

# Highlands News-Sun

## Wreaths Across America honors local vets

- By PHIL ATTINGER Staff Writer



Elizabeth 'Betsy' Waddell, retired corpsman with the U.S. Navy, places a holiday wreath on the local grave of U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Chester H. Draper, a veteran of World War II and the Korean War. This year saw thousands of wreaths placed on gravesites like Draper's, to honor veterans in an almost 30-year holiday tradition.



This iconic image became viral in 2005, inspiring increased national interest in an annual tribute of laying Christmas wreaths on the graves of fallen soldiers, and prompting the formation of Wreaths Across America as a nonprofit that now provides wreaths to similar efforts at 2,500 places across the United States.

- COURTESY PHOTO/WREATHS ACROSS AMERICA

AVON PARK — A few veterans were decorated Saturday, posthumously, but they didn't get Purple Hearts. They got green wreaths.

Volunteers taking part in the annual Wreaths Across America Day on Saturday placed Christmas wreaths on the graves of veterans in conjunction with hundreds of other events across the nation this December to honor hundreds of thousands of veterans.

The effort got a slow start Saturday at Lakeview Memorial Gardens in Avon Park. Four volunteers, all retired military, had seven wreaths to place on graves there and had to wait until later in the weekend to place the rest: The wreaths were on back-order or just hadn't arrived yet.

For Betsy Waddell, it's just a chance to give a little bit of Christmas cheer, especially this year, as so many folks who might get out to visit loved ones' graves or to decorate veterans' markers might not because of health issues or concerns for COVID-19.

Waddell (U.S. Navy 1971-1992) was joined by former U.S. Air Force pilot Chuck Day (1953-1957), who has also volunteered locally for the American Red Cross, and Chief Fire Controlman Brad Bowters (U.S. Navy 1973-1994).

His wife, Gloria Bowters, a member of the Disabled American Veterans Auxiliary, also helped put out wreaths at Lakeview Memorial Gardens. Waiting for the rest of the wreaths gave the four time to reminisce and salute fellow service members, posthumously, in the crisp air on Saturday.

The tradition of placing Christmas wreaths on veterans' graves began in 1992, but its genesis began long before that when Morrill Worcester, owner of Worcester Wreath Company of Harrington, Maine, was only 12 years old, working as a paperboy for the Bangor Daily News.

He won a trip to Washington D.C., his first trip to the nation's capital, where Arlington National Cemetery made an especially indelible impression on him. The memory of that experience followed him throughout his life and successful career, reminding him that his good fortune was due, in large part, to the values of this nation and the veterans who made the ultimate sacrifice for their country, according to [wreathscrossamerica.org](http://wreathscrossamerica.org).

In 1992, Worcester Wreath had a surplus of wreaths near the end of the holiday season. With the help of Maine Senator Olympia Snowe, the company arranged to place the wreaths in Arlington in one of the older sections that had received fewer visitors each passing year.

This went on every year after that until 2005, when a photo of snow-covered graves, adorned with wreaths, circulated around the internet, bringing the project national attention and requests to emulate the Arlington effort at local cemeteries.

It now takes place at 2,500 places in the nation, and on Dec. 3, the U.S. Senate passed Bill No. 786, officially recognizing Wreaths across America Day as Dec. 19, 2020.