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A Girl Scout marks the grave of a soldier at a local cemetery Thursday as part of a project being undertaken by Troop No. 60005 in cooperation with American Legion Post No. 80. The Legion has purchased flag holder crosses to be placed at the graves of veterans, and the organizations have teamed up to help with unmarked soldiers' graves at Restlawn and Liberal Cemetery. Courtesy photo

Legion, Girl Scouts work together to honor Seward County's forgotten soldiers

By ROBERT PIERCE

• Leader & Times

Throughout its history, America has had many men and women die for the preservation of the freedoms enjoyed by its citizens.

Many of those soldiers are recognized annually during Memorial Day and Veterans Day, and while many of the names and histories of those warriors are known, still others sit in graves in cemeteries across the country with nary a mention of their time served.

Girl Scouts in local Troop No. 60005 are looking to help get at least some of those who gave their life for their country some recognition through a project with American Legion Post No. 80.

Girl Scout leader Michele Stoddard said the idea for the project came about after she and her troop were looking through pages on the social media site, Facebook.

"I saw all these little comments coming up," she said. "For Memorial Day, they were doing this, they were marching in a parade, or they were helping with this or that."

This is when Stoddard started wondering what her troop could do to help with local Memorial Day events. She next paid a visit to neighbor Al Orr, the commander of Post 80.

"I said 'Do you have anything our girls could help with?'" the Girl Scout leader said. "He said, 'I need some flag holders.' I said, 'OK, how many do you need?' He gave me a number. Two days later, he had a meeting. I went and said, 'I have all the girls handled. We'll be there.'"

At the time of Memorial Day, the Girl Scouts went out to Restlawn Cemetery to put flags on soldiers graves. Stoddard said troop members then began realizing how poorly many of the graves with soldiers in them were marked.

"A couple of them after we got done with both cemeteries looked at me and said, 'We want to fix this,'" she said. "'We want to make this easier, better, quicker, and make sure our soldiers are not being disrespected by not having a flag.'"

Stoddard listened to the young ladies, all the while believing they had come up with a great idea.

“I went down and talked to Al again and said the girls would like to get involved and try to help get those better marked,” she said. “He said we’d be tickled pink if you guys wanted to help. The group is getting smaller. They’re getting older. It’s getting harder for a lot of them to go through. We’d love to have help.”

Stoddard said members of her troop then told her they would like to take on the marking as a Silver Award project.

“I’ve got five girls that say they are dedicated to go out, and we will find those graves if we can get help,” she said. “Some of them are not marked.”

Troop 60005 began the project just last week, and Stoddard said the girls are finding out more and more every day.

“I think we’ve got seven now that have been turned over to me,” she said in an interview Wednesday.

Many of the poorly marked graves are of soldiers from World War II. Stoddard explained why the history of many from that era is unknown.

“When visiting with Al, he said a lot of the World War II guys didn’t take care of their paperwork really well so when they passed away, they couldn’t be found,” she said. “They couldn’t prove it to be able to have it there when it happened. With the fire in St. Louis, a lot of those records got destroyed.”

Stoddard said the troop would like the community’s help with the project.

“We’re trying to work with both cemeteries,” she said. “I’ve been out and talked with both of the ones in charge, and as we find things and we get things marked, we are writing it down.”

Stoddard showed a list compiled of soldiers in both Liberal and Restlawn Cemetery.

“If the names of the soldiers we find are not on this list, we’re writing down the name, the section they’re at, whether they were Army, Navy, what time they served,” she said. “We will turn this information over to the county so they can add that to their paperwork.”

Of course, Stoddard knows not all of the graves will be found, but the goal of the project is to get as many marked as possible.

“The girls are willing,” she said. “The girls have said they will take Restlawn and go and mark them, but to do that, we want to know where they’re at. If they’re not marked, we want to get them marked so we’re not sitting there feeling left out.”

Troop members would like to see people coming to put flowers on a grave for Memorial Day likewise be able to see a flag for the relative.

“They put their life on the line for us,” Stoddard said. “They got the flag draped over their coffin. The least we can do is on Memorial Day to make sure they’ve got a flag on their grave to show the respect they deserve.”

The local Girl Scouts will present their project Wednesday through a phone interview to a committee of organization official, and once it is approved, Stoddard said there will be a minimum of 50 hours commitment to the project.

“Their goal is to walk through each cemetery, each gravesite and see if there’s any markings,

and if there's a marking showing something of war, making sure it's documented on the paperwork," she said. "If not, try to get that information there so it gets added into the books, which will help a lot of people if they're researching."

The American Legion has purchased white flag holder crosses to be placed at a grave of a soldier, and both Post 80 and Troop 60005 are hoping the public can help with contacting the cemetery of a soldier's grave not yet marked.

The number for Liberal Cemetery is 626-0174, and Restlawn Cemetery can be reached at 626-3355. Orr can be contacted at 391-1414, and Stoddard can be reached at either 626-6936 or 391-2638 or via e-mail at mstoddard@gmail.com

"Any of us will be happy to take that information and go find them," Stoddard said. "If you just take the information and give it to me, I will be happy to bring some girls out, and we'll go find that grave. It's a great opportunity to give our fallen soldiers the respect they deserve, and it's a great way for these kids to learn."

The Girl Scout leader said her young troopers were really affected by participating in Memorial Day activities.

"One of them looked at me and said, 'You know, I didn't know what Memorial Day really meant till I sat there and went through those services and started seeing all those white crosses and seeing how many fallen soldiers we had,'" she said. "They said it made a lot more sense to why we have Memorial Day. It's just not picnics and fun time. It's a chance to honor the dead."

Stoddard said she believes the project is a great opportunity for Troop 60005 to do something for both the community and its fallen soldiers.

"Hopefully, in years to come, this information can still be used by people," she said. "By us getting books updated, maybe that will make things easier for people to do research."

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