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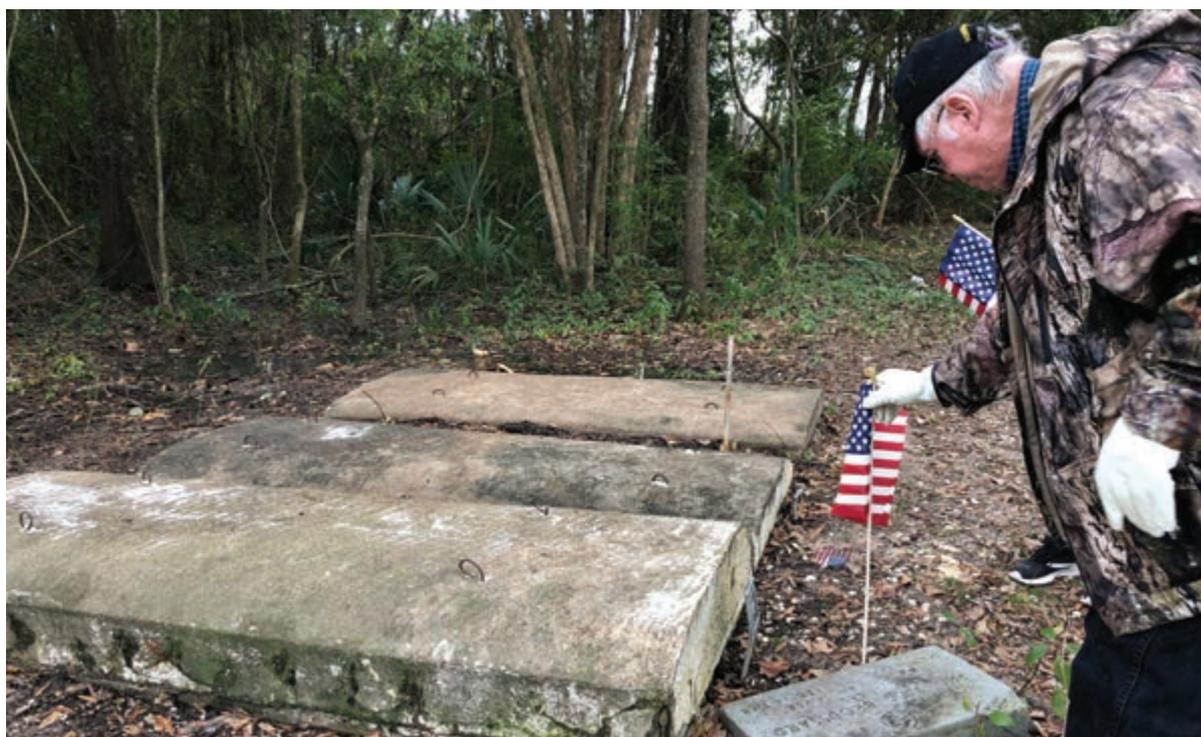
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American heroes unite to deforest forgotten cemetery



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Veterans deforest forgotten cemetery

By Jennifer Johnson
Managing Editor

Decades of degradation resulting in a 100-year-old cemetery becoming less recognizable as a final resting place for families and veterans and more like a forgotten forest were met with a tenacious cleanup effort undertaken by American heroes and their support system on Saturday, Dec. 14, in Beaumont's north end.

As reported in The Examiner in recent weeks, an overgrown and neglected cemetery on Gill Street in Beaumont had gone from bad to worse with natural disasters and haphazard machining taking its toll on the historic graves and headstones concealed in the foliage and trees. By the roadside, hints of "newer" graves – still over 50 years old – could vaguely be deciphered. One such grave, that of Pvt. 2nd Class Prentice Broussard, had the most recent death date that could be distinguished from what's left of the interments – 1968.

When he heard of the disrespectful disregard for veteran remains running amok at the Gill Street cemetery, Disabled American Veterans Chapter 236 Adjunct Bruce Lockett knew he and his crew had to get involved.

"I apprised them of the situation, and it was a unanimous decision to go in and clean it up," Lockett said of the feedback he received from the DAV group. "Everyone was in from the



Some of the many volunteers of 'Operation Cemetery Cleanup'

beginning."

Veterans George Matthews of Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 292 and James Alexander also needed little convincing to get to work clearing out the forest that served as a fellow veteran's final resting place.

"I saw your article; that's how I got involved," Alexander said. Noticing the overgrown cemetery on the cover of the paper brought Alexander to seek

out how he could make a difference in ensuring that the travesty was rectified. "The wife and I always talk about how blessed we are – how we want to help; we want to share.

"This seemed like a good place to do that."

