

**Duksa Family Funeral Homes at Newington Memorial
Newington, Connecticut**

Duksa Family Funeral Homes at Burritt Hill, Burritt Hill, CT

At Duksa Family Funeral Homes we pride ourselves in supporting grieving families during their time of loss and offering dignified farewell services. Over the years we've continued to try to find new ways to extend our commitment to our communities. This year, we participated in an organization called Carry The Load. We were impressed with their mission, and excited to learn more as well as be a part of the greater purpose.

Our funeral home participated in a walk with Carry The Load on May 8, 2023. Carry The Load is a non-profit organization that provides active ways to connect Americans to the sacrifices made daily by our military, veterans, first responders, and their families. The organization holds walks across the country for the entire month of May, ending on Memorial Day, to restore the true meaning of Memorial Day. A group of our staff members, Diana Kurz, Denise Verner, Kristy Marciano, Frank DeMaio, Tatiana Montes, Marge Banach and Casey Biega joined the walk for a local leg, approximately 4 miles long, starting in Newington and ending in West Hartford. It was an honor to participate in an event where we were able to share in recognizing and commemorating those who have selflessly served and continue to serve our country.

In funeral service, we help families honor Veterans all year long. Whether their loved one made the ultimate sacrifice, or was able to spend years after their service as honorable Veterans, there are few things that make a family more proud to share with us about their loved ones than the fact that he or she is a Veteran. We in turn make it our mission to ensure that these brave individuals receive the respect they so deserve, through powerful and meaningful tributes. Collaborating with Carry The Load gave us another angle from which to appreciate these heroes. Just meeting with and conversing with some of the Veterans in the organization allowed us to continue to gain more knowledge about their trials and tribulations, sometimes long after they're home.

Our goal is to never stop working at improving our services to our families, and the more information we have about the members of our communities, the more capable we are in doing that. This experience was a wonderful one for all of us, and we hope to make our participation an annual occurrence. Our hope is that by regularly participating and spreading knowledge, we'll be able to create a sense of unity and gratitude among the members of our communities.

Feeney Funeral Home Ridgewood, New Jersey

Feeney Funeral Home was called upon to conduct the funeral of a Army Air Force veteran killed in WWII. Our entire full time and part time staff benefitted in many ways. A great deal of pride from each staff member was attained, seeing the incredible respect shown the deceased by member of the service, and by each of our staff members.

The family benefitted by having closure after so many years. The community benefitted by watching an incredible display put on by our staff, the Army, NJ and NY State Police and local police, and NJ and NY Fire Departments.

Among the organizations we coordinated into the funeral service: US Army, NJ State Police, NJ local police, NY Port Authority Police and Bridge staff, local NJ and NY Fire Departments, NJ and NY Patriot Riders, local and NY VFW and American Legion.

THE ESSAY

On February 12, 1944, the B-25G on which John J. Heffernan was a Navigator, was hit by Japanese gunfire while attacking a Japanese barge on the Chindwin River in Burma. The plane exploded into flames, and tumbled nose over tail into a peanut field near the river. There were no survivors. In 2019, searchers arrived at the peanut field with a backhoe, picks, and shovels. After digging and sifting nearly 10 feet deep, they found a few teeth, some bone fragments, uniform buttons, and a lieutenant's brass uniform insignia. It took another two years for DNA analysts to positively identify the remains as those of John J. Heffernan. We were contacted by his nephew, Andrew, to conduct the services of this war hero.

On the day of his arrival from the military base Hawaii Casualty Center to Newark Airport, we were escorted by 15 NJ State trooper cars down the NJ Turnpike and into Newark Airport, to a special area set up next to the arriving plane. The passengers on the flight were told by the captain the story of Lt. Heffernan, and that they were all invited to watch the 'transfer ceremony' from the terminal window. Needless to say, over a hundred people were looking out of the terminal windows at the unfolding scene. With full military honors, the casket was transferred from the plane into our hearse. Afterwards, we were escorted back to the Funeral Home once again by the 15 patrol cars.

The day before the funeral we held a visitation. In addition to some family, most in attendance were military personnel, paying their respects.

The morning of the funeral brought much more pomp and circumstance. The funeral cortege was escorted to St. Elizabeth RC Church in Wyckoff, NJ by NJ State and local police. Upon arriving at the church, we pulled up next to two Wyckoff Fire Department Fire trucks, with an enormous US Flag fraped between them. The local newspapers were their interviewing some attendees, as well as a NY Cable TV station.

