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With solemn words, long-awaited veterans cemetery is consecrated



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Board members of the Northern New Jersey Veterans Memorial Cemetery bury the ashes of American flags as well as an Air Force uniform during the cemetery's consecration ceremony Sunday in Sparta.

Photo by Daniel Freel/New Jersey Herald

By Bruce Scruton (/staffer/38) New Jersey Herald

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SPARTA -- The two had talked a few times on the phone -- Beth Albinson asking for progress on the cemetery and John Harrigan saying, "Soon, soon."

On Sunday, after the Northern New Jersey Veterans Memorial Cemetery was consecrated, the two met face-to-face for the first time at the top of a hillside, where the ashes of the late Joseph Flanigan will become the first burial at the cemetery.

With Albinson were her mother, Joseph's widow, Catherine Flanigan; and her son, Taylor, 23. The family has his ashes, waiting for word that the cemetery would be open and accepting interments.

"John called on Friday," Beth Albinson said, "and gave us the news. He knew the family would be getting together for Thanksgiving, so the day after we will be back here."

Sunday's consecration ceremony had several moments of poignancy, from the preamble to the opening prayer; from to the ceremonial "first burial" of ashes of American flags to Master of Ceremonies Phil Crabb noting that the wind stopped blowing and there wasn't a cloud in the sky during the ceremony, "a sign we are doing the right thing."

There were also plenty of words of thanks and praise for Harrigan, the Vietnam veteran who approached the Sussex County Board of Chosen Freeholders more than a half-dozen years ago with an idea for a "plot of land" for veterans to be buried.

What evolved in those years is the first non-government-owned veterans cemetery in New Jersey and one of very few across the country.

Details on the cost of burials and other information is available at: www.vva1002.org.

The plot of land is 66 acres off Route 94 with enough property for about 16,000 additional burials after that of Navy veteran Flanigan, who lived most of his life in Stanhope.

While Harrigan received the lion's share of thanks during the ceremonies, he often points to the small cadre of Vietnam veterans of the Wallkill Valley post of Vietnam Veterans of America who stood behind him.

When the idea was first floated, there were about 50-60 members of the post. Today, the rolls have about 200 members.

The Rev. John Boland, who many years ago offered the handful of veterans a room at his church in Vernon to hold their meetings, gave the opening prayer.

He noted Sunday's ceremony was just a couple of days short of the 152nd anniversary of President Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, and he used a passage from that speech as the lead-in to his prayer.

"The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here; while it can never forget what they did," he said.

State Sen. Steve Oroho called the event "a fitting day," and said he and fellow legislators Parker Space and Allison McHose "played a small, small part."

Turning to Harrigan, he said, "You played the big part. You are such an inspiration."

He also noted that the cemetery's location, on the hillside overlooking Sussex County Technical School, is "noteworthy and important as we pass on to future generations the sacrifice these men and women have made."

Sussex County Freeholder Richard Vohden, a Korean War veteran, recalled how he was a chairman of the county's Open Space Committee in 2010 when freeholders asked his group to look at where land was available in the county for a cemetery.

"Mission accomplished. We consecrate this land as a place where all our veterans, whether they served in war or in peace, can get eternal rest," he said.

Space, who was on the freeholder board in the early stages of the cemetery's development, said the project "seems contagious for the entire community. I have never seen so many people in the community jump on board. Congratulations, John, your dream is coming true."

Among those taking part in the ceremonies was a compilation band from all community bands in the county. As it played, a slight breeze rustled the ornate formal dress of a contingent from the Knights of Columbus, and the banners of two color guards standing side-by-side -- gray-bearded veterans from the Vietnam Veterans post and non-bearded boys from Sparta's Boy Scout Troop and Pack 82.

All was not solemn pomp, however.

County Clerk Jeff Parrott, who was freeholder director when Harrigan first stood, hesitantly, before the board in 2008, recalled how the board first looked at offering "an acre or two near the Homestead. John though, said, 'I'm thinking more on the lines of an Arlington.' "

Crabb, who has been freeholder director twice since Harrigan first went to the board, said, "All along, John's sole goal has been to provide a resting place in Sussex County for our veterans."

He also recalled an early conversation when Harrigan was not happy with the acre-or-two offer.

"He said, very respectfully, 'Phil, with respect, that area isn't big enough. They'd have to be buried standing straight up.'"

As Harrigan was introduced and walked toward the podium, the crowd gave a standing ovation.

Asking the audience to stop, he was quick to point toward the board of directors of the cemetery, asking the members to stand for recognition.

"This was started by one person," he admitted, "but completed as a community."

Among the many volunteers who have worked on the project, from the veterans to high school students to community members, he gave special thanks to some professionals -- surveyors Susan and Rich Gardell; attorneys Kevin Kelly and Meghan Ward; and landscape experts Mark and Michele DeVendzia, who were the lead contractors to clear the land and make the initial grading.

All provided their services for free, Harrigan said, and to honor their work, the three main roads within the cemetery will be called DeVendzia Drive, Kelly & Ward Way and Gardell Avenue.

The Board of Directors then gathered near the main flagpole for the ceremonial "first" burial of a box of ashes from about 800 pounds of U.S. flags that were burned at the Abby Glen Pet Crematory in formal ceremonies over the past few months.

After each board member placed a spadeful of dirt on the container, there was a multi-gun salute followed by taps.

The gun salute and taps will be repeated thousands of times over the next few decades, beginning with the interment of the ashes of Joseph Flanigan, with his family gathered around.

Harrigan said he had last heard from Albinson, who lives in Upper Mount Bethel, Pa., by a recent letter.

"She would call or write, tell me the family was getting together and I'd have to say, 'Soon,' and tell her to wait," he said. "This last time, she wrote they were all getting together at her house for Thanksgiving."

He said he called her on Friday to invite her and her mother to the ceremony and to let her know they could do the burial on the day after Thanksgiving.

Harrigan said the choice of the Flanigan family was to keep the "first" burial as random as possible.

Flanigan, 85, was a resident of Stanhope when he died Aug. 18, 2014.

His ashes have been held by the family since then in anticipation of the cemetery's opening.

Born in Pottsville, Pa., he served in the Navy from 1951 to 1955 as a radio operator. After his discharge, he was employed as an electronic technician at Picatinny Arsenal.

He and Catherine were married after he got out of the Navy and lived most of their lives in Stanhope. He was a member of the William J. Hocking American Legion Post 91 of Mount Arlington and St. Jude's Roman Catholic Church in Mount -Olive.

"He was my sons' (Taylor and Brett) biggest fan," Albinson said. "He would try to get to all their games."

She said her younger son, Brett, was off to college just a week before her father died. "He told him, 'Hold that football up behind your ear when you're ready to throw.' "

Brett was quarterback of his high school (Bangor High School, Pa.) team. As junior, he played tight end for Allegheny College this past fall.

Other survivors include Flanigan's other daughter, Deborah Nittinger, and husband, Edward, of Chesapeake, Va.; and his brother, Hugh Flanigan, and wife, Marion.

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