

Concurrent Technologies Corporation's Greg Zehner Makes Appeal for Wreaths Across America with December 14 Deadline Looming

December 17 is National Wreaths Across America Day, and Greg Zehner, U.S. Air Force Colonel (retired) and Principal Energy Analyst at Concurrent Technologies Corporation in Crystal City, VA, is making an appeal. While it takes over \$3.5 million dollars to cover the cemetery, Wreaths Across America is short nearly \$650,000 to ensure that each of the approximately 245,000 graves, markers, and crematorium columns have a wreath to remember and honor the veterans buried at Arlington National Cemetery.



An iconic American image of Arlington National Cemetery—made possible entirely through donations to Wreaths Across America. Photo by James Varhegyi.

Volunteers who lay a wreath on a grave are encouraged to take a moment to say that veteran's name aloud and thank them for their service. Wreaths Across America has a saying that a person dies twice: once when they take their final breath and later, the last time their name is spoken.

This is not about decorating a cemetery. "It's about honoring our veterans and remembering their lives instead of their deaths," said Zehner, who is Vice Director, a Chief Operating Officer role with Wreaths Across America.

Donors have until December 14 to contribute to the 2016 shortfall at the nonprofit organization's [website, www.wreathscrossamerica.org](http://www.wreathscrossamerica.org). To sponsor a wreath for Arlington, go to <http://www.wreathscrossamerica.org/sponsor-a-wreath> and select "sponsor a wreath at Arlington."

Everyone is also invited to attend the wreath laying ceremony on December 17 at Arlington or one of 1,100 other locations across the U.S.

Remembering America's Heroes

An iconic image of evergreen wreaths with bright red bows respectfully leaning against stark white tombstones on hallowed, snow-covered ground at Arlington National Cemetery turned a quiet annual tribute into an American Christmas tradition.

Until the photo went viral in 2005, not many people were aware of the humble act of patriotism. "I started helping with Wreaths Across America at Arlington in 2008," said Zehner, (AKA "Z," his fighter pilot call sign). "We had five trucks and placed 24,000 wreaths on a Saturday morning. It was a very informal, fairly simple effort. Each year we would move to a different part of the cemetery in an effort to try to at least get a wreath on every grave at least once. That would take almost a decade at that rate."

“By 2011, when I returned from my second deployment in Iraq, Wayne Hanson (Chairman, Wreaths Across America) told me the organization wanted to try to cover the entire cemetery, maybe 235,000 graves,” he said. The program’s popularity had grown. It was the 150th anniversary of the beginning of the American Civil War and the tenth anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks on America. Zehner and Hanson, U.S. Army Captain (retired), began a major planning and logistics operation.

“I was trained at the Advanced Military Studies Program (AMSP) Army School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS) to plan and coordinate complex operations,” said Zehner, who specializes in the strategy and logistics of warfighting. He has served in a number of high-level capacities including Strategist for Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, The Pentagon.

“I worked with some buddies to figure out if it was even possible. To get some data, we walked through the process at the cemetery to figure out the best placement for all the trucks, how long it would take people to get to and into the cemetery, how long it would take to walk to a section, how long it would take for one person to carry four wreaths and place them, how long it would take 20,000 people to make multiple trips . . . every detail necessary to do the analysis. My buddies and I figured, conservatively, those 20,000 people, making three trips each, carrying four wreaths per trip, would take about 10 hours to cover the entire cemetery. So it was technically feasible on paper. Barely.”

“This year, tens of thousands of volunteers will empty 65 trucks and lay the wreaths in less than a couple hours,” he said. “It touches me to see how our volunteers make it happen each year. I make it a point to take a look at the cemetery before we start placing wreaths. Arlington has its own special feeling you have to experience yourself. Only a couple hours later, I can turn around and see what looks like a carpet of wreaths on the stoic grave markers, placed there to remember and honor our veterans. It’s a great experience, both to honor our veterans buried there, and for those who volunteered to make it happen, both by donating money and for placing the wreaths.”

Military Precision, American Pride

Wreaths Across America is carried out with as much heart as military precision.

Last year, Zehner invited his CTC coworker Michelle Coghill to help with the media and other communications challenges. An Air Force Public Affairs Officer (retired) and Communications Systems Analyst at Concurrent Technologies Corporation, Coghill was thrilled to see so many people travel from across the country to honor our fallen victims.

“I shadowed Wayne Hanson to serve as an intermediary with the media,” Coghill said. “It was so heartwarming to see how many people came from so many walks of life to pay homage and honor to vets who made that ultimate sacrifice and vets who served honorably.

“On that dark morning, the people just kept coming and coming. Trace Atkins sang a song he had written about the cemetery that brought tears to my eyes. I’m proud to be an American every day, but seeing those thousands of volunteers show up to lay the wreaths on the graves at Arlington made me feel very good to be an American that day. I needed a lot of tissues that day.”

Wreaths Across America began quietly in 1992 when Morrill Worcester had 5,000 extra wreaths and a fond memory of his boyhood visit to Arlington National Cemetery. If you share his heartfelt desire to honor our veterans in this way, visit [the website](#) to find out how to donate and find a location near you where wreaths will be laid on December 17.