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'More than just a piece of cloth' – Flag ceremony part of Warrior Hunts' return to Lake Greeson

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- **RETIRED BY FIRE.** Larry Lawson, a U.S. Army veteran from Louisiana, participates in a special ceremony to retire an American flag Saturday night at Lake Greeson. Lawson is part of Warrior Hunts, an event hosted by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Lake Greeson Field Office for a second time.

By John Balch

Leader staff

With every head bowed in silence around a crackling campfire, Old Glory was retired by fire during a special ceremony held at the conclusion of this weekend's Warrior Hunt on Lake Greeson.

Many of those in attendance, still dressed in their camouflage hunting clothes, dabbed tears from their eyes and stared long and intently into the flames as the last bits of fabric disappeared.

"I tried to hold it together," John Nolan told the crowd gathered Saturday night after leading the emotional ceremony to properly retire the American flag. Nolan, a Louisiana native and retired soldier with the U.S. Air Force, is the director of Warrior Hunts and has been involved in many flag retirements but has only led the ceremony twice.

"But, it gets me every time," Nolan later said.

This year was the second time Lake Greeson has hosted the Warrior Hunts, which Nolan helps coordinate with the Patriots Alumni and Louisiana Sportsman (PALS) and the Northeast Louisiana Veterans Association as well as the Wounded Warrior Project. The hunts are designed to be therapeutic outings for soldiers of all ages and from all branches of the military who have participated or been physically or mentally injured in wars around the world.

Approximately 27 soldiers and family members returned to Lake Greeson this year, some participating in a special squirrel hunt where 46 squirrels were bagged while others enjoyed a lengthy ATV ride around Albert Pike.

"This is a great place with great people," Nolan said. "We're already talking about coming back next year and maybe doing some fishing."

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Lake Greeson Field Office partnered with the USDA Forest Service, Arkansas Game and Fish Commission to host the event. Kirby Motel and Landing and owner Clay Crump donated the rooms for the event and personnel from the Corps' field offices at DeGray Lake and Ouachita were also involved.

Following a meal provided and prepared by Lake Greeson personnel and the Lake Greeson Sportsmen's Alliance, the soldiers and their families moved down the hill from the motel to a large campfire to prepare the flag for retirement. They privately separated the flag's colors into strips.

"I am your flag. I was born on June 14, 1777. I am more than just a piece of cloth. I am the emblem of the greatest sovereign nation on earth," Nolan said to open the ceremony.

"I have led your sons to battle from Valley Forge to the blistering desert of the Arabian peninsula."

Each soldier and their family members held ragged strips of the flag and were asked to retire them by colors. First the white, which represents the "burning tears shed by Americans who lost their sons in battle." Next the red, which "symbolizes the blood spilled in defense of this glorious nation." Each strip was carefully placed on the fire.

Nolan had reserved as special red piece of the flag that he and an older soldier held together and committed to the fire. "This is for our fallen and their families," Nolan said, his voice cracking with emotion. The elder man then saluted the flames.

Nolan then turned to another fellow soldier and said, "Please, retire the Union." The blue field of stars, representing "God's Heaven under which I fly, and my stars, clustered together, unify the 50 states as one for God and country," was laid in the fire, followed by a lengthy moment of silence.

The flag that was retired flew over the Corps' Lake Greeson Field Office above Narrows Dam and had never seen any wartime or bloodshed. But, as Nolan said again, the flag represents "more than just a piece of cloth" and should be respected at all times.

Nolan also informed those around the fire it is "absolutely O.K." to approach someone about the condition of their flag and request that it be properly retired.

"When you see Old Glory in tattered shape, it's kind of our responsibility to step up and say something about it," he said.

With the retiring of an old flag, a new flag was presented, this one to motel owner Crump for his donation to the event. The flag had been flown over the Louisiana capitol, the state where most of the visiting soldiers reside.

"Fly it proud. Always." Nolan said.

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