



Medal of Honor recipients Robert Patterson and Brian Thacker fire Last Salute's cannons, the "Mike D" and the "Jdime Lee"

Artillery Sounds a Last Salute

By Chuck Knutson, Commander, Last Salute Military Funeral Honor Guard

Among us live true heroes. Those who served, sacrificed and bled for us. Too few stop to reflect upon the people living amongst them that were willing to give everything, never return home, so that they may enjoy living virtually any way they wish.

I believe a nation defines itself by those it honors. We live in a time when athletes and celebrities are worshiped. Award shows are too numerous to keep track of as many rabid fans obsess over their specious idols. Social media too, has created mass hysteria as it produces internet deities measured in influence by their number of subscribers.

Honoring those who served, the true heroes, as they are finally laid to rest, is the primary mission of Last Salute.

Last Salute military funeral honor guard proudly serves the Southern New Jersey region. The unit conducts approximately 150 military honors ceremonies each year and continues to grow. It is an all volun-

teer all veteran 501C3 veterans services organization.

In 2015 Last Salute was formed to provide military funeral honors commensurate to the intrinsic value of military service. While in many cases the military will send a pair of uniformed personnel to play Taps and present a flag, in some instances, the services provided are not only less than adequate, but poorly performed.

In a nation that prides itself on an "all volunteer" military which accounts for less than 1% of its population, should it not do more to recognize that service? Not only does honoring our fallen in an appropriate and professional manner comfort the family, but it also advances a legacy that promotes the military's public image while helping the recruiting effort. The latter is something which we have direct knowledge of, as Last Salute, through its activities in the community, has motivated and mentored a number of young adults to join the

military.

Last Salute has had the privilege of providing elaborate and professional military funeral honors to many heroes. Among them, those who served in World War 2, Korea, Vietnam, Beirut, Desert Storm, Afghanistan and battles the world over. They were awarded Silver Stars, Bronze Stars, Purple Hearts, as well as medals for bravery, professionalism, commitment, the character traits specific to the type of person willing to place an ideal before themselves. Not all served overseas or in battle but their service also provides for the security necessary so that the many may peacefully sleep.

Our services have grown considerably since our inception. It was always our intent to provide an honor ceremony that demonstrated great respect and recognized the fallen in a way deserved. Last Salute honors ceremonies can include a military caisson, firing cannons, tolling of a large memorial bell, rifle volleys,

Taps, the folding and presentation of a memorial flag and posting a flag at the grave. Our most moving and memorable honor is our "Prayer Box" promise. I will write more about that after the cannons are given their distinction.

After the invention of gunpowder in China, it is widely accepted that cannons (artillery) soon followed. Some time later, rifles and pistols were invented. For hundreds of years cannons were used in countless battles and wars, often determining who would win and who would lose.

These artillery pieces were often referred to as "guns". For the purposes of our discussion and how it relates to modern honors ceremonies, the term "gun" is an essential element. Specifically, the term "21 gun salute". Today people ubiquitously refer to a 3 volley rifle salute as a "21 gun salute". In fact, the 21 gun salute is reserved only for the President, former Presidents, certain heads of state and monarchs. For all others, it is simply a gun salute. Even if there are 7 rifles firing 3 volleys, it is still simply, a "rifle salute".

The history of the 21 gun salute dates back hundreds of years. Ships were alleged to have 7 cannon and as they entered a friendly harbor they would fire each cannon a single time to demonstrate their peaceful

intent by emptying their guns. The land based fort, which could hold in reserve much more powder and shot, would fire 3 volleys of 7 in response.

This historical tradition establishes artillery cannon as the origin of the 21 "gun" salute. Artillery cannons of various size and provenance are still used today to honor and salute past presidents like George Bush, esteemed Senators like Bob Dole as well as Prince Phillip. Cannons are fired 17 times (for the number of states in the Union in 1810 as directed by the War Department) or 21 times which is the "Presidential Salute" established in 1842. The British have many different salutes varying in number.

Notably, Arlington National Cemetery also fires artillery cannon for certain funeral ceremonies. The cannons at Arlington are fired for General officers with the number of volleys determined by their number of stars.

Peripheral artillery equipment also plays a significant part in military honors. During Napoleon's time, he made another use of the resupply "artillery wagons". After they brought powder and shot to the artillery line, he commanded that they be used as "caisson" to transport his fallen warriors from the battlefield. Napoleon is also credited with draping his fallen warriors with the

national flag. Today, horse drawn caisson are still used to honorably transport flag draped caskets.

