

Old Guard takes pride in a solemn task Places Arlington flags with attention to detail

**By Willem Marx, Los Angeles Times
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ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY, Va. -- In the late afternoon light, the Old Guard units fanned out over the hills and valleys of the cemetery. Methodically, they pulled the flags from their rucksacks at each grave and pushed the small poles into the ground. Gatorade caps tucked inside gloves protected their hands from the sharpened ornamental tips.

Each year, the number of flags grows, though that fact is not one in which anyone takes pleasure. More than 300,000 are interred, starting with veterans from the Revolutionary War. There are 285 troops from the current conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq.

It is here that the nation collectively looks each Memorial Day as it honors those who served. And that is why soldiers and sailors such as Gabriel Fernandez, volunteering for the day, take such care with the task before them.

Fernandez, dressed in Navy white, used his black boot to measure the distance from the face of the tombstones on Chaplain's Hill to determine where the flags will be placed. Shaded from the afternoon sun by oak trees, the three large markers are engraved in memory of the military chaplains buried there.

His dark eyes inherited from Cuban-born parents now living in Miami, Fernandez joined the Navy Ceremonial Guard about 18 months ago. "It's an honor to be doing this," he said as he placed another flag.

Each year, hundreds of men and women stationed in the Washington area and from different branches of the service come together on the Thursday before Memorial Day to take part in the Arlington ceremony known as "Flags In."

Much of the task is carried out, as it has been since 1948, by soldiers from the Third US Infantry, better known as the Old Guard. Throughout the year, members of the regiment stationed at Arlington provide a ceremonial presence at the many funerals in the cemetery.

On Thursday, a member of the Old Guard, Specialist Aaron Nelson of Minnesota, ensured that the flags placed by his colleagues were sufficiently upright.

Treading heavily between the neat rows of white headstones and corresponding flags, occasionally ducking a low branch or stooping to straighten an errant pole, he explained his attention to detail, saying "our job out here represents who we are; if they [the flags] are messed up, people will think badly of us."

When he enlisted in 2003, he thought he would be sent overseas. But his assignment has been here, as part of an honor guard for burials.

It is during the funerals of active service soldiers that he has come to appreciate the dangers facing his contemporaries overseas -- and the cost at home. He recalled standing recently next to a young soldier's family as they laid him to rest. "I thought, that's a 2 - year-old who just lost their dad in Iraq," he said quietly.

Command Sergeant Major Russell McCray has been in the military 24 years and "learned to hold a lot of the emotion inside."

But, he said, "when you are burying a 17- to 21-year-old, it's a lot more difficult. "

Turning away, he barked orders at a group of service members.

"We think about our job daily, and this year is a bit more emotional than in the past," he said.

Within two hours, the Old Guard and the hundreds of volunteers from the other service branches have attended to nearly all 612 acres of tombstones. As the last flag was posted, the young soldiers from the Old Guard formed into their companies.

Staff Sergeant Nicholas Zielinski, who served with the First Armored Division in Iraq, in Baghdad and Karbala, from 2003 to 2004, called them to attention and ordered them home in tidy columns.

This day's work is "a big deal," he said as his troops filed past.

He pointed out a bronze plaque beside the road, dedicated to Vietnam veterans of the 82d Airborne, which read: "Nothing is dearer than life, but nothing is more precious than to live it in freedom."