

DUTY CALLS

Bugler leads call for vets to return to duty

By Terry Brown

Norman Miller of Princetown, a retired Air National Guard recruiter, read a newspaper article on the Echo Taps Across America organization looking for 650 buglers to line up to play “Taps,” the national song of remembrance played at military funerals.

The request called for enough buglers to echo “Taps” for 40 miles to and from Elmira. Miller decided to join in. But at age 66, he didn’t have a bugle and couldn’t even read musical notes.

That was 14 years ago.

First, he found a cheap bugle on eBay that cost \$35. But when he showed up for his first music lesson, the instructor gave Miller, a former Olympic bobsled coach, bad news.

“The instructor told me it wasn’t a musical instrument but was something that would be hung on an American Legion post wall,” Miller recalled.

Miller purchased a good instrument, and after many lessons led by Mark Eiser, a retired Schalmont High School teacher, Miller had learned to play and read music. The instructor then told Miller “in order for me to progress I had to purchase a better instrument.” Eiser added that the better trumpet would likely cost \$4,000.

But Eiser contacted a friend, John J. Keal, who operated John J. Keal Music Store in Albany. Eiser was able to get Keal to discount a top-of-the-line instrument and lower the cost to \$3,500.

Miller completed the deal and took the instrument home and showed it to his wife, Marilyn.

“After she said she liked how

it looked, I asked her how she would like to pay for it as a Christmas present,” he said. “She asked how much? When she learned it cost \$3,500, she said OK — but it would be a Christmas and birthday gift for the next 10 years.”

For then on, Miller said, he took more lessons and practiced for at least an hour every day. He did master the 24 notes of “Taps” and was able to join more than 850 volunteer buglers to perform Echo Taps the following July.

The buglers lined up. After each one played just one note the next one in line played a note. That went on for 40 miles. Afterward, school buses picked up the buglers who assembled in a field, and all played “Taps” together.

“There was not a dry eye anywhere,” the 81 year-old bugler said.

After he mastered his trumpet well, he successfully auditioned to perform with the Clifton Park Orchestra and Rotterdam Town Band. He also joined the Gerald B. Solomon Saratoga National Cemetery Honor Guard Association in Schuylerville as a bugler.

Every Wednesday he plays “Amazing Grace” and “Taps” during as many as eight military funerals. Miller is one of two buglers at the cemetery. The other bugler is Ernie Belanger of Gansevoort.

A taped version of “Taps” is played at the majority of military funerals. “A live bugler is more meaningful for the decreased veterans’ families,” Miller said. Teams of Honor Guard volunteers perform military funeral honor services for honorably discharged veterans



Times Union archive

Norman Miller is one of two buglers at Saratoga National Cemetery.

and military personnel at the national cemetery daily.

Miller is one of 125 veterans who have volunteered to serve as members of the Honor Guard Association and Color Guard at the national cemetery. Each member is a veteran.

“Of the 125 members, between 80 and 100 are active members,” said Art Dutcher of Ballston Lake, Honor Guard Association commander. “It’s an older group of veterans, mostly men and women retirees. There’s a need for fill-ins when a members get sick or vacation.”

Miller joined Dutcher, a Navy veteran, in calling for more volunteers to serve as members of the Honor Guard Association.

“We welcome honorably discharged veterans, men and women, to join the Saratoga National Cemetery Honor Guard Association and Color Guard,” said Dutcher. “Veterans may participate in any aspect of the military funeral honor services. Rendering military funer-

al honors consists of three main functions — the Flag Detail, Bugler and the Rifle Detail. The Honor Guard also joins directly with all active duty branches sharing in the ceremonial procedures.”

New members undergo a two-week orientation that includes on-the-job training. New members are trained in drill and ceremony, firing rifle volleys and flag-folding and are also given uniforms. Each member is assigned to a team and a day.

“Saratoga National Cemetery Honor Guard teams perform honors every day the cemetery is open,” said Scott Lamb, cemetery director. “They do this with the upmost honor and respect each and every time they have been asked. With their support, they help provide final resting places in national shrines, all the while providing lasting tributes that commemorate the veteran’s service and sacrifice to this great nation.”

As the cemetery director, he said, he is honored to work side-by-side with Honor Guard members and couldn’t ask for a better group of men and women.

“They easily perform as many as 1,000 to 1,200” interments a year,” he said. “Their dedication to service doesn’t end there,” he added. “They have supported me in ceremonies, outreach events, and public outreach at the cemetery. They have an amazing Color Guard and Rifle Team, and perform a Flag Fold presentation that moves you each time they perform.”

For information regarding becoming a member of the Honor Guard, visit SNCHGA.org or contact Art Dutcher at (518) 253-3203.

West Point trip

The Leatherstocking Honor Flight Veterans Initiative, an outgrowth of Leatherstocking Honor Flight, is offering Purple Heart recipients and Gold Star Family members a free day trip through the Hudson Valley on Saturday.

The trip will include a tour boat ride on the Hudson River, plus a visit to the National Purple Heart Hall of Honor, Washington’s Headquarters and the West Point Military Academy as well as dinner at the Thayer Hotel.

Honor Flight also is offering breakfast and lunch as well as transportation from Albany. For information, call (518) 339-2464.

► *News of troops and units can be sent to Duty Calls, Terry Brown, Times Union, Box 15000, Albany, NY 12212 or email brownt@timesunion.com.*