When the funeral mass was over, the procession assembled and proceeded to St. John's Cemetery in Queens, NY, where Lt. Heffernan was to be interred with his mother, Mary. The timing of the escorts on the highway to the George Washington Bridge was a sight to behold. While some police cars surrounded us, other cars and several motorcycles raced a mile or so ahead of us, blocking every entrance ramp. The Patriot Riders, a Veteran Motorcycle group from NJ and NY, led the hearse. As we approached the George Washington Bridge, a large electronic sign flashed "Well Done, and Welcome Home, Lt. John Heffernan." After crossing the Bridge into New York City, the entire NJ contingent peeled off, and the massive New York Police Department escort took over. We travelled unimpeded down the Grand Central Parkway and Van Wyk Expressway. On each and every overpass, there were NY Firemen and trucks, with American flags draped over the railing of the bridge. It was a sight no one associated with the funeral will ever forget. Upon arriving at St. John's Cemetery, we were thrilled to see a massive US Army Air

Tanker do a fly over. At the grave, full military honors were rendered, and at last, Mary Heffernan's son, John, was home.

Kerrville Funeral Home
Kerrville, Texas

Kimble Funeral Home, Junction, TX; Krestridge Funeral Home, Levelland, TX

We have all seen Honor Guards' Posting of the Colors at ball games, graduations and public events prior to the singing of our national anthem or reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. These men and women, who comprise the Honor Guard, work as a unit to demonstrate respect and give reverence to these occasions. However, Honor Guards are not solely utilized for these types of events. Honor Guards are ones called at times to honor someone for what they have done and the service they have performed.

No one likes to think about the death of any of our public servants, especially of those who dedicate their lives to serving and protecting our communities, states and nation. Unfortunately, members of local police forces, Texas Department of Public Safety troopers, Border Patrol agents and many others who work in these capacities, do pass away in the line of duty.

During the week of January 9th through the 13th, 2023, South Plains College in Levelland, Texas, hosted a regional Multi-Agency Honor Guard Academy. First responders from all areas of the South Plains of Texas came together to learn how to honor a fellow brother or sister who has perished in the line of duty. The goal of this academy was to establish uniformity among different law enforcement agencies; to enable officers be able to act together when the need arises. At the end of the week, all the personnel involved came together at Krestridge Funeral Home to practice their newly acquired skills in a mock funeral.

Krestridge Funeral Home opened its doors and its chapel to these officers to enable them to practice and experience the relevancy and solemnity of the funeral experience when it is for one of their own. Furnishing a casket draped with an American flag, Krestridge Funeral Home allowed the honor guard trainees to rehearse procedures and protocol used before, during and after a service. From the changing of the guard to guarding the casket, law enforcement cadre went through the procedures necessary to be able to have a performance that dignifies the fallen.

Allowing these different law enforcement agencies to practice in the actual environment of the funeral home with a real casket, rather than in a sterile classroom, hopefully gave them a realistic experience to make use of what they had learned. Being in the funeral home and seeing the draped casket, with the knowledge that it was all staged, gave the men and women an opportunity to work without the having to cope with the emotions and grief of actually saying good-bye to one of their own.

Lakeside Memorial Funeral Home, Inc.
Hamburg, New York
Lakeside Memorial Funeral Home, Inc., West Seneca, NY

