

A Touching Tribute



Mike Reilly among those humbled by Wreaths Across America experience at Arlington National Cemetery

Hundreds of people stood in line at the back of a Pottle's Transportation 53' dry van trailer near Section 53 at Arlington National Cemetery on December 10, 2011. They were there in conjunction with "Wreaths Across America Day", which includes a remembrance ceremony that takes place on this sacred ground in Virginia, the final resting place for more than 300,000 veterans.

As the trailer doors rolled up, dozens of boxes containing identical pine wreaths with simple red bows were handed down to people who began to filter quietly among the rows of white tombstones for placement at the graves of relatives, battlefield buddies, fraternity brothers and strangers fallen in numerous wars over the years.

December 2011 marked the twentieth year that Worcester Wreath Company has provided wreaths to be placed on headstones to honor and remember America's veterans during the holiday season, and the Pottle's truck was one of 20 scattered throughout the 642-acre cemetery, the last stop in a "Veterans Honor Parade" that began December 4, 2011, in Harrington, Maine.

The truck convoy had slowly made its way down a 750-mile stretch of Route 1 to Washington, D.C., escorted by the Patriot Guard Riders. Along this week-long route, the group made stops at schools and cemeteries to carry out the mission of Wreaths Across America: to remember and honor veterans by placing wreaths at the graves of fallen military members during the holidays – a time of traditional family gather-

ings – and teach children that we are able to gather, in peace, because of the many sacrifices made by military men and women.

About 15,000 volunteers joined the effort at Arlington, and each tractor trailer had a similar scene. Scout troops, parents, grandparents, kids in earmuffs and mittens, and military members in full dress uniforms were waiting to take wreaths, one



Left: A Witte Bros. Exchange, Inc. truck turns into the front gate of Arlington National Cemetery. Right: Members of the military salute driver Tom Trower as he navigates his truck through the entrance.

For the next few minutes, not a sound was made as Reilly simply stood and stared, lost in thought and overcome with emotion.

Crouching down to one knee, he placed a wreath at the tombstone of Major Frank Kent Reilly Jr., a father he never met. Frank Reilly was a Marine fighter pilot who received six Gold Star and Distinguished Flying Cross awards before being killed in



at a time, and head for a familiar spot or form somber clusters around a single tomb.

Some were there to volunteer their time. Others were present to pay a tribute to a fallen soldier with personal mourning and private reflection.

Mike Reilly was there to do both.

Reilly is the CEO of Randall-Reilly Business Media and Information, the company that publishes several magazines for the trucking industry, and he helped unload boxes from the back of the Pottle's trailer. Afterward, he watched as within a few hours all of the wreaths were distributed to different spots across the vast cemetery.

After the crowds had dwindled, Reilly made a solemn walk to the opposite side of Arlington in search of Section 7, one of the areas where wreaths had not been placed. Using a tree off of Grant Avenue as a marker, he entered the section and began walking slowly for several rows until he uttered the words, "I see them."

a test mission following the Korean War. Frank was a highly decorated soldier, but Mike said his mother, Blanche, was the real hero in the family.

Blanche was pregnant with Mike at the time of Frank's death, and she raised five children on her own, all while working as a teacher during the daytime, as a librarian at a Federal prison at night, and becoming a noted tutor of minority students in Montgomery, Alabama during the height of the Civil Rights movement. She would live for almost four more decades before being buried next to Frank in Arlington National Cemetery.

It had been a few years since Mike had seen the graves, and he vowed to visit more frequently as he placed a wreath on the marble marker bearing her name. Crouching in between both graves, Mike placed his outstretched arms enough to touch both headstones. He cried, and then he prayed. As he rose to his feet, wiped the tears from his face and walked away, Mike said his

mother would be proud to see that her place of interment stood out - and he plans to make this an annual tradition. "I think of all the sacrifices she made, and that was the least I could do to honor a strong woman who made me what I am," Reilly stated.

Opportunities for people like Reilly to pay tribute with wreaths began with the generosity of Worcester Wreath Company, and have been expedited by the participation of the trucking industry. Worcester Wreath and its involvement was inspired at the early age of 12 years old when, as a Bangor Daily Newspaper boy, Morrill Worcester won a trip to the Nation's Capital. It was a journey he would never forget,

the country's veterans. Arrangements were made for the wreaths to be placed at Arlington in one of the older sections of the cemetery, an area that received fewer visitors with each passing year. Thus, the Arlington Wreath Project started that year with the donation and laying of 5,000 Christmas wreaths.

"I felt like our military are the fabric of America, and these veterans deserved the honor we were providing," Morrill said. "I thought it would be a one-time thing, but the experience was amazing." Thus, the trip to Arlington became an annual pilgrimage for Mr. Worcester; and the program was relatively obscure until 2005



Mike Reilly unloads boxes of wreaths to waiting volunteers.

and Arlington National Cemetery made an indelible impression. In later life, he recognized that his success as a businessman was in large part due to the values of this nation and the veterans who made the ultimate sacrifice for their country.

