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****Featured on the Home Page****

'THEY SEE THE UNIFORM AND IT'S JUST SO POWERFUL'

Veterans honored in pinning ceremonies throughout Fredericksburg area



Marine 2nd Lt. Alex Shaven shakes hands with World War II Freedom Fighter Jenó Matrai during Friday's 'We Honor Veterans' event. Mary Washington Hospice and care facilities teamed up for it.

By Emily Jennings

Col. Brian McCormack, active duty U.S. Army National Guard, bent respectfully toward Jenó Matrai to honor him

www.PoetsWalk-SpringHills.com



Biscuit Wev (right) stands for the Pledge of Allegiance at the start of Friday's pinning ceremony at Poet's Walk in Fredericksburg. Biscuit Wev (right) stands for the Pledge of Allegiance at the start of Friday's pinning ceremony at Poet's Walk in Fredericksburg.

Matrai was a freedom fighter in the resistance movement against Germany, completing covert operations in various countries in support of the Allies. He speaks several languages, including Hungarian, German and French.

But for years now, Matrai has been battling dementia, residing at Poet's Walk, a Spring Hills Memory Care Community near Central Park in Fredericksburg. According to his caretakers there, like many residents, Matrai doesn't talk much any more, withdrawing into himself due to his condition.

Remarkably, however, as McCormack stood before Matrai in full military uniform, Matrai responded, giving a sharp salute and speaking very clearly and proudly to the colonel in Polish. Those in the room were emotionally moved, in spite of being unable to understand the language.



Col. Brian McCormack greets Rick Cline at a "We Honor Veterans" pinning ceremony at Poet's Walk. The event is coordinated through Mary Washington Hospice and care facilities where veterans live.

"It's inspiring to see how [the veterans] react to the ceremony," said Terri McAuliff, community liaison for Mary Washington Healthcare Hospice. "They see the uniform and it's just so powerful, it touches them deep inside. Suddenly they start sharing."

In addition to Matrai, 11 veterans who are now residents of Poet's Walk were honored during the ceremony, as well as spouses and others who contributed to war efforts. One resident, for example, said she worked as a cook for soldiers in Korea the whole time the United States was fighting there. She was given a pin.

The event is coordinated between Mary Washington Hospice's "We Honor Veterans" program and between 15 and 20 assisted-care facilities in the Fredericksburg area, including the Poet's Walk. In addition to this year's Veterans Day ceremonies Friday, the program honors veterans throughout the year as they enter hospice care, both at assisted-care facilities and in their own homes.



Robert Cary, an Air Force veteran of WWII, listens to Friday's Veterans Day ceremony at the Poet's Walk, where he is a resident.

"In 2016, we honored more than 250 veterans," McAuliff said. "We've been doing this now since 2013 and I'm grateful to be a part of it, they're all wonderful individuals who deserve to be recognized."

Janet Green, Poet's Walk resident and family ambassador, said each of the people who live there have Alzheimer's or some other form of dementia. "Some are farther along on that journey than others," Green said.

Having Mary Washington come and perform the pinning ceremony is something she treasures.

"We love these people. We appreciate their individual talents and rich history," Green said. "To see their reaction, to see that spark of recognition, of making a difference to their quality of life even for a moment, means the world to me."

Resident Bosquet "Biscuit" Wev was in the submarine service of the Navy during the Korean and Vietnam wars, serving a total of 30 years. When asked about the missions he performed, he smiled, "I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you. Most of my service was classified.



After everyone in attendance sang the national anthem, Marine Corps veteran and resident Nick Hilgert shouted an enthusiastic, “Oo-Rah!”—true to his military origins.

Hilgert served in Vietnam during the 1950s and ‘60s. “Everything was a story the whole damn time I was there,” Hilgert said. “You look at people and you wonder how the hell they made it.”

“I failed her so she would have to repeat the course,” he said, holding her hand affectionately.

Hart served as a medical doctor in the psychiatric division for the U.S. Army in Japan, arriving in Nagasaki two years after the atomic bomb was dropped. “The residents there were so disfigured, it was terrible,” he said.

Hart evaluated soldiers affected by the war in Korea, deciding whether to send them back to the front or if they should return to the states to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center.

“It was a whole different world back then,” Hart commented.

In her presentation to the veterans, Mary Washington Hospice social worker Beatrice Kerr expressed gratitude on behalf of herself and American citizens everywhere who have benefitted from their service.

“You answered the call to duty when our nation needed you,” she said. “You helped ensure that our nation’s future will continue to embrace our legacy as the land of the free and the home of the brave.”