Dec. 14, upwards of two-dozen men from local DAV chapters, Vietnam Veterans Chapter 292, as well as independent contractors and supporters, braved the chilly weather and spent the morning undoing what Mother Nature has spent about 50 years concocting. Veteran ringleaders Lockett, Matthews, Rodney Breaux and Alexander, joined by Gage Muntz, Ray Manriquez, Larry Fagg and over a dozen others, chopped trees, pulled weeds, bagged leaves and paid respect to the ancestors who have been long forgotten up until now.

Muntz said he came all the way from Kountze to assist on the project.

"I'm not even from around here, but I got a call that said they were cleaning up veterans graves, and did I want to come," Muntz said. "So, here I am."

Muntz was confounded by the condition of the cemetery, puzzled by the

ever-increasing number of unearthed headstones – as well as a noticeable lack thereof in many cases. Of particular note, the grave of a 17-year-old exposed after decades of overgrowth was removed.

"It's hard to make (the headstone writings) out sometimes," he said. "A lot of the graves don't have any markings on them. Nothing. We have no idea how many are out here. There's definitely more behind these trees, too. Everywhere."

After what Lockett affectionately called "Operation Cemetery Cleanup," flags were placed on the graves of confirmed veterans, many of the deceased dating back to the early 1900s. An area the size of a home lot was cleared.

There's still more to do.

Lockett, a Vietnam M60 machine-gunner veteran injured in the line of duty, said he makes taking care of his fellow veterans – living or dead – a priority.

"We never leave someone behind – and we don't forget about them, either," Lockett said. According to the veteran advocate, he was blessed to make it



During cleanup, several headstones are unearthed.

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The overgrown area pre-cleanup

VETERANS

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home from war and believes it is his duty to pay that feeling forward.

"I got three pieces of shrapnel when a B-40 rocket landed right behind us when we were stationed at Hill 10 in Arizona (Vietnam)," Lockett vividly recalled. "Sept. 17, 1969. I'll never forget it.

"They came and got us that night. There was (gun)fire everywhere, shooting at the (medical helicopters).



A chainsaw is needed to clear trees growing through the headstones.



It was hard for them to get the choppers in – but, they did.

"The good Lord brought me back and I want everyone else to make it back, too. Then, when they get back, I want them to get the benefits they deserve, and to be respected."

Lockett champions for veteran rights, veteran benefits and proper veteran acknowledgment and care. Leaving a fellow veteran to rot in the woods is something Lockett couldn't bear.

"Army, Navy, Air Force... this was a combined military effort," Lockett half-joked, giving credit to his fellow veterans for stepping up and taking part in Operation Cemetery Cleanup. "The main thing is to

respect our veterans and make sure they're never forgotten. We never need to forget our veterans – and their gravesites."

"Veterans can't do everything – but we can do something," he said. "We can make a difference."

Lockett and Alexander both say that this labor of love will continue until the Gill Street cemetery is completely excavated, and there are other nearby cemeteries the group has intent to address, too. In the meantime, more volunteers are continuing to add themselves to the project.

"It looks like something to go on for a while," Lockett said. "Nobody wants to see it look like this. We're all going to die someday, and nobody wants to be left like this, either.

"So, we're not finished out there. We're going to go out there after the first of the year to finish up the back."

Lockett said the crew will bring added manpower and equipment on the next cleanup installation.

"There's another gravesite with Buffalo Soldiers, as well, and we're going to make sure that gets cleaned up.

"We don't leave anybody behind."

Jefferson County Sheriff Zena Stephens had a simple message for the veterans working to bring dignity back to the forgotten Beaumont cemeteries: "I'm in."

"The weather just hasn't been too good, but I've gone by there myself to look at the area," Stephens said, offering up that inmate labor could be utilized for such a community service. "It looks like a lot of work, but I'm down."

Anthony Cemetery owner Raymond Chaisson, whose property is essentially co-mingled with property owned or operated by Gill Street cemetery owner Community Cemeteries Inc., said he was also willing to put in work on the cleanup project.

"I told (Lockett and Alexander et al) if they needed any help to put me down on the volunteer list because it needs to be cleaned out," Chaisson said. "They may need shovels ... machines ... I may even be able to come up with some volunteer labor myself.

"Any kind of help I can give, I will be happy to give."

Alexander said the group would be happy to take any help offered as the work "certainly needs to go on." Alexander added that he has been pleased by how many people have expressed interest in joining in the effort, further affirming his desire to embark on such a massive cleanup mission. The cleanup has also affirmed other choices in his life, as well.

"I told my wife I wanted to be cremated," he said. "All this has really reinforced my decision."