

## Butler Honors Its Veterans

By Tom Riley



Butler High School Mission Honor Memorial

A moving patriotic ceremony took place on May 20, 2017 at the dedication of the Butler High School Mission Honor Veterans Memorial. Over 700 veterans, family members, friends, and well-wishers paid tribute to the men and women who attended the school and went on to serve in the military. As four World War II veterans watched from the front row, over 930 paver stones engraved with a veteran's name, class year, and branch of service were dedicated.

The event also included the posthumous awarding of nine state-endorsed diplomas and Distinguished Service Medals to now deceased Butler High students who entered the military before they completed their high school education.

Now attended by students from Butler and Bloomingdale, for decades, Butler High drew students from the neighboring towns of Riverdale, Kinnelon, Ringwood, Wanaque, Pequannock, Jefferson, and West Milford.



Master of ceremony, Ray Bossard, a Class of 1966 veteran, and the driving force behind the creation of the memorial, pointed out that a small committee put countless hours of planning, researching, and fundraising into the three-year project. "Everywhere there has been a major conflict since and including World War I, someone from Butler High has been there," Bossard told the crowd. He went on to say, "People are using words like therapeutic and cathartic to explain their emotions after visiting the site and seeing their name or that of a loved one, engraved on the memorial stones."

As of March 2022, the project continues to expand; at this time, 2,820 BHS veterans have been added and about 50 more will soon join the list. A defect has been found in the footing of the memorial, so fundraising continues.

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Visit any of Butler's five cemeteries at the end of December and you will see dotted across the landscape a holiday wreath marking every veteran's grave. Mt. Rest, Mt. Calvary, Mt. Holiness, Manning Avenue, Brown/Sanders, and four other area cemeteries are part of the *Wreaths Across America* project.

Ray Bossard, local program coordinator since 2019, and a team of dedicated volunteers lead the effort to make sure every veteran's grave gets a wreath. People place holiday decorations on the graves of their loved ones as a show of respect and remembrance. Bossard has spread that sentiment to honor all of his fellow veterans in our area.

*Wreaths Across America* began in 1992 when Morrill Worcester's wreath company had a surplus of holiday wreaths. Morrill contacted Arlington National Cemetery and arranged for the wreaths to be placed on the graves of veterans. The annual tribute went on quietly until 2005 when the project received national attention after a photo of the stones at Arlington, adorned with wreaths and covered with snow, circulated around the internet. Thousands of requests poured in from all over the country. People wanted to emulate the Arlington project at their local cemeteries.

In 2007, the Worcester family, veterans, and other groups formed *Wreaths Across America*, a non-profit 501 organization. In 2008, over 300 locations held wreath-laying ceremonies in every state, Puerto Rico, at sea, and at 24 overseas cemeteries. By 2020 that number had grown to 2,800 locations, laying 1.7 million memorial wreaths on veterans' graves.

Annual wreath laying ceremonies are held not only at Arlington, but also at the Pearl Harbor Memorial, Bunker Hill, Valley Forge, and the September 11th Memorial. Over 60,000 volunteers work every year to make the project a success.

Our area project has grown from 773 veterans recognized and honored with wreaths in 2019 to 1,959 last year (2021).

A \$15 sponsorship places a fresh balsam fir holiday wreath at the headstone of a Butler or area veteran.



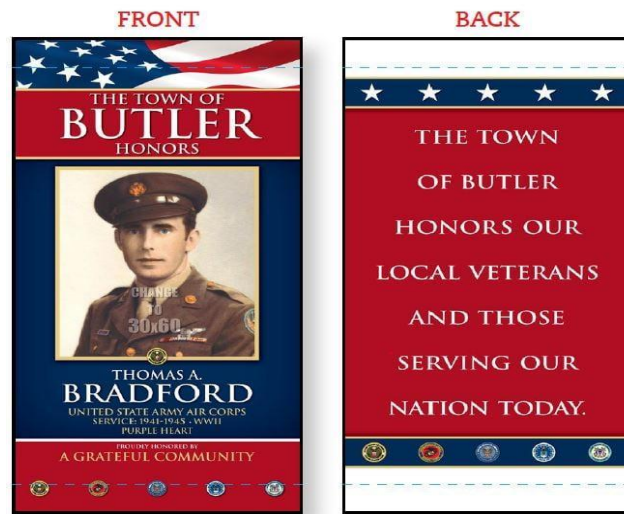
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On March 2, 2022, Ray Bossard announced that the Butler Town Council had approved the *Military Tribute Banner Project*. He stated that the program would begin with the servicemen from Butler who had given their lives to protect our country. Street signs will be placed on the streets where they lived at the time they entered the service and banners will be displayed either on Main Street or around the Park.

Bossard led the campaign to have veteran banners placed on Main Street, Bloomingdale and was delighted that, with the support of the Gold Star Mothers, Butler has chosen to join the project. West Milford and a number of other communities have also erected banners to honor their veterans. Butler's participation in the program is one more way the community is showing its respect and gratitude to its veterans. (Gold Star Mothers are mothers who have made the ultimate sacrifice by losing a son or daughter in military service.)

All 30 of the veterans to be honored have been sponsored, thanks to the generous support of the community.



The thread connecting all three of the above projects is Ray Bossard. Over the years, Ray has been a dedicated advocate for veterans. His hard work and leadership have kept the memory of countless veterans alive and has led to the success of not only the projects mentioned here, but others as well. Thanks Ray!

Sources: *Suburban Trends* Dec. 9, 2015, *Suburban Trends* Nov. 26, 2017, *Wreaths Across America Website*, *Daily Record* May 5, 2017, *NorthJersey.com* Oct 2, 2016, *Butler High School Website*