Across our great nation, many veterans organizations still provide rifle salutes. If families are able to find a local VFW or American Legion to provide such an honor, they are greatly appreciated. It is obvious that the conversion to using rifles to provide a "gun salute", was simply an evolution of practicality. At Arlington it also clearly establishes a level of entitlement based on rank. Level of service at Arlington plays an important role in which honors are bestowed. Medal of Honor recipients I am sure, receive any and all honors available.

Last Salute honors almost all our fallen with a single cannon volley. Those who have received awards for heroism and sacrifice will be honored with 2 cannon volleys provided by 2 cannon. Currently Last Salute possesses 2 cannon which have been used at over 1000 ceremonies. They have been fired at many cemeteries, on military installations and other locations to honor our fallen. They have been fired by Senators, Congressmen, Mayors, Police Chiefs, Fire Chiefs and the Attorney General of The United States but most notably, many Medal of Honor recipients. In the last weeks of June, Medal of Honor recipients Robert Patterson and Brian Thacker each fired both cannons for a total of 4 volleys. You can see video of this incredible honor at LastSalute.us.

The cost of acquiring, maintaining and supplying the cannons is quite expensive but the impact these artillery pieces have on those attending an honors ceremony is immeasurable. The family and friends of our fallen comrade will not forget that a cannon was fired in his honor.

Families that desire may request our military caisson for use in place of the traditional hearse. A fully up armored slant back HMMWV (Humvee) with machine gun turret pulls an M1102 trailer fitted with a raised platform to elevate the flag draped casket for all to see as it is transported honorably to its final resting place.

Previously I had mentioned our



Medal of Honor recipients Hershel "Woody" Williams, Gary Beikirch, Robert Patterson, Maj General (R) James Livingston, and Joe Marm stand with the "Jaime Lee". Also in photo Last Salute Commander Chuck Knutson and Josh O'connor

“Prayer Box”. The Prayer Box is a perpetual caisson. It is a chest built from wood that was taken from inside a very old church as it was being razed. Within it are the prayer cards and photographs of all the fallen we honor. At each funeral ceremony, we read the inscription etched upon the box’s lid and ask a family member to place their loved one inside. They are told that once they do this, their loved one becomes a permanent member of our Honor Guard, they will travel with us everywhere we go and overwatch everything that we do. The Prayer Box has been held and honored by all those who honored the cannons and it was with us at Arlington when we conducted a ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. It was flown by Blackhawk helicopter from Fort Dix to Vineland, New Jersey for the renaming of the Middle School after the first Army Ranger to die in the “Blackhawk Down” battle, it was honored at the Battleship New Jersey, and recently carried in a military backpack through a training action at Parris Island which include the gas chamber, obstacle course, crucible and rifle range. On Memorial Day it was placed in another military main pack and members of Last Salute marched 21 miles in full kit to honor the fallen.

Tolling the bell, firing rifles, playing Taps and presenting a flag also



Last Salute's artillery cannons fire to honor Medal of Honor recipient Hershel "Woody" Williams on 3 July, 2022 at the WV State Capitol Building.

play a big part in each ceremony. Great care must be given to folding the flag. It will be the last time it is folded. It is the final gesture. The fallen have honored the flag. It will now honor them.

At Arlington, a flag is typically folded by a 6 man team. We are limited to 2 due to availability of volunteers especially during the week. For this reason, we have enhanced the fold with more detailed hand movements to make this somber moment more moving. The folded flag will be a perpetual remembrance displayed prominently in the family’s home. It has served as pall to cover their loved one and

now must be carefully folded, and presented.

As you kneel before the next of kin with their loved one lying behind you, “on behalf of the President of the United States, the United States Military and a grateful nation, please accept this flag as a symbol of appreciation for your loved one’s honorable and faithful service. Rise and salute, mindful of the moment, the fallen will remain, only the flag will depart.

It is a great privilege to honor these fallen heroes and comfort their families. Last Salute strongly believes that each family should leave the ceremony with a profound sense of pride. Their sadness somewhat assuaged by the elaborate ceremony conducted on the field before them. The presence of military vehicles, artillery cannon, uniformed personnel, banners, bell and the Prayer Box placed upon a table covered in black. All of this, to honor their hero.

Last Salute military funeral honor guard has intentions to provide these ceremonies in an ever increasingly larger area. We provide training and assistance to Police, Fire, Funeral Directors and other organizations wishing to provide similar services. Last Salute will also consider commissioning subordinate posts in other areas. For more information, please visit LastSalute.US



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