

# A ‘Last Salute’ for Homeless Vets

## An Illinois VFW member arranges proper military funerals as one aspect in his quest to serve the homeless

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Jack Picciolo has been working for nearly a decade to help homeless veterans receive proper burials. That work, along with other projects in his Illinois community, earned the Vietnam veteran the Illinois Veterans’ Patriotic Volunteer and Appreciation Award.

For Picciolo, the recognition meant more because of who it came from.

“It was from veterans — from groups that I work with, peers, veterans groups, not just a general award from the city or the state,” said Picciolo, who was drafted in 1964 and spent the last eight months of his two years of service in Vietnam as a specialist 4 with the 2nd Bn., 17th FA.

Every veteran, according to Picciolo, deserves to be buried with military honors.

“We have a national cemetery right in our backyard,” said Picciolo, a member of VFW Post 5788 in Lockport, Ill., about 30 miles southwest of Chicago. “Why couldn’t we arrange to act as family and get these guys their military honors?”

Picciolo said the Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery in Elwood, Ill., roughly 15 miles south of Lockport, had a policy of quarterly burials.

“I was basically the only person there,” Picciolo said. “There was just no participation by any groups anywhere. I decided right then I’d start advertising [and] working with the memorial squad.”

The cemetery instituted its all-volunteer memorial squad in 2003 to help with military honors.

“When requested, a detail consisting of at least two uniformed military persons, with at least

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one being a member of the veteran's branch of service provide folding and presentation of the U.S. flag and can also play 'Taps,' either by a high-quality recording or a bugler," according to the National Cemetery Administration.

In his efforts, Picciolo aimed to involve VFW and American Legion Posts. Patriot Guard riders now are participating as well.

In 2007, Picciolo said, he began working with the Chicago Homeless Sandwich Run after hearing about it from Illinois VFW Homeless Chairman Paul Bezazian at the state convention. The run was started by Marine Corps veteran Jim Proffitt in 1989. A few years ago, Picciolo brought that effort to his own county.

"It was very eye-opening," Picciolo said. "We had a truck and sandwiches and food and everything ... Maybe four or five out of 10 [homeless that we spoke to] could be a vet. Then we started finding out the problems they had."

Their concerns included lack of employment and medical problems. So Picciolo and others started connecting veterans with the VA. Picciolo also said most of the veterans "just wanted someone to talk to."

Even though he was "just a draftee for two years," Picciolo said being there for other veterans to talk to "really opens them up."

One veteran Picciolo and Proffitt assisted in the Chicago area was Harold Lewis, a resident at a men's hotel.

When Lewis died, Proffitt was contacted about providing Lewis a proper burial at Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery.

"We've buried probably some 80 more homeless vets since then," Picciolo said.

Those efforts have been the most impactful for Picciolo.

"[It's nice] to provide a veteran with a last salute and some kind of going off ... It really helps me to work on something like that, to make it possible and do as many as we can," Picciolo said.

Picciolo also served as Post 5788 commander from 2013 to 2015 and has been a member of the Will County (Ill.) Veterans Affairs Commission for three years.

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