Memorial Day in full bloom – red, white, and blue captures patriotic pride

Written by by Tom Hartsock Sun Correspondent
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The Memorial Day crowd at the Court House plaza started filling the chairs about 9 am last Monday, an hour or so before the ceremonies at Hill Crest Cemetery came to a close: a Catholic Mass on the east side and a wreath-laying in the small, fenced Veteran's section at the top of the hill to the west. The parade began about 11 am, drawing more spectators to the sidewalks to watch veterans, Boy Scouts, CAP Cadets, Parade honorees, and City officials march or ride by during the eight-block route down Aztec Avenue.

The day was warm with plenty of sunshine, but the heat did not keep the local citizens away from this summer-starting event. The attendance may have been smaller than past years, but the warm weather may have encouraged many to visit the cooler climes at McGaffey and other venues. Those in attendance enjoyed the regular fare of this special day, and there was a special treat that doesn't always find its way to small towns.

The first half of the program was regular stuff, like the pledge of allegiance and the national anthem, the latter delivered by John Encino, a Gallup native. Spiritual Warrior Tooley Brown prayed for those who had sacrificed all for America, and Veterans Committee Chairman Joe Zecca introduced the political speakers.

The introduction of the Grand Marshal Fran Palochak drew a warm response from the crowd. The US Navy Vietnam veteran and current City Councilor for District 4 is a Gallup native, a member of Veterans Helping Veterans, active in St. Francis of Assisi, and devotes a lot of time on local and state issues relating to domestic violence. She has been married to Richard for 36 years and they have three children and three grand children.

The special treat for the audience was the recognition of Corporal Van Etsitty, who made the ultimate sacrifice for America on June 1, 1968 in Kien Tuong Province, in South Vietnam while serving with C Company, 2nd Battalion, 60th Infantry, of the 9th Infantry Division. What made this special was when the infantry commander at the time of his death, Edward Ryan, agreed to speak at this gathering.

"I don't know much about how he lived before he went to Vietnam," Ryan said of Etsitty. "The only thing we spoke about is leaving and going home."

Ryan noted that Etsitty always faced forward, not the type to look the other way when the going got tough.

“He had the heart and soul of a warrior,” he said.

Members of Veterans Helping Veterans then gave a 21-gun salute and played taps, following which there was a flag folding ceremony and presentation of the flag to the family of Corporal Etsitty.

A thoughtful, though heart-wrenching way to close out Memorial Day, honoring one who gave the last full measure of life for his country.

by Tom Hartsock

Sun Correspondent