

Best of the Best Award: The Ultimate Honor

One of the most popular and longest practiced forms of disposition is burial. Many families bury both their loved ones' caskets and urns in cemeteries across the world. Specialty cemeteries, such as Veteran Cemeteries, are a great way to honor a loved one's brave service and sacrifice to their country. Across the United States, there are over 155 national cemeteries where veterans, their spouses, and dependents laid to rest in-ground burials and columbariums. Western New York is the proud holder of two of the eight Veterans or National Cemeteries in New York State. These two cemeteries include Bath National Cemetery in Bath, NY, and the newly opened Western New York National Cemetery in Corfu, New York, which was delayed in opening due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Lakeside Memorial team kept a close eye on the opening of the WNY National Cemetery. Many of our families were holding off the burial and inurnment of their loved ones' cremated remains until the opening. When the cemetery's dedication ceremony was completed in November 2020, the community was thrilled. Services began quickly. However, while this cemetery was the first of its kind for the Buffalo-Niagara area, something more could be done to make this even more special. Prior to May 2021, only two national cemeteries in the United States held the special designation of having an Avenue of Flags. An Avenue of Flags consists of interment/burial flags flanking each side of the road, typically the cemetery's main entrance. Interment or burial flags are specific flags given to deceased veterans' families during military honors or other funeral services. When the WNY Memorial Council formed in December 2020, Lakeside Memorial Funeral Home, Inc. was eager to work with them to create this honor for Western New York's new national cemetery.

With the rationale of the idea to create a beautiful tribute to our veterans as well as further decorate and commemorate Western New York's new national cemetery,

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Lakeside Memorial's Mark Janik joined the WNY Memorial Council and became the chair for the Avenue of Flags project. He quickly organized our team to assist the cause. After educating the staff on what an Avenue of Flags was and why it was a special designation, we got to work. To create an Avenue of Flags, one needs interment flags. The problem with this aspect is that one cannot just go out and buy these flags. To obtain a single interment flag, one needs a DD214 Form or Certificate of Honorable Discharge from the United States military. Once a flag is received for a veteran, another cannot be requested. Therefore, Avenue of Flags typically consists of flags donated by families of past veterans. While Lakeside Memorial Funeral Home has been collecting general flags for our Retire A Flag program to honor veterans we serve, they would not suffice. However, we had seen countless interment flags donated with damages from families unsure of what they were as well as improper storage. Our team decided to ask families for donations, explaining the importance and significance of the Avenue of Flags as well as telling the stories of damaged flags. We got to work with various Facebook posts, meetings with the American Legions and other veteran organizations in the area, requesting flags from at-need families, past families, and spreading the word to groups such as the Gold Star Mothers of WNY. Before long, we had collected multiple interment flags. For each flag that was donated, we took note of the late veteran's name, their military branch and dates, and the name and relationship of the person donating the flag. After Mark Janik and the rest of the Lakeside Memorial team helped procure the materials for the 25ft flag poles, the Avenue of Flags was finally erected on May 8, 2021. The Avenue of Flags at the WNY National Cemetery consists of 26 5x9ft interment flags, with 16 of the original 26 collected by Lakeside Memorial Funeral Home. The raising ceremony was completed with some of our staff, the other memorial council members, and the Pembroke Central School District Veterans Club members. The flags lining the entrance

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hold identifiers for each honored veteran. Due to weather concerns, the Avenue of Flags will fly from Armed Forces Day or the third Saturday in May to the Saturday after November 11th of Veterans Day. Since the original raising ceremony, our staff has been back out to replace worn flags with new donations multiple times and to teach individuals how to lower the flags properly. The cemetery now has a unique feature, and the veterans who are laid to rest there have another final honor.

The Avenue of Flags program has been incredibly beneficial to both our funeral home and the community. The experience was inspiring for our staff. As the only funeral home in Western New York that belongs to Veterans Funeral Care, we will always work towards any opportunity to further honor veterans in our community. Collecting interment flag donations has now become a regular part of our veteran programs. The discussions with our families and other community members have also offered the opportunity to educate the public on the difference between interment flags and general flags and the sacred nature of the Avenue of Flags. Lastly, our staff truly benefited from working closely with the Memorial Council and the staff of the new national cemetery. The opportunity to work together created a familiar relationship and got both parties accustomed to working together for the first time. A solid sense of communication will prove to be beneficial for funeral services in the future. The Avenue of Flags also benefited our families and the community. Not only did it create media attention for the new national cemetery and ignite interest in burying loved ones there, but it allowed veterans' families another way to honor their loved ones. The military honors ceremony of presenting the flag is a beautiful experience for many families. However, after the ceremony, many families place the flag in storage. In storage, the flag can become forgotten and damaged. As generations age, the flag may not hold the special attachment it once did. By donating the flag, families were

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able to find a specific place to donate the flags for the special use of honoring their loved ones, and all the other veterans laid to rest at the cemetery. While not a permanent form of memorialization as most flags only fly a season, the thought of the flag giving one last honor instead of sitting in storage can be incredibly comforting.

Overall, the experience was beneficial for all parties involved. The Western New York National Cemetery received well-deserved media attention, veterans and veterans' families received an ultimate honor, and beautiful display of patriotism, and the Lakeside Memorial Funeral Home team was able to further our goals of always putting our veterans at the forefront of our community involvement. We hope to continue to collect flags well into the future to fly valiantly over the national cemetery.

