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Wreath project honors fallen Ky. Airmen

By Lt. Col. Dale Greer
123rd Airlift Wing Public Affairs

The Christmas season can be a joyous time of family and community, but it's also tinged with sadness for many whose loved ones have passed away. One retired Kentucky Air Guardsman is working to turn that sense of loss into a celebration of life by placing wreaths on the graves of her extended family — former members of the 123rd Airlift Wing and its predecessor units.

The project, which began in 2011 with one wreath, has now grown to 138, and Lee East needs help to keep it going.

East, who retired from the wing in 2005 after serving 23 years as an imagery interpreter and unit training manager, is looking for volunteers who can deliver the wreaths and place them on the graves of former Kentucky Air Guardsmen. Volunteers also can assist by helping make the wreaths, which she has been fabricating herself with assistance from her daughter and others.

"It's so very important to remember our fallen Airmen," said East, who served in a variety of units during her career, including the 165th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron, aircraft maintenance and civil engineering. "Our wing would not be where we are today — the unit would not have been as successful as it has been — without all the hard work and sacrifice of the people who've worked there. This is a simple way to honor their service and memory."

East seems the perfect candidate to oversee a project like this. Her family loved Christmas so much, they dedicated two full months each summer to filling the house with holiday music.

"We had a designated period of time over the summer when there was no music in the house except for Christmas music," East recalls. "We got out Christmas albums, and we played nothing but Christmas music all day for the entire months of June and July every year — Bing Crosby, Perry Como, Rosemary Clooney, Doris Day."

Their love for the season ran so deep, the family eventually converted their cattle farm, near Shepherdsville, Kentucky, to a Christmas



Lt. Col. Dale Greer/KyANG

Tech. Sgt. Lee East, a retired member of the Kentucky Air National Guard, prepares a workspace to make Christmas wreaths with the help of her granddaughter in Louisville, Ky., Nov. 16. East operates a project to place wreaths on the graves of deceased unit members. The project needs volunteers to help this season, starting the week after Thanksgiving.

tree farm in 1985.

"My parents sold all the cows and planted 1,500 trees that year," she said.

When her aunt died in 2011, East thought it would be a nice memorial to place one of the family's wreaths on her grave.

"My dad and I sat and talked about it, and we decided we were going to start placing wreaths on the graves of all our family members. It wasn't going to cost us anything other than time on my part, which I was willing to volunteer. So we started doing that. When I would deliver them, it gave me a chance to sit and think about those family members because there were a lot of good memories there."

That year, the former technical sergeant also delivered a wreath to the grave of Lt. Col.

Johnny Jones, who had been her supervisor in the 165th.

"He taught me how to be a unit training manager, and I had a lot of respect for him," East said.

Word eventually got out among the Kentucky Air Guard community, and several people asked East if she would make wreaths for other Airmen who had passed.

"The messages I got back from family members were overwhelming," East said of the response. "It was amazing how happy these wreaths made people feel. It was like the way I felt when I first started placing the

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Wing earns Distinguished Flying Unit honor

By Staff Sgt. Joshua Horton
123rd Airlift Wing Public Affairs

The 123rd Airlift Wing was awarded its ninth National Guard Bureau Distinguished Flying Unit Plaque during a ceremony here Sept. 16.

The plaque, bestowed annually to the five-highest rated Air National Guard units in the nation, highlights the wing's performance in operations, human resources, accident prevention and community engagement during the period from Jan. 1 to Dec. 31, 2017.

During the ceremony, Brig. Gen. Warren Hurst, Kentucky's assistant adjutant general for Air, praised the crowd of more than 1,000 wing Airmen for "a job exceedingly well done."

"You made it look easy," Hurst said. "I appreciate you stepping up to the plate, going out there, and setting the bar high. You're living up to that culture of excellence that we've estab-

lished over the past several decades."

During the award period, the 123rd Airlift Wing directly supported the war effort with the deployment of 137 personnel to five countries and four geographic commands, for a total of 24,535 Title 10 days.

The 2018 award also recognizes the wing's unprecedented support to hurricane relief operations in Texas, Florida and the Caribbean — including the delivery of thousands of tons of supplies and the evacuation of more than 1,500 stranded citizens.

The 123rd Contingency Response Group deployed 100 tons of gear to Puerto Rico following Hurricane Maria, establishing an intermediate staging base, cargo logistics and passenger terminal operations after arriving at a non-functional airfield and gaining full operational capability within hours while working with the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the U.S. Army

and airfield management. The group provided essential aid to the citizens of Puerto Rico by supporting 268 aircraft, 3,887 passengers and the delivery of 3,617 tons of relief cargo.

Additionally, the 123rd Special Tactics Squadron deployed 18 personnel to Houston for rescue missions which resulted in the rescue of 336 stranded citizens. Twenty-three Airmen in five other areas in St. Thomas, St. Croix and St. Maarten controlled 636 aircraft that evacuated 1,286 citizens.

Back home, the wing exceeded recruiting and retention goals by 15 percent, surpassed 100 percent manning for the year, and received the Disney Award for the best food service in the Air National Guard.

Additionally, the Airman and Family Readiness program hosted two Gold Star family events for more than 1,300 family members and 50 distinguished visitors from 14 states.

Wreaths

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wreaths on the graves of family members and taking the time to remember them, the stories and the history. So my dad said, 'If this is making people so happy, why don't we just do some more.'

"And it's just grown from there. We've added a few on every year."

East said she's grateful to the Kentucky Air Guardsmen who've already signed on to help — John Amshoff, Connie Carrillo, Tommy James, Randy McLain and others — but more volunteers are needed. The project also had to make some adjustments last year after East's father died, causing her to lose access to free branches from the family tree farm. She now sources the branches at a deep discount from a local supplier, Shelby Christmas Tree Farm and Nursery, but East still spends about \$5 of her own money for each wreath the project produces.

"The cost is a very minor issue," she said. "It's just so very important to me that this tradition carry on."

Dorenda Stackhouse admires East's determination.

"This is such a wonderful idea, I think we need to do whatever we can to keep it going," said Stackhouse, a former recruiter in the Kentucky Air National Guard who retired as a master sergeant in 1999. She started helping East make wreaths last year.

"We have a responsibility to the younger members of the wing to make sure they remember and honor the past. It reminds everyone of the sacrifices these people made. But it's much more than that. This project also supports the family members — the people left behind."

Stackhouse told how a former Guardsman was overwhelmed with emotion last year when she saw that a wreath had been placed on the grave of her son, who had recently passed away.

"If you could have seen the look on her face, I would have made 200 more. It told her that we cared enough to put that wreath there — to honor him and to honor her."

To volunteer to help or make a donation, leave a message with Lee East at (502) 408-4892 or Dorenda Stackhouse at (502) 407-2222. Wreath delivery will start the week after Thanksgiving.



East's project placed a wreath on the grave of Chief Master Sgt. Tommy Downs and more than 130 other unit members last year. Downs, a former wing command chief, passed away in 2009.

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