What Veterans' Deserve

The fact that our United States Veterans deserve every benefit and honor available is no secret. After serving their country, including all the sacrifices that come with service, all Veterans deserve to be treated with respect and reverence. Unfortunately, this sentiment has not always been the case. Seen in the shift after the Vietnam conflict, many veterans did not receive the warm welcome home that others in the past had experienced. Even today, Veteran homelessness, mental health crisis, and the lack of health programs and benefits continue to be an issue. However, the United States government is trying to rectify this problem. These efforts are recently displayed with the passing of the Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act (PACT Act). The PACT Act, was enacted on August 10, 2022, and named in honor of Sergeant First Class combat medic Heath Robinson who passed away from a rare form of lung cancer after toxic exposures during his service. The PACT Act is considered the most significant expansion of Veteran and VA Health Care in the past three decades. In connection with the Camp Lejeune Justice Act of 2022, the PACT Act is a new law that expands health care for Veterans exposed to toxic substances during their service, including burn pit exposure, radiation, and Agent Orange. Any Veteran with toxic exposures who served during Vietnam, the Gulf War, and post 9/11 eras may be eligible if they are either suffering from or pass from a presumptive condition. The presumptive conditions, or conditions believed or assumed to be caused by toxic exposure, had also expanded to include various cancers, lung diseases, and other conditions such as Parkinson's Disease. In addition, the PACT Act states that the VA is required to provide toxic exposure screening to every Veteran in their care to ensure they receive proper diagnosis for benefits. Other funds are also used to improve research, staff education, and various treatments for Veterans. The PACT Act also includes compensation for survivors of Veterans affected, from monthly compensation after the passing of a Veteran from a service-connected disability, or survivor's pensions. As a connection to the PACT Act, the Camp Lejeune Justice Act also covers toxic exposure through water contamination at Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune or Marine Corps Air Station in New River, North Carolina. As a Veteran or civilian, such as spouse or child of a Veteran, living or working at either base during the period, August 1, 1953, to December 21, 1987, may be eligible for compensation and disability benefits if they possess a presumptive condition on the list. The passing of the PACT Act and the Camp Lejeune Justice Act were incredibly important in strides for Veteran and their survivor's health care. As the sole member of Veterans Funeral Care in Western New York, Lakeside Memorial Funeral Home, Inc. was quick to begin researching all the new benefits our Veteran families could be eligible for under these acts. As Veteran benefits experts, it's essential that we stay up to date with benefits. However, in the months following the passing of both acts, we received countless calls and emails concerning benefits and what the program meant as a resource for Veterans in our community. Always willing to and happy to educate our community, Lakeside Memorial Funeral Home decided to create informational products to help individuals better understand their benefits.

With the rationale of wanting to educate our community, who clearly was searching for answers, Lakeside Memorial Funeral Home began creating an informational presentation regarding various topics including the PACT Act, Camp Lejeune Justice Act, Agent Orange, and Toxic Exposure presumptive conditions, filing claims and requesting military records, death and burial benefits, and preplanning, especially prequalifying for burial at a national cemetery, such as Western New York National Cemetery. After months of research and fine tuning, our presentation titled "The PACT Act and New Benefits" was finished in December 2022. After completing the presentation, we worked towards obtaining a proper place to present our ideas. After some searching, we made connections at the Matthew Glab American Legion Post #1477 in Lackawanna, NY. In discussions with the American Legion Post, we found that they were getting the same types of questions discussed at their post and we decided to create a Veteran resource event and decided on the date of April 18, 2023, to avoid some of the harsher weather of the Buffalo area. This date was also important as it gave almost four months to the first year of applications deadline on August 9, 2023. While there is no deadline to apply for PACT Act Benefits, if a Veteran applies during the first year, they could receive benefits backdated to August 10, 2022, therefore receiving the max amount of benefits allowed. As the date grew closer, the American Legion officers and

our staff were also able to contact the VA Western New York Healthcare System and the VA Buffalo Regional Office of the Veterans Benefit Administration and have their organizations join the event. The Veteran Resource Event on August 18, 2023, hosted the Matthew Glab Post, began at 7:00 PM with our presentation to give Veterans and their families a rundown of all the information they needed to know about the two acts and the benefits they were entitled to receive. After the presentation, attendees were split into two groups – The first group was served a warm meal and the second group was able to visit different information tables from the funeral home, the VA Healthcare System the Veteran Benefit Administration. Our funeral home's table was able to answer more questions about our presentation, provide brochures on the funeral home and death benefits, display our Veteran programs such as discounts on preplanning and our Retire a Flag program, and the benefits of preplanning to preserve your legacy. Our table also included information on how to obtain your military documents, such as a DD214, through Erie County or the National Archive, as these documents are necessary to obtain benefits. The Healthcare System worked with Veterans to obtain VA healthcare for new presumptive conditions and set up appointments for toxic exposure testing. The Veterans Benefit Administration table began claims for the PACT Act and the Camp Lejeune Justice Act. While any Veteran or survivor can begin the application online at va.gov, the online portal can become confusing for older Veterans, and having a representative walk someone through the application can be easier and more beneficial. After an hour and a half, the two groups switched, and the process was repeated. At the end of the night, the program assisted over 200 Veterans and their families, which all parties considered a great success.

