

VIGIL RETURNS TO HONOR AMERICAS MISSING HEROES



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Celebrations for the nation's 250th birthday ran deep this year with parades, fireworks, historical events and speakers but recognition continues as well as prayers and memorials especially to remember Prisoners of War (POW) and those Missing in Action (MIA).

On Friday, Sept. 18, and Saturday, Sept. 19, the All Veterans Memorial in Budd Lake will host its 10th annual National POW/MIA 24 Hour Vigil to honor all American soldiers who have served and have yet to be accounted for from various wars. With the opening ceremony set to begin at 5 p.m., the program runs through the night at the memorial grounds.

Volunteers and participants will gather at the one-of-a-kind kind POW/MIA/PTSD Remembrance Wall and Ascension Bell Tower, two elements that will be utilized in honoring these warriors.

Volunteers from various organizations are asked to sign up for an allotted time to read the names of N.J. men and women who are POW or MIA, ring the Ascension Bell and keep watch over the vigil flame. The vigil will continue for 24 hours with the reading of names and tolling the ascension bell for each prisoner of war or military man or woman missing in action.

It has been 47 years since the United States designated the third Friday of every September as the National POW/MIA Recognition Day. On this day, this country calls upon all citizens to remember these brave soldiers who went missing or became prisoners of war throughout its nation's history. On July 18, 1979, a congregational resolution was passed for a national vigil be held annually to recognize the 2,646 American soldiers unaccounted for from the Vietnam War.

With this year being the nation's anniversary, the program is expected to have some added highlights. Explains AVM Founder Charlie Wood Uhrmann, "2026 is our Nation's 250th Birthday since the signing of the Declaration of Independence. In recognition of this milestone, we will enact certain American adopted traditions: The formal folding of the U.S. Flag and the meaning behind each fold; formal setting of the Table for One, also known as the Missing Man Table; recital of the first ten amendments of the U.S. Constitution / Bill of Rights; century old bugle calls which will be embedded throughout the program.

"I secured an actual Ceremonial Bugle player who has been playing since he was ten years old," says Uhrmann. "We are also having a special dedication of the POW/MIA ceremonial grounds," she adds. "Since the Morris County American Legion has sponsored the entire section, they will be holding a special dedication and recital. They have invited the New Jersey American Legion Commander to participate in this momentous occasion by having him light the Vigil Flame. During the ceremony, we integrated each one of the sponsored elements into the dedication."

Other special guests will include: The former Morris County American Legion / AVM Board of Director Chairman Amery Vasso, who now lives in Texas; Ceremonial Bugler Douglas E Grunn; and several ranking officers.

Folding of the U.S. Flag will honor James Norman Baum, a WWII veteran who gifted the WWII Flag to the AVM before his passing, says Uhrmann. The flag was raised on a battleship during WWII. It was also raised on several other battleships during the Korean War, Vietnam War

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and Gulf War. The flag has not been formally retired, so we decided to use the 250 Anniversary to formally retire Old Glory,” says Uhrmann. “This flag will be added to the military relics we plan to donate to a museum.”

An honorable service paver will be laid for James Hammer, a veteran who recently passed away due to a war-related illness. “He served with a previous fallen warrior who was honored at the AVM last year,” explains Uhrmann. “James’ widow, Jeanie Marie, had requested her husband's Honorable Service Paver be placed next to his 'Brother in Arms.' James leaves behind a wife, children and many loving relatives, who will be present for the setting of his paver.”

Chaplain Robert Till, a longtime clergyman from Post 450, will give the invocation during the opening ceremony, and provide other blessings throughout the vigil.

Another highlight at this year’s vigil will be the 250th American Legion Dedication of the POW/MIS Stage. “It is the final element of the POW/MIA that needed a sponsor; we have been working towards this sponsorship for more than four years,” says Uhrmann. “The stage leading up to the podium will display a small segment of President Ronald Reagan's 1984 speech, whereby adopting the National POW/MIA Recognition Day; the stage will also display all of the Morris County individual Posts. During the dedication, President Reagan's entire POW/MIA speech will be recited.”

Throughout the 24-hour vigil, the Mt. Olive High School JROTC will march around Turkey Brook Park for the Bataan Death March to honor the nearly 75k Filipino and American troops who were forced to march 65 miles to prison camps during the April 9, 1942, U.S. surrender of the Bataan Peninsula in WWII. Cadets who complete the 14-mile march around Turkey Brook Park earn a Bataan Death March Memorial Ribbon, remembering the thousands who perished from intense heat and harsh treatment.

A Candlelight Ceremony is also planned on the eve of the vigil. Participants will gather in the field to hold vigil candles to light up the sky and set the tone for a blessed evening.

“Ever since the Revolutionary War, America's men and women have heroically served their country in times of conflict,” recited former President Ronald Reagan in his May 9, 1984 Proclamation 5192 National P.O.W. / M.I.A. Recognition Day. “In each of America's wars, our prisoners of war have been required to make special sacrifices, serving their country under conditions of hardship. “Our P.O.W.s and M.I.A.s have earned a very special place in the hearts of all Americans because of their selfless devotion to duty and unflinching courage,” added Reagan. “We must not forget or fail to honor those who have served their country so faithfully.”

To reserve a reading spot, call or text Uhrmann at [973-479-4959](tel:973-479-4959).