

THE FIELD REPORT

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WREATHS ACROSS KING

Ray and Evelyn McSherry will accomplish their goal of placing wreaths on every grave at the Central Wisconsin Veterans Memorial Cemetery in King.

Although his physical military service ended more than 50 years ago, Ray McSherry continues to serve.

As the president of the 8th District American Legion Riders, McSherry spearheaded an effort years ago to give back to Veterans in a unique way. He and his wife, Evelyn, had a goal of making sure every grave at one of the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs' Veterans cemeteries had a symbolic piece of life on it during the holiday season.

On December 15, that goal was finally met, with each of the more than 7,000 graves at the Central Wisconsin Veterans Memorial Cemetery in King having wreaths laid next to them.

"It's all about remembering, honoring and teaching," Ray, a U.S. Navy Veteran, said. "I hear people ask, 'Why don't you take the money raised and give it to the living Veterans instead of putting it toward a cemetery?'"

"These Veterans at these cemeteries don't want to be forgotten, either."

It's a community-driven effort that's part of the national

Wreaths Across America campaign. The McSherrys have been involved with the initiative since 2010, and the support has grown every year since. The project takes place at more than 1,400 locations in all 50 states, including the other two WDVA cemeteries in Spooner and Union Grove.

Ray was born in Mount Horeb and enlisted into the Navy in 1961. He served during the Vietnam War, and was stationed in Okinawa, serving until 1965. He said that the inspiration for the project came from his service time and seeing and hearing the sacrifices military personnel and their families continue to make.

After thinking of the idea one day, Ray came forward at the riders' meeting years ago to see if they were willing to support it. A dream that seemed impossible at first has finally come to fruition.

"Everyone thought that I was nuts and said that it would never happen," he said. "It took us seven years, but we finally made it."



“The involvement from the general public has been unreal.”

The first year the Wisconsin Rapids-based 8th District Legion Riders got involved, they laid 400 wreaths at graves at the cemetery in King. Every year, the number has significantly increased to finally fill the entire cemetery this year.

In order to lay wreaths at graves, a contribution is required to cover the cost. The sponsorship of one wreath costs \$15, and it can be earmarked to a specific cemetery and grave. With so many graves to accomplish the goal, Ray and his wife rely on the support from his 8th District Legion Riders, other Veterans groups and the surrounding community, and they have come through in overwhelming numbers.

“The involvement from the general public has been unreal,” Ray said. “We’re getting anywhere between 150 to 200 people to come help lay the wreaths. We have a couple of high schools that bring their FFA (Future Farmers of America) classes over and pick up all the wreaths for us when we pick them up. The Veterans groups and the people who come every year to help are unbelievable.”

The riders hold several fundraisers annually, but the gun raffle it’s held has been the catalyst for reaching the McSherrys’ goal. The single event raised \$34,000, all which went toward the Wreaths Across America project at the cemetery.

“It chokes you up,” he said of the collaborative effort. “Some of the notes people include with their donation is just overwhelming, it really is.”

The conclusion of the Wreaths Across America project was celebrated December 15, and dozens of volunteers helped lay the wreaths.

