

BRONX VOICE

MEMORIAL DAY NO FLAGS FOR VETS COVID19

Most Vets Graves go 'Un-flagged' for Memorial Day Due to COVID-19



One of three flags placed at the headstones of U.S. serviceman by Norwood's Chris Perkins "flagged" the grave of World War II medic Dominick Sette.--Photo by David Greene

By David Greene, May 26, 2020

For about the last 18 years volunteers have been placing American flags at the gravestones of thousands of U.S. military members-- but sadly this year, most graves went "un-flagged" due to the global pandemic of the coronavirus.

In past years, Lynn Radke and Bruce Campbell of the Woodlawn Conservancy would organize hundreds of volunteers from groups like the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Mellon Bank and the Washington Grey Cadets, for the annual 'Flagging of the Graves' at the Woodlawn Cemetery.

Volunteers would set out with maps and flags and scour the 400 acre site looking for the 8,200 veterans now identified as being among the 310,000 people buried at Woodlawn Cemetery. The massive cemetery stretches south to north from Norwood to Woodlawn, and west to east from Jerome Avenue to Webster Avenue. The mighty task would take the better part of two weekends and more than 200 volunteers to complete.

With social distancing in effect, The Woodlawn Conservancy's website recently informed the public, "After considering the guidance and safety recommendations for the prevention of COVID-19 and for the safety of our volunteers, this public event will not be held."

However, the cemetery remained open to the public, as Barbara Selesky of the Woodlawn Cemetery stated, "This year we have signs... that we have flags available at the gate for individuals to place one on their loved ones graves that their just individually doing."

Selesky added, "So we're not having the full blown event like we have had in the past that includes volunteers."

On May 24, lifelong Norwood resident Chris Perkins, 48, paid a visit to the national landmark. Besides a flag presentation a decade earlier with then-borough president Adolfo Carrion, Perkins had not been to the cemetery since he was a teenager and entered through a hole in the fence at night with friends. Perkins arrived with a flag of his own and was given two more flags at the Webster Avenue entrance.

Perkins, a retired 1st Sgt with the Army National Guard, who served two tours in Iraq in 2005 and 2007, as a member of the 145 Maintenance Company, once based out of the Kingsbridge Armory. The unit comes under the command of the 369th Sustainment Brigade and it's Infantry Brigade, famously known as the "Harlem Hellfighters." Perkins had hoped to place a flag at the grave of a Hellfighter in honor of Memorial Day.

The first tombstone located of a U.S. serviceman was that of Martin V. Fink of New York. The marker stated that Fink served with the 309 Infantry Division in World War II. Fink was born on September 11, 1890 and died on April 4, 1947. Despite having died more than 70 years earlier, Fink already had a U.S. flag at his grave.

Perkins would then come across the grave of Dominick Sette, also of New York. A Private in the U.S. Army, Sette was a medic during World War II, sadly he died in 1947, just a year after his son Richard was born. Perkins stuck the flag into the earth, stepped back and offered a salute to Sette. He would then place a penny on the headstone as a symbolic gesture and would repeat the process two more times.

According to the Military Times, leaving a penny at a soldiers grave means someone visited the grave. A nickel means you trained at boot camp together and a dime means you have served together. If someone leaves a quarter, it means the person who left it served with the soldier at the time he or she was killed.

The next soldier to get a flag was Gandolfo A. Sellaro, another New Yorker and Private in the U.S. Army during World War II. He died in July of 1948.

The final soldier that would get a flag from Perkins was Joseph Phelan, a member of the U.S. Air Force, who died in 2004.

After giving his final salute, Perkins stated, "Wow, I'm not a religious person at all, but this has been kind of moving. And all these headstones mean something, but how often do people come out to look at them."

Now without a flag, Perkins started to leave the cemetery when he came across the grave of Jorge Luis Campos, Jr., a sailor who died on April 28, 2004. Fortunately Campos had been remembered by someone, as fresh roses were left at the grave. Perkins offered one final remark, "Today was a lot of fun, in a serious way."