Overall, the program and experience were very beneficial to the funeral home, all the VA organizations, and the Veterans involved. As an active member of our community and an advocate for Veterans, our team here at Lakeside Memorial Funeral Home were honored to create this program with all the entities involved. The process of creating the presentation allowed our staff to learn a lot about the new benefits for Veterans and their survivors as well as get a larger picture of the conditions our Veterans are facing. During the program at the Matthew Glab Post, we also came face to face with the reality of how many Veterans in our community need to hear this information and how many are struggling with these conditions and accessibility to the information as many application materials simply state to gather documents and go online. If a Veteran struggles with internet applications or even simply doesn't know how their condition is covered or how to obtain their military documents, the online application is useless, frustrating, and confusing. After this experience, our team has many ideas on how to not only continue sharing this important information, but the scale of need that needs to be addressed. We also created some great relationships and connections with the VA Western New York Healthcare System and the VA Buffalo Regional Office of the Veterans Benefit Administration, which are two organizations that we could continue to work with to share our mission. Both VA organizations also benefited from having an opportunity to work in person with Veterans and answer questions. However, the group that received the most benefit was the over 200 Veterans and their families in attendance. As discussed earlier, the constant changing of the VA benefits available and presumptive conditions can be confusing and difficult to keep up with, especially for those living with some of these conditions. The PACT Act itself added over 20 presumptive conditions itself. By having educational opportunities, especially those in-person, creates a more accessible access to Veterans and their families. Changes from the PACT Act and the Camp Lejeune Justice Act have even allowed Veterans who were initially denied to resubmit under new guidelines and receive compensation. Without having entities to not only share this information, but assist in the application process in free events, some Veterans may never realize the changes or receive the benefits they entitled to nor would their families know they could receive compensation after their deaths.

In conclusion, our Veteran Resource Program and presentation was a great success for all parties involved and created a fantastic opportunity for our team to continue to be educators in our community. As members of the Veterans Funeral Care network and Veteran advocates, this program let us continue our goal of making sure each and every Veteran receives every cent they are entitled to after sacrificing their health and lives to protect and serve our nation. Lakeside Memorial Funeral Home, Inc. will continue to keep a close eye on the ever-changing scape of VA benefits and healthcare through our own research and connections to government organizations. We hope to continue to find more opportunities to serve our Veterans and share our event.

Lord and Stephens Funeral Homes Athens, Georgia

Lord and Stephens Funeral Homes, Watkinsville, GA; Lord and Stephens Funeral Homes, Danielsville, GA

Heroes at Rest a Collaboration Between Lord and Stephens Funeral Homes and the Athens Veteran Community

The inspiration for Lord and Stephens' Heroes at Rest program came when I, Whitney, one of our funeral directors, read about a committal service to inter unclaimed veterans' remains at a national cemetery. Our funeral home shelters many long-term, unclaimed cremated remains, and for the first time it occurred to me to wonder how many of "our people" might have been veterans. I began by identifying the veterans in our care and then attempted to contact any surviving family to determine if the remains were permanently unclaimed. At the end of this process, we identified eight veterans eligible for interment in a national cemetery.

I also volunteer with the Daughters of the American Revolution, so at this point I shared the project's progress with my DAR chapter. The Daughters, notable supporters of veterans, shared the project with their husbands, many of whom are veterans themselves and highly involved in local veterans' organizations. Several groups requested a meeting and revealed to us that none of their members had previously been aware of the phenomenon of unclaimed cremated remains. This was a surprise to us, since it is such a common issue in the funeral industry, but we quickly realized that this was an excellent opportunity to raise awareness of this issue. The veterans' organizations told us at the funeral home that they did not want merely to attend the service at the national cemetery; they wanted to get involved and become part of the solution. One of the executive members of the Athens Area Military Officers of America Association stated a goal right then and there that we would someday be able to say that there were no longer any unclaimed veterans in Athens, Georgia. Along with the committal service, they asked us to host a memorial at our funeral home chapel so more members of the local community could attend to honor our veterans. This memorial was held at our Lord and Stephens, West location in Watkinsville, Georgia, on September 19, 2022. A committal service with full military honors was held the next day at Georgia National Cemetery in Canton.

