

John Carlisle: Vets keep on marching, no matter what

By John Carlisle Detroit Free Press Columnist Filed Under Commentary and criticism John Carlisle
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Jay Bell, 2, looks at his father's medals at the annual Veterans Day parade down Woodward Ave. in Detroit on Saturday, November 9, 2013. Jeremy Bell, 41, of Detroit served in the Navy and was in the first Persian Gulf War in the early 1990's.

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George Hemme, 90, of Auburn Hills stormed the beaches of Normandy for the U.S. Army in World War II as a 19-year-old. / Eric Seals/Detroit Free Press

When he came to Detroit's Veterans Day parade a few years ago, Phil Harrison watched on the sidelines.

He showed up after hearing about it on the radio. But instead of fighting for a good spot in the crowd, he had a front-row seat anywhere he wanted.

"There were more people waiting for buses on Woodward than were actually there to see the parade," said the 51-year-old Army veteran.

Harrison came back the next year, again standing by and watching. Finally, this year, he asked if he could march, too.

He was told by organizers that this year would be bigger than ever, with more once-reluctant veterans like him coming out to march with their fellow soldiers the Saturday before Veterans Day. But there have been seven parades so far, and each year, barely anyone besides those marching has come out to any.

"You get close to a million people for the Thanksgiving Day parade, you get thousands for the St. Patrick's Day parade, but just to come down and thank a veteran, there's nobody lining the streets to say, 'Thank you,'" said Dick Chatman, one of the parade's founders. "It's really kind of sad."

This year, he hoped, would be different.

Struggling to grow

The first time this group of local veterans threw a parade, nobody showed up.

Eight years ago, they'd asked each other why the city didn't have a Veterans Day parade anymore. During the 1950s and '60s, one was held every year on Woodward. But nobody could remember the last time that happened, so the vets decided to bring it back on their own.

Their first parade drew 125 marchers and no spectators.

"It was basically the people that just happened to be on the street at the time," said Chatman, 65, an Air Force veteran who served in Vietnam.

A few people clapped, though, as the marchers passed. And a handful of vets who happened to be walking down the street at the time joined the parade at the end of the line.

To the organizers, these were encouraging signs. With better publicity and tighter organization, they thought, the parade would easily draw more vets to march and more people to watch them.

But it's been a struggle. Organizers found that many vets in the city were reluctant to come out. Some just wanted to put their service behind them.

Organizers found that getting help from the city was difficult. For the past few years, in fact, the vets have had to pay for their own street barricades and portable toilets.

And they found it perplexing why nobody wanted to come out for an hour or so and thank veterans for their service.

After seven years of disappointing turnout, the veterans say they now take comfort in the fact that the parade provides vets a chance to be around others who have been through the same thing.

"Even if no one else shows up, we need to be there as veterans," said 70-year-old Joe Salvia of Milford, a National Guard veteran who helped resurrect the parade along with Chatman. "We need to be there to look at each other, deal with each other, visit each other and stand tall together. So even if we don't ever get a soul watching, I don't even worry about that. Because we're together and that's the goal."

Working together

This year, the vets held regular meetings at Chapter 9, the host of the parade and the place where it starts. They held a news conference, planned the route, announced support from sponsors, gave people their assignments for the big day and went through the thousands of registrations from veterans who wanted to march.

At the final meeting before the parade, Harrison sat off to the side, listening eagerly as the details were discussed.

Lately he'd been showing up at the chapter headquarters, offering to help out. When someone pointed out that the paint on the chapter's exterior walls was faded and peeling, the vets arrived the next night to see Harrison outside the door, painting the wall with a roller in the dark, stopping only to wait out a slow drizzle that started falling.

Being around these vets, Harrison said, helped him talk about his experiences, even ended some bad

dreams he'd been having.

The vets in turn helped him get disability benefits he didn't realize he'd been entitled to for three decades.

Harrison was quiet through that meeting, except when he stood up to proudly show off some signs he'd made so marchers in the parade knew where to find their groups of friends.

By the night before the big day, he was immersed in the planning and was thoroughly excited.

"I bet I won't even be able to sleep tonight," he said.

Watching the sidelines

The vets were greeted Saturday morning by a cold, sharp wind. They huddled in their groups — the Vietnam veterans, those from World War II and a few from more recent conflicts.

About a hundred people had gathered to watch the opening ceremonies. Most were family members here for their fathers or brothers or sons.

They listened to the dignitaries and bowed their heads for the prayers. Hands were laid on hearts for a volley of gunfire and the playing of taps, and hands were raised in salute as a choir sang the national anthem. Flags flew everywhere.

And the sidewalks along the street were quiet once again.

A few joggers ran past, a couple of pedestrians stood waiting for their bus. But the street was mostly deserted.

The sidewalk in front of the ivy-covered abandoned church, empty. The bridge over the freeway, also empty. The long span fronting the ballpark, empty too.

Finding meaning

The parade began. Hundreds of veterans on motorcycles roared through, waves of ROTC cadets marched in formation, dozens of groups from VFW and American Legion posts waited their turns.

Only a few people stood here and there along the route, holding little American flags and waving at the veterans. Here, a family of three letting their toddler hold a flag. There, a family of six with military roots, shivering in the breeze.

And along the sidewalk, sitting by herself on a fold-out chair in front of her Woodward-facing townhouse, was Denise Conner, 78, who's been one of the few watching this every year.

"I don't know why nobody's out," she said. "You'd think everybody loves a parade, especially one for the veterans."

She looked up to see army veteran Anthony Shine passing before her. He'd seen the parade announced on TV every year and finally came out this year in his wheelchair to be a part of it. He showed up at the registration tent, asking politely if he could march. They gladly found him a spot with Chapter 9.

“My caregiver was able to help me get myself together to be able to come here,” he said. “For me it is, I realize all the pain and sorrow that war has, because a lot of the veterans don’t come back. I had a lot of fellow servicemen and relatives that never came back. So this is very meaningful.”

And just in front of him in the parade, marching in his crisp green uniform, was Harrison.

His hard work helped ensure a high turnout of vets and a smoothly moving parade. But just like every year before, few people came out to thank him and the hundreds of others marching.

It didn’t bother him.

“It would be nice if the public would come out and show some appreciation,” he said. “But this is really for the vets. That’s why I’m here.”

He marched down the road into the morning sunlight, and spotted a lone man walking on the sidewalk.

The man stopped walking, looked at Harrison as he marched by, and offered him a solemn, straight-backed salute.

Harrison stopped, saluted him back and smiled.

“It’d be nice if more people would come out and show appreciation,” he said. “But it’s the stuff like that makes you feel good. This is great.”

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John Carlisle is a columnist who writes about interesting people and places throughout the state. Read more columns at freep.com/carlisle. Contact him: jcarlisle@freepress.com or 313-222-6582.