

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS

Paying tribute to fallen service members

By SARAH MCCARTHY, NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

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A Marine veteran salutes as wreaths are presented during the 2015 Memorial Day ceremony at Santa Barbara Cemetery on Monday.

KENNETH SONG/NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS



Bugler Howard Hudson plays taps as the flag flies half-staff.



Veterans and attendees salute during the retiring of the colors ceremony at Santa Barbara Cemetery on Monday.

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More than 500 people gathered on a sloping hillside in the Santa Barbara Cemetery Monday morning to honor the men and women of the U.S. Armed Forces who died in service.

The 2015 Memorial Day ceremony, hosted by the Pierre Claeysens Veterans Foundation, took place under a grey sky with members of the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps and Coast Guard in attendance to pay tribute to their fallen comrades.

"Our debt to them is eternal," said Fred Lopez, retired Marine brigadier general. "Their lasting gift to us is an enduring, thriving United States of America."

An American flag presented by the Marine Corps Color Guard shifted softly in the breeze as Santa Barbara Teen Star winner Mary Grace Langhorne and Sgt. Vicki Golding of the D.C. National Guard sang the National Anthem.

Air Force Col. Keith Balts, commander of the 30th Space Wing and Western Range at Vandenberg Air Force Base and the keynote speaker of the ceremony, said the day was an opportunity to remember and reflect on the men and women "who gave the ultimate sacrifice."

"As awful as it is to die for your country, it's even worse to be forgotten," he said.

Col. Balts paid special tribute to Navy Cmdr. Duane Wolfe and Senior Airman Daniel Johnson, who were stationed at Vandenberg, Army Spc. Kenneth Alvarez of Santa Maria and Navy Lt. Cmdr. Landon Jones of Lompoc, all of whom lost their lives in recent years while serving abroad.

"Having attended the funerals of those last three individuals, I ... will never forget, certainly, their full measure of devotion and nor will the millions ...who took the time today all across this country to attend Memorial Day services," he said. "They've given their lives overseas so that we may enjoy the lives that we have today here in the U.S."

Col. Balts emphasized that the sacrifices made by members of the Armed Forces extend to their loved ones.

"We not only honor their sacrifices but we honor the sacrifices of their families, their friends and their communities, like Santa Barbara, who bear the burden long after they have been lost," he said.

Remembering the contributions of service members, Col. Balts said, is important not only on Memorial Day, but every day.

"Our patriotism surges on days like today and moments like Pearl Harbor and 9/11, where thousands are remembered," he said. "However, I want to reiterate, our freedoms are defended before, during and after these moments, not just by those thousands, but by one (service member) at a time.

"There is no greater gift than to lay down one's life for someone else, especially when these heroes did it knowingly for millions of U.S. citizens they will never, ever know personally," he said.

After Col. Balts' speech, the sound of the piano filled the air with the theme songs of each branch of the Armed Forces. Veterans of World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, the Iraq War and the War in Afghanistan stood proudly when they heard the song of the branch they served in, with many holding a salute for the duration of the tune.

Toward the end of the ceremony, four T-34 planes performed two flyovers, first in a diamond formation and then in the "Missing Man Formation," with one plane veering off course in acknowledgement of the service members killed in action.

Retired Petty Officer 1st Class Jose Morales, who served with the Navy in the Vietnam War and now lives in Buellton, said it was an honor to attend the ceremony and show his support.

"It makes me feel proud," he said. "When we were in Vietnam and when we came back, they didn't acknowledge us. So to be able to do this and to honor our fallen heroes, it's a great honor."

Santa Barbara resident Pat Merrill, a retired lieutenant colonel who served in the Air Force from 1970 to 2003, was wiping tears from her eyes at the end of the event.

"I'm really glad I was here. This was amazing," she said. "It was really wonderful to see."

email:smccarthy@newspress.com