Our partner organizations grew to include multiple chapters of the National Society Daughters of the American Revolution, National Society Sons of the American Revolution, Military Officers of America Association, Marine Corps League, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Military Order of the Purple Heart, American Legion, and Patriot Guard Riders. To say that this project became a true community endeavor is not to do it justice. Members from these veterans' organizations donated money to purchase personalized urns for each of the veterans and brought ceremonial floral wreaths to decorate the service. Media coverage in local newspapers led to several more community members attending who were not affiliated with the veterans' organizations, simply out of a desire to honor local veterans. Some of these community members had never been to our funeral home before, while others were fellow church members with some of our staff, who had never realized we had a love for veterans in common! In all, around two hundred people attended the local memorial, and the service was also livestreamed for the homebound or those still uncomfortable with attending public events.

During the memorial, members of our partner organizations participated as speakers, musicians, an honor guard flag line, rifle volley, folding the flag, and playing "Taps." Veteran attendees were recognized during a musical medley of the armed service branch anthems. I read obituaries that our staff wrote for each of the veterans based on research we conducted into their lives. This was personally one of the most rewarding parts of the entire project: we learned more about these individuals who had been in our care for so long, some for almost thirty years, about who they were as people and sometimes a little bit about the circumstances that led to their remains being unclaimed. Our veterans' military service ranged from World War II to the mid-1970s, but many were veterans of the troubled period of the Vietnam War. Several experienced divorce and substance use disorders that may have led to their eventual estrangement from their families. It was incredibly meaningful to honor these individuals for the best and most honorable part of their lives rather than remembering them at their lowest. For our entire staff, this

project was an emotionally overwhelming experience. We were able to honor the veterans we had sheltered so long; to commit them to a safe and dignified resting place; to meet so many amazing members of our community; and to share with that community a small piece of what we do every day as funeral directors: to care for the vulnerable and, sometimes, the forgotten.

At the committal service at Georgia National Cemetery, the word had spread so much that members of our veterans' organizations Atlanta chapters and beyond traveled to be a part of the service. A representative from the state Governor's office was in attendance, and active-duty military service personnel rendered formal honors individually for each veteran. Representatives from our partner organizations stood in for the missing family members to receive the veterans' flags. Some of these representatives have later incorporated their flags into special presentations about their "adopted veteran," and even donated the flags and other memorabilia about the life of their veteran to museums, including the heritage museum in one of the veteran's hometown in North Carolina.

Since the committal service, I have been invited to give talks on the project to numerous groups who have also expressed a desire to get involved. We plan to reach out to other area funeral homes and coroners' offices to begin the process anew. Community members have asked that for future memorials, we charter a bus so more elderly attendees can be present at the committal ceremony in Canton. Chief among our long-term goals for this project is to publish a manual specifically written for funeral homes and partner organizations to teach them how to replicate this process in their own communities. As our MOAA officer said, we hope that someday we may be able to say that there are no longer any unclaimed veterans in Athens, in Georgia, and beyond.

Martin Funeral, Cremation & Tribute Services Mt. Morris, Michigan

Great Lakes Veterans Museum

1. The rationale behind the idea:

In the fall of 2018, owner, Adam Martin, was invited by the Michigan Funeral Directors Association to fill a vacant position on the board of the Great Lakes National Cemetery Advisory Council. Great Lakes National Cemetery is located in Holly, Michigan, about 6.5 miles from our funeral home in Grand Blanc, Michigan, and about 25 miles from our funeral home in Mt. Morris, Michigan. The national cemetery's reach covers some 20 counties in Southeast and Mid-Michigan, serving hundreds of thousands of veterans and their families.

The Advisory Council has members from nearly every veteran's organization within its area of coverage. Many VFW and American Legion posts, auxiliary posts, DAV, county government VA offices, Patriot Riders and of course the national cemetery director. The council supports the cemetery in a myriad of ways and it was during Mr. Martin's initial meetings with the group that he was able to ascertain a need within the communities where we have funeral homes and serve veterans and military families.

It was during this time frame that Mr. Martin was still serving as the president of the International Order of the Golden Rule (OGR) and learned of a fellow member funeral firm in Clearwater, Florida, Veterans Funeral Care, Jim Rudolph. Jim developed a program entitled "Operation Toy Soldier" that specifically address the needs to veterans and military families during the holiday season. For the last several years, we have modeled this program in Genesee and Tuscola Counties where our funeral homes are located. In the summer of 2022, our staff was invited by Jim to visit his funeral home and attend a training seminar for Veterans Funeral Care. It was during this visit to Clearwater, Florida; that a spark was lit to develop and build our own Veterans Museum right here in Michigan.