Morrill grew up to own and operate Worcester Wreath Company, who in 1992 found themselves with an excess of wreaths nearing the end of the holiday season. Remembering a boyhood experience of his visit to Arlington National Cemetery, Morrill saw this as an opportunity to honor

when a photo of the gravestones adorned with wreaths and covered in snow circulated around the Internet. The project received national attention. Thousands of requests poured in from all over the country from people wanting to emulate the Arlington project at their National and State cemeteries. The project expanded, and in 2007 Wreaths Across America was formed as a non-profit organization to promote veterans' remembrance.

In 2008, the US Congress unanimously voted to designate the second Saturday in

December as “Wreaths Across America™ Day”, and rapid growth followed. The trucking industry has been a huge part of Wreaths Across America since its inception, and Barry Pottle, president and CEO of Bangor, Maine-based Pottle’s Transportation, has been the catalyst to get other fleets plus the Truckload Carriers Association (TCA) and American Trucking Associations to participate.

“Wreaths Across America is a great cause... it has really brought the trucking industry together,” Pottle said. “We’re united in wanting to wish veterans and their families happy holidays and to thank those who died protecting our freedom. It’s a great



Debbie Sparks, VP of Development for the Truckload Carriers Association, passes out red stocking caps with a commemorative pin to children who put wreaths on graves at Arlington National Cemetery.

cause, and we’re so proud to be a part of it!”

In 2011, 46 trucking companies provided equipment and manpower to haul 80 truckloads of wreaths, which represents 325,000 of the 400,000 that were placed at cemeteries across the U.S.

At an earlier ceremony at the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Col., the TCA honored 950 Air Force veterans who are interred at the Academy’s cemetery. Earl L. Henderson Trucking Co. transported the greenery to Colorado Springs via a donated truck and the ser-

vices of two if its drivers.

This year’s Arlington event was the largest ever, requiring the placement of more than 92,000 wreaths, a huge jump from the previous record of 26,000 in 2010. This writer was a volunteer then, and to see the growth in one year was phenomenal.

Debbie Sparks, vice president of development for the TCA, which is headquartered in nearby Alexandria, Virginia, said she knew it was going to be a special day after her emotional Metro ride to Arlington that morning. “The trains were almost as full as they are during rush hour, but the atmosphere was completely different. Most of the people were volunteers on their way to the cemetery, and they were both excited and awed by the task ahead. As my train filled up, people began to talk about why they decided to participate. When it was my turn to speak, I said that I work for the trucking industry and had helped organize the trucks everyone would soon be unloading,” Sparks stated. “I also told them that our industry was actually delivering wreaths to more than 700 military cemeteries across North America, not just to Arlington. In response, one passenger shouted that if it weren’t for the trucks bringing the wreaths, we wouldn’t have had the chance to come together like this.”

Gary Salisbury, TCA’s chairman and the president and CEO of Fikes Truck Line, Inc., of Hope, Arkansas, said he is impressed at the level of commitment the trucking industry has made to this endeavor. “Congratulations to Barry Pottle and his team of dedicated volunteers – both trucking companies and individual professional truck drivers – who have done such a tremendous job making this initiative work,” Salisbury said.

One of those trucking professionals was Tom Trower, a company driver for Troy,



A hillside in Section 31 covered with wreaths.

Missouri-based Witte Bros. Exchange, Inc. Trower said he was honored to be one of the drivers in the 2011 convoy, but said there were times when it was hard to keep his emotions in check. "As we were entering the main gate of Arlington, and I saw all of the military members saluting my truck, I choked up," Trower said. "I had to put on my sunglasses to hide the tears."

Trower hopes to return in the future. "If my company will send me, I will be here,"

he said. Mike Reilly echoed his sentiment. "I don't know how anyone who participates in Wreaths Across America would not want to come back," Reilly stated.

Wreaths Across America is counting on people like Trower and Reilly to volunteer this year, as they aim to honor every veteran at the cemetery.

The wreaths placed on December 10, 2011 remained in place at Arlington and on view until February 28, 2012 when volunteers returned to remove them.

However, the memories from Wreath Across America Day will last forever. **CD**

To find out how you can donate a wreath, or for more information about the program, visit WreathsAcrossAmerica.org. To volunteer your trucking equipment or to learn how your fleet can become involved in next year's effort, contact Barry Pottle at (800) 370-5623 or bpottle@pottlestrans.com.

Own your career. Own your truck. Own the Road.

After only 60 days of employment with Barlow, drivers are eligible for our lease acquisition program, which allows YOU to take control of YOUR career and own a late-model, extended-hood 379 Peterbilt.

- OO's Average \$1,000+ a Week
- 401(k) Retirement Program
- All Miles Paid Loaded or Empty
- Paid Orientation, Referral Bonus, Safety Bonus, Holiday Pay
- Paid Weekly
- Rider Program



877.822.8237 - www.barlowtruckline.com
1305 Grand DD SS Faucett, MO 64448

Wreaths Across America Day

December 10, 2011



Clockwise, beginning at top right: Veterans Honors Parade trucks await entry into Arlington National Cemetery; Barry Pottle's truck at the top of Section 43; Karen and Morrill Worcester address volunteers; wreaths being unloaded from Barry Pottle's trailer; section 42 after wreaths were placed on headstones; a local scout troupe and Maine state troopers pose with the wreath that rode on the front grill of Barry Pottle's truck.