



Violet Tharp, Flags of Honor caretaker. *Photo courtesy of Bill Vander Weele, Sidney Herald.*

## REMEMBERING VETERANS WITH FLAGS OF HONOR

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“THESE ARE  
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PEOPLE.”

On Memorial Day in Sidney, Montana, not just any American Flags fly. An elementary school student may carry the folded casket Flag of a Vietnam veteran the length of the town’s seven-block parade. You could see a woman carrying her grandfather’s Flag flown on a pole.

The procession carries more than 100 casket Flags from the town’s Flags of Honor room in Veterans Memorial Park, just a fraction of the 628 casket Flags stored there from the Civil War to the present. Some, much too fragile to be flown, have been retired for safekeeping. Others get posted on a rotating annual basis every Memorial Day, allowing for a complete rotation of unretired Flags every four years.

“I have been with the program so long that I know most of the veterans in the room,” said Violet Tharp, Flags of Honor caretaker and Life Member of Auxiliary 4099 in Sidney. “When my husband died in 1982, I would not release his Flag until this current Flags of Honor room was completed.

The planning, painting and moving the Flags to this room were done by my co-worker and her husband. I now engrave the name plates for each Flag. Each Flag is marked with the name, branch of service, war served, and date of death; and the same information is on the name plate. Since the Flags are only on loan to the program, we sometimes must release the Flag to a family member.”

The Flags of Honor room, unlike any other facility of its kind in the United States, displays Flags from families not just in Montana or near Sidney, but other states as well.

The room, which is open on special occasions and for private viewings, is also a source of education for local students.

“Every year, the fifth grade classes receive a 30-minute tour of the room and are given a Flag etiquette book,” said Tharp, who works with another caretaker and Auxiliary Life Member Margaret Bradley. “We assist them on how to fold the Flag and read the meaning of each fold. The reaction when they see all the Flags is amazing. Adults who see the room say they can almost feel the presence in the room. It is a very personal experience for those who have left the Flag of their loved one for our safekeeping.”

Each Flag is meticulously arranged alphabetically each year behind glass-enclosed cabinets. The project, initiated in 1965, was originally a community effort of 13 different civic organizations. By the 1970s, the Auxiliary streamlined the Flag caretaking roles.

“I, personally, will never leave the program to anyone who does not share the same compassion I have for the program,” Tharp said. “These are not just Flags, they are people.” ★ AC