The mission that was developed and its results are detailed as follows.

2. A detailed description of the program, service or activity:

The Great Lakes Veterans Museum was created as a safe space to honor and preserve military memorabilia, not only for the families in which we care for but for any visitor to the museum who wishes to donate their own personal collection of military items or their loved ones.

The goal, is to help preserve the legacy of our military men and women who selflessly sacrifice of themselves to protect our freedom, as well as a educational place for teachers to use as a tool to educate classrooms through touring the museum. And by doing so, individuals of all ages may experience the museum, reminisce about their own military experience, and to educate the younger generations about our Unites States history.

Perhaps one of the most appealing aspects of the Great Lakes Veterans Museum, is the knowledge that a loved ones military items are "put to use" and not stored in a dusty attic, to be forgotten.

Our museum grew from one small corner, to two rooms within 6 months. And as a result, thousands of individuals have toured the museum, hundreds of items have been donated for safekeeping and to preserve history, as well as the local Disabled American Veterans began using Great Lakes Veterans Museum as a satellite location beginning in May of 2023.

3. Benefits provided to families and/or the community at large:

The outpouring of generosity from the communities has been tremendous. We already felt blessed to have so many supporting the collection of toys for our Operation Toy Soldier and Cell Phones for Soldiers Projects. We were simply humbled by the amount of donations to our museum.

- Well over 1,000 items ranging from photographs, letters written home during wars, to military uniforms, to precious metals such as a purple heart medal and more.
- Several hundreds of dollars in cash donations to purchase items to add to the museum.

- Numerous hours of time

4. Benefits provided to the funeral home and staff:

We are involved and care deeply for our communities and are willing to put in the hard work and the time to show those in the community that we care. This has been an ongoing commitment by the Martin family for nearly 100 years. Also, by creating and building this museum, we have educated our staff and ourselves more on our US History. Talking to a gentleman about his experience in Vietnam, looking through his personal photo album and touching medals he earned, is vastly different than reading a school book.

Our staff has also challenged themselves to better comprehend the DD214 form, specifically taking the time to discuss what we know about it during the arrangement process to families, who sometimes have no idea how much of a hero their loved one was during their military service.

5. List any community organizations that were involved with the development and/or implementation of the idea; describe the role the organization played:

Special thank you to Jim Rudolph for hours of guidance and providing the inspiration for a veterans museum. Operations Manager at Martin Funeral, Cremation & Tribute Services, Tom Merritt, for many hours of curating the museum.

**PinesFunerals (Fry & Prickett Funeral Home)
Carthage, North Carolina**

Kennedy Funeral Home, Robbins, NC; Powell Funeral Home & Crematory, Carthage, NC

Every year, PinesFunerals holds a Veterans Appreciation event on Veterans Day to demonstrate their unwavering support for the veterans in our community. This event holds immense significance because it acknowledges the countless sacrifices made by veterans for our freedom. It has become one of our most significant gatherings each year, drawing an increasing number of attendees.

Our most recent Veterans Appreciation event, held on Veterans Day in 2022, was a powerful expression of gratitude for veterans both locally and globally. The event commenced with warm opening remarks by Robert Nunnaley, President of PinesFunerals, followed by heartfelt reflections from retired USMC Major A. McKinnon, who spoke about the valor of our veterans. USMC LCPL. Sam Bradley then took the stage to honor the families served by PinesFunerals. The event reached a poignant moment as Taps played and doves were released. Our very own R.J. McFarland recognized the Patriot Guard and Boy Scout Troop 800 for their contributions. Kerry Nunnaley of PinesFunerals and USMC LCPL. Sam Bradley presented special acknowledgments. The event concluded with the Patriot Guard leading a Ceremonial Ride Out, with motorcycles, limousines, and other vehicles in procession.

These events offer numerous benefits for our funeral home and staff. Firstly, they highlight our funeral home's community-oriented approach, allowing us to connect with and give back to our incredible community. Through word-of-mouth, attendees share their positive experiences, recommending PinesFunerals to their loved ones and friends. The events also provide our staff with invaluable opportunities to engage with the community, forge personal connections, and deepen their understanding of serving families. Furthermore, participating in these events enhances their event coordination skills, public speaking abilities, and compassion.

