

Leonardtown hosts Veterans Day Parade

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Leonardtown, MD – American flags were blowing in the wind and thousands of feet—human and equine—pounded the streets of Leonardtown Friday, Nov. 11. The award-winning Leonardtown Veterans Day Parade gave Southern Marylanders plenty to cheer about. The 90 minute promenade featured service units—active, retired and youth—an array of vehicles—classic cars, jeeps, fire trucks and motorcycles—equestrian groups and local high school marching bands. Even Santa Claus was in the parade. The Young Marines handed out free American flags and any Armed Forces veteran could enjoy a free cup of coffee.

The enthusiastic voices of Leonardtown Mayor Dan Burris, St. Mary's County Board of Education Member Mary Washington and retired Navy Captain Barbara Ives, could be heard all over town giving the huge crowd thorough summaries of the various parade units. The trio also interacted with the crowd and marchers. "Ladies, your outfits are simply gorgeous," Washington exclaimed to a troupe of belly dancers.

The Leonardtown event is one of the largest Veterans Day parades on the East Coast. "It's neither a logistical nightmare nor a dream," event organizer Maria Fleming told TheBayNet.com. "We try not to tell anybody 'no.' We let everybody participate."

Fleming, the town's events coordinator, explained that the parade comes together through the support of several entities, including public schools, police and emergency services, shuttle services, county government, Naval Air Station Patuxent River and various service organizations. The parade units start at St. Mary's Ryken High School in Leonardtown.

Before and during the parade, several organizations seized the opportunity to perform outreach among a large gathering of Armed Forces veterans and their families. VConnections Inc. Chief Executive Director Bill Buffington called his nonprofit corporation a "value-add" for area veterans who might be unaware of the services available to them in Southern Maryland. The Navy veteran was on hand to provide information about VConnections partnership with the College of Southern Maryland (CSM). "The G.I. Bill is one of the things we are addressing, helping veterans move into a career field, starting a business, getting them onto the path to success," he stated. According to Buffington, approximately 700 Armed Forces veterans are enrolled at CSM campuses. "We're in a heavily populated area for veterans," he said.

Following the parade, many stayed around for a brief ceremony in the center of town. The families of six fallen servicemen were given special seating and several elected officials made brief remarks. In addition to Burris, the dignitaries included Congressman Steny Hoyer, Delegate Matt Morgan, Delegate Jerry Clark and Commissioners' President Randy Guy. All conceded they were upstaged at the podium by the three Leonardtown Elementary School (LES) students who delivered their essays on "What Veterans Day Means to Me." Fifth-grader Austin Harris stated "honor, respect and kindness" were the themes of Veterans Day, adding proudly that his father is in the Navy and his grandfather was a Vietnam veteran.

"It's amazing," is the way LES fifth-grader Jaryn Lampe described the observance. Lampe explained both of her parents served in the Army and now her father has embarked on a second service career in the Coast Guard. "I think having my Mom and Dad as veterans is special," she stated.

"If veterans were not here today our country would be different," said LES student Josie Bahr, who added that after interviewing an Armed Forces veteran who visited the school her perspective of the holiday changed. "Now it's the most important holiday, in my mind," said Bahr.

"They all gave better speeches than we ever will," said Hoyer.

"It's beautiful," said Air Force veteran John R. Countryman Jr., who was attending his first Leonardtown Veterans Day Parade. Countryman told TheBayNet.com that he joined the Air Force at age 19 and served 18-1/2 years. The Charles County resident attended the parade and ceremony in his capacity as first vice president of the Southern Maryland District of the American Legion.

"I've enjoyed it," said Countryman. "It's a great turnout."

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