Alton's Wreaths Across America Ceremony Returns to Honor Fallen Soldiers

by Sydney Sinks, News Reporter
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ALTON - The City of Alton will once again honor veterans with the 20th annual Wreaths Across America memorial project.

At 11 a.m. on Saturday, Dec. 19, 2026, community members are invited to Alton National Cemetery for the ceremony, where students and veterans will place 20-inch balsam wreaths on the graves of fallen soldiers at the cemetery. Organizers Margaret Hopkins and Sue Fitzgerald noted that the experience is deeply moving, but they need the community's help to make it happen.

"This is our 20th year, and it is a simple mission: to remember, honor and teach. To remember the fallen, to honor those who serve, and to teach children the value of freedom," Hopkins said.

Hopkins started the Wreaths Across America tradition in Alton after watching a special on "60 Minutes" about a man who laid wreaths on all the graves at Arlington National Cemetery. In the past 20 years, Wreaths Across America has become a major initiative, with over 5,000 locations around the world planning to participate on Dec. 19.

The original mission — to remember, honor and teach — remains front of mind for those involved in the Alton Wreaths Across America chapter. As part of that mission, Hopkins, Fitzgerald and their team always ask a local school to participate in the ceremony.

"I think all of those parts of the mission are very important, but to me, the most important mission is the teaching," Hopkins said. "If we don't teach the children, we're going to lose that generation of people, and this all will be for naught."

Calvary Christian School students will help veterans lay the wreaths in Alton this year. Students will stand at each grave and hand the wreath to the veteran, who will then lay it on the grave. Both the student and veteran will then salute.

The ceremony lasts 30 minutes and is powerful, but it's not possible without the community's support. Each wreath costs $17, and the group needs about 520 wreaths to lay on graves at Alton National Cemetery. You can mail a check to Wreaths Across America, P.O. Box 3081, Alton, IL 62002, to donate to this cause locally.

The group always orders 144 additional wreaths. Community members then reserve a wreath to take to their loved ones buried in other cemeteries. You can contact Fitzgerald at (618) 530-1430 to reserve a wreath.

"You give me your name, your phone number, the number of wreaths you'd like us to hold for you, and to whom those are going, which grave," Fitzgerald explained. "If you have someone you love or know that you would like to lay a wreath on their grave in a different cemetery, just let us know their name, the branch of the service they were in, and what cemetery."

Following the ceremony on Dec. 19, you can pick up your reserved wreaths and lay them on graves throughout the region. The Alton Wreaths Across America team has also sent excess wreaths to communities in need throughout the country in years past.

Fitzgerald and Hopkins thanked the community for their work to support Wreaths Across America. They believe the mission is important and the ceremony means a lot to the veterans, students and observers who witness it.

They ask people to donate if you can, but also to come out to the event on Dec. 19 to honor fallen soldiers and foster the community spirit that is integral to the experience. For more information about the local Wreaths Across America ceremony, visit the official Facebook page.

"Let me just say thank you to the Riverbend community," Hopkins added. "We wouldn't be able to do this. We have never not been able to do this because we didn't have enough wreaths. I feel confident that this year, we will make our goal."

