

# **Local Wreaths Across America Ceremony Honors Fallen Veterans With Christmas Wreaths On Headstones**

by Chris Rhodes, Reporter  
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ALTON - The 14th annual Wreaths Across America project and ceremonies were held locally on Saturday at the Alton National Cemetery, in which the headstones of fallen

United States military veterans nationwide were decorated with Christmas wreaths by volunteers in 2,100 locations across the country, as well as in sites at sea and at military locations around the world.

The event, usually open to the public, was closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but a video of the ceremony, along with the three days of prep work leading to it, was sponsored by recently-elected State Representative Amy Elik and State Senator Rachelle Crowe. The national project received a \$300,000 challenge grant from the Jersey Mike's sub shop chain.

"This is our 14th year here at the Alton National Cemetery," said local Wreaths Across America coordinator Margaret Hopkins, "and this year, of course, is extremely different from what we normally do. We usually have a huge ceremony, but it's going to be a very limited event this year, only laying of wreaths, and a core group of people are going to be doing that. But today, the delivery of the wreaths comes today, and there's a lot of work to be done for that. The truck is coming from Maine, left Maine on Saturday, arriving here, and then, we'll be unloading all those 79 boxes of wreaths into the mausoleum, opening the boxes, fluffing the bows and prepping them for the service on Saturday."

The theme for the 2020 project was Be An American Worth Fighting For, and Hopkins emphasized what it means to be an American citizen.

## **VIDEO OF WREATHS ACROSS AMERICA:**

"The theme for Wreaths Across America this year is Be An American Worth Fighting For," Hopkins said. "That means to live your life, do all your activities, and do it with patriotism and kindness. And so, we're hoping that even though you can't attend this year, you can still take that call to action and be an American worth fighting for."

The core values of the project are remembering the veterans, honoring the men and women who serve in the military, and teaching children the values of freedom. And for those who volunteer for the local project, it's a chance to remember those who came before them.

"It's important for me to do this, because this is what we need to do," said Ron Swain, the Senior Vice Commander of Edwardsville American Legion Post 199, and Junior Vice Commander of Illinois District 22, along with being a veteran himself, "because I have family members that are deceased, that I want to make sure it gets done right, and they're not around here, so I want to help every family here, make sure their fallen soldier gets a wreath for each year."

Swain thanked Hopkins and the volunteers who worked hard to make the ceremony possible.

"I just want to thank Margaret and all the other gentlemen and ladies that make this happen today and Saturday," Swain said, "because this means a lot to this community, and to each person in this United States."

The volunteers who help out with the project do so in remembering their fallen friends, and the sacrifices they made to help keep the country free.

"It's the memories," said volunteer Roger Perotka. "You got to be able to remember who went before us, and the sacrifices they made."

Hopkins was very impressed by the ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery in Washington in 2005, and thought it would be a great honor to the veterans to have a similar ceremony at the Alton National Cemetery.

"I was struck by this event about 15 years ago, when I saw a Wreaths Across America event at the Arlington National Cemetery," Hopkins said, "and I knew we had a treasure in the Alton National here, and thought it would be nice if we had the same thing, and honor our veterans in the same way they do."

It takes many volunteers to help prepare for and perform the ceremony and the wreath-laying, and Hopkins encouraged those who would like to volunteer for the 2021 event, or donate money to the project, to do so if they wished.

"It takes hundreds of volunteers to put this on every year," Hopkins said, "and it also takes thousands of dollars, so if you still would like to contribute towards, maybe, next year's event, each wreath costs about \$15; for every \$30 we raise, we can buy three wreaths. And that helps cover the 560 wreaths at the Alton National."

For more information on the national project, or to contribute to the project, please log onto the organization's website:

<https://www.wreathsacrossamerica.org/>

[Colin Feeney also contributed to this story.](#)