Not only do these events benefit our funeral home and staff, but they also hold significance for families and the community at large. The events provide a platform for community members to attend and honor their loved ones who have served or are currently serving. They also offer veterans a chance to reunite with old friends and connect with the next generation of veterans. Those who participate gain knowledge and exhibit steadfast commitment in a setting where we unite to express our appreciation and honor their priceless contributions.

Several esteemed organizations were involved in organizing these events, including the United States Marine Corps, the Patriot Guard, and Boy Scout Troop 800. The USMC delivered impactful remarks during the event, while the Patriot Guard and Boy Scout Troop 800 were recognized for their contributions and dedication.

Reeves & Baskerville Funeral Homes and Crematory Coal City, Illinois

Reeves & Baskerville Funeral Homes and Crematory, Gardner, IL; Reeves & Baskerville Funeral Homes and Crematory, Morris, IL; Reeves & Baskerville Funeral Homes and Crematory, Wilmington, IL

Over the years, we have seen various Flag Retirement programs that have been provided by the local Scouts, Veteran of Foreign Wars and American Legions. From time to time we would also have local residents drop off flags by the funeral home because they weren't exactly sure what to do with the weathered and worn our flags. In those cases we would at the time do as many funeral homes do - drape the bodies of veterans being cremated. We at the time were using a third party crematory, and it was not convenient to remember to secure the flag, and then make sure it was cremated as intended, but we did our best and never solicited the idea, other than use the handful of flags we would get from time to time...

In 2023 our funeral homes added a crematory to our business and it soon began to drive a more solid idea of how we could retire flags. We liked the idea of draping Veterans who were being cremated, however wanted to elevate the process. Also in addition to physically retiring a United States flag - it was our desire to give some recognition and ceremonial aspect to the veteran family whose loved one was cremated with the flag.

We first needed to formally start collecting the flags, and went to our local American Legion and VFW's to see if they had flags that needed to be retired. We immediately gained probably nearly 3 dozen flags within one afternoon!

The flags turned in for retiring are all different sizes of course, but typically the largest is no bigger than a traditional burial flag. Since that was most often the largest, we measured a star on the flag and found that they were less than three inches square. We then went and purchased 3x3 inch frames. For each flag we retire, we cut one of the stars from the flags and frame it. We then label the back of the frame with the veterans name and a tag that reads "This is a relic from the actual US Flag that was formally retired during the cremation process. We are truly grateful for your Veterans service. Caring always, Reeves & Baskerville Funeral Homes and Crematory.

We have had such a favorable and positive response from this simple gesture, it has literally brought families to tears.

The investment and expense is nominal, roughly \$3.50 per frame, and time involved is less than five minutes to cut, frame and label the frames. We actually have framed stars in advance and keep them with the respective flags to expedite the process for our crematory operators.

It's truly been a "win/win" for the families, for the Veterans groups and community to retire the flags, and for the special detail provided by the funeral home. A simple common practiced routine that we took and elevated to a new level detail.

Twiford Funeral Home
Elizabeth City, North Carolina
Twiford Colony Chapel, Manteo, NC

Twiford Funeral Homes, LLC has sponsored and participated in Operation Toy Soldier for 10 years. The Twiford family has always had a special appreciation for our military personnel, becoming involved with numerous fundraisers, awards and recognition services and celebrations over the years, as well as becoming a Veteran's Funeral Care Funeral Home partner. This program supports the children of soldiers, sailors and airmen stationed overseas during the Christmas holidays, providing donated toys to children in North Carolina who have a deployed parent. The goal of Operation Toy Soldier is to help these children feel the community's love and concern for them as well as to bridge the gap between what their parents may or may not be able to provide. The hope is that the toys, and the compassion expressed by their purchase, helps them feel less sad while not having a parent present for the holidays.

Barrels are placed in various businesses starting in November, where community members are welcome to donate toys. This event has become a much loved and anticipated part of the Northeastern NC holiday season, and a significant portion of the local community participates. Businesses and volunteer organizations from insurance agencies, to retail stores, restaurants, to the Pasquotank County Sherriff's Office, the Elizabeth City Fire Department (Station 1), two local American Legion Posts and several area churches vie for the opportunity to host a barrel, and there is friendly competition among them to collect the most toys. The Fire Department, which participated for the first time this year and the Sherriff's Office began a rivalry , with the Sherriff's Office winning a "trophy" (a wooden Nutcracker) for gathering more toys than the Fire Department!

