

'A show of leadership'

By Lisa Reisman

BRANFORD — Mark Hally's quest to cover every veteran's grave in each of Branford's seven cemeteries with a wreath might earn him an Eagle Scout designation, but it's not a one and done.

"I'm returning every year until every single one is covered," the 16-year-old told the hardy 150 people who turned out in last Saturday's cold drizzle to commemorate Wreaths Across America Day at St. Agnes Cemetery in Branford.

Wreaths Across America is a national initiative founded in 2007 to remember fallen veterans and their families during the holidays by laying wreaths on their headstones.

The ceremony, which was coordinated by Hally, played out in accordance with those at Arlington National Cemetery and at 2,100 locations across the U.S., at sea, and abroad, where volunteers lay an estimated 2.2 million wreaths at service members' graves.

There was the compelling sight of fresh balsam wreaths laid out in the snow. There was Army veteran and speaker Brian Minter articulating the WAA mission to "remember the fallen, honor those that serve, and teach the next generation about the value of freedom."

There was former First Selectman Anthony "Unk" Daros exhorting the crowd to say aloud the name of the deceased while laying a wreath to ensure no veteran is forgotten. There was a rifle salute by Branford military veterans, a blessing of the wreaths by Msgr. David Walker, and the playing of Taps.

But it was also singular, with a 16-year-old spearheading an effort that included members of the Branford police and fire departments, local veterans from all branches of the military, and Boy Scout troops from Branford and Hamden, as well as a cadre of over 100 volunteers.

A pair of factors drove Hally to make the effort his Eagle Scout project and, in the process, raise \$15,000 toward his goal of \$20,000, enabling the volunteers he

recruited to cover over 1,300 graves of the roughly 2,100 in each of Branford's cemeteries.

One was the inspiration of his great uncle, William Kevin Colwell, an Air Force sergeant who served in World War II, the Korean War, and Vietnam, during which he was shot down over Laos in December 1965 at the age of 44. In 2012, a year after Colwell's remains were returned, Hally attended a service in his honor at Arlington National Cemetery.

Another was last year's stirring WAA program honoring fallen veterans and Gold Star families at Branford's Fire Headquarters, which was one of only a handful of scheduled stops for the 2-mile-long fleet along a 700-mile week-long trek from Maine to Arlington.

Though the WAA convoy stopped this year in Old Saybrook, Hally found a way to keep Branford involved, one that he's determined to make an annual tradition.

"Next year it's not going to be my Eagle Project, but I'm going to make sure every year this happens and I hope to see you all next year," said Hally, who would later lay a wreath on the grave of Branford's Robert E. Lee, a U.S. Army Air Corps veteran who died last month at 94 and who, like Hally, achieved the rank of Eagle Scout at 16.

"His family contacted me, and said they wouldn't be able to attend, and asked if I would cover his grave," he said.

"Mark's actions exemplify leadership, respect, and honor," said LCDR Dottie Packer, NC (Nurse Corps) USN/RET, as the spirited notes of the Stony Creek Fife & Drum Corps lingered in the air and volunteers, escorted by a convoy of fire trucks, dispersed to each of the cemeteries under the cold December rain.

► To support Mark Hally's quest to cover all Branford veterans' graves with wreaths in December 2020, make checks payable to Wreaths Across America and mail to Mark Hally, 18 Wilford Ave, Branford 06405. Online wreathsacrossamerica.org/CT0101



Dottie Packer / Contributed photos



Above, aspiring Eagle Scout Mark Hally lays a wreath on the grave of a veteran during the Wreaths Across America Day at St. Agnes Cemetery in Branford on Dec. 14. Wreaths Across America is a national initiative founded in 2007 to remember fallen veterans and their families during the holidays by laying wreaths on their headstones. At left, Members of Branford VFW No. 12106 Bill Savastano, Chuck Larkins, Donald Langlois Sr. and Robert Russell pay their respects.