The Patriot Guard Riders who "Stand for Those Who Stood for Us" sponsor a "Toy Run" on their motorcycles, where they ride all over Northeastern NC, collecting toys for this event, plus they donate hundreds of stuffed animals themselves. They appreciate David H. Twiford's commitment to our military so much, they elected him to the Board of Directors for Operation Toy Soldier. Once all the toys are collected from the barrels, a community event takes place, with the North Carolina National Guard, the Sherriff's Office, the Fire Department, Twiford employees, Coast Guard members and other volunteers converging at Twiford's Memorial Chapel, in Elizabeth City, NC, to bag up and count the toys. Toys of every sort and for every age range are donated: bicycles, games, puzzles, blocks, coloring books, dolls, action figures, crafting supplies, costumes for dress up, musical instruments, Legos and many more are collected from a warm hearted community, just trying to give back. Over 3000 toys were collected in 2022, an impressive record.

The entire Twiford family, and all the staff at both locations, participates in this event every year. Though it takes an incredible amount of planning, work and time, we all feel led to help. Several employees came in on their days off to help in various capacities, and we wouldn't have it any other way!

Watson Thomas Funeral Home and Crematory Galesburg, Illinois

When we see something that isn't right, we have three choices, except it, ignore it, or fix it. At Watson Thomas Funeral Home we believe the only choice is to step up and fix it. For many years, our local veterans service organizations have dutifully provided an honor guard at a funeral, if requested, for their fallen brethren. As the years have gone by the number of participating veteran organizations, veterans, and most importantly, the funds to provide this noble service has greatly diminished.

Through the years many families requesting this service was asked to make a monetary donation to help them keep the honor guard afloat as they do not receive any funds from any other source. While our crew has been amazing and devoted, through the years, the requested dress attire amongst the group became only similar and not exact as one would expect from such a fine group of veterans. This has been due to the veteran having to purchase their own uniform.

Mark and Tricia Thomas had been trying to come up with an idea that would not only raise a lot of money at one time so they would be able to purchase matching uniforms, but also to provide a spotlight on the sometimes tireless volunteer work they do without any acknowledgement. So along came the idea to partner with one of our local craft breweries and create a beer, just for the veterans. And this is how All American Ale was born!

Mark called Blake Benedict at Reserve Artisan Ale about partnering to create not only the beer but a keg tapping evening at their brewery. Blake was immediately onboard as soon as the situation and idea was explained. Blake set about creating a light tasting beer that would satisfy many different beer drinkers. He summoned off finding as many local or near local ingredients and created a light, creamy ale. The promise made by Watson Thomas was two fold, one to cover all costs with creating the beer as long as Reserve would hold the event and donate their expertise in brewing the beer and canning some to have for sale as a keepsake. An artist was hired and a custom can wrap was made.

Mark went on a publicity tour around the Galesburg area to get word out about the event. The keg tapping evening was held on August 10, 2022. Watson Thomas wanted to make sure the evening was an enjoyable one. The funeral home hired a local caterer who specializes in giant charcuterie boards to create something stunning for the evening. The entire honor guard's presence was requested to attend and have not only the first pours of the beer but the official first drink of the beer publicly. The evening was a bigger hit than either, Mark and Tricia, the honor guard, or Reserve Artisan Ales could have imagined. By the time the evening was complete, \$5,000.00 was raised for the honor guard. It still gives me goose bumps to think about the love and support the community showed our honor guard. The commander of the group immediately set out to our local tuxedo shop and sent all the guys in to get custom fit suits, dress shirts, ties, and shoes. They had enough funds to be able to buy everyone all their clothing including matching navy overcoats for colder weather.

The honor guard was gracious enough to save the new uniforms until Watson Thomas had an honor guard service at the cemetery.

This event did more than just raise some money for a worthwhile organization. New relationships and partnerships were created within our community. Our veterans all stand a little straighter when providing rifle volleys for their fallen comrades.

Watson Thomas and Reserve Artisan Ales is bringing back the event for year two hoping to not only provide another night honoring these selfless veterans and to provide the recognition they deserve, but to continue to raise money for them so as new veterans join their ranks or as gun repairs are needed and rifle rounds need purchased the money is there without having to ask a grieving family for a monetary donation.