

'This isn't about me'

Army vet, keeper of the flags honored with Quilt of Valor

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By Lisa Reisman

BRANFORD — When Phil Zielinski was recognized with a "quilt of valor" for his military service last week, he wore it inside out, showing the backing, decorated with flags.

Only fitting, it seems. Zielinski officially serves as Branford's keeper of the flags, which explains the design of his quilt, said Jane Dougherty of the Quilts of Valor Foundation, which has as its mission "to cover service members and veterans touched by war."

In keeping with his post, which involves organizing volunteers to honor the 1,700 veterans' graves with American flags every Memorial Day and Veterans Day, Zielinski preferred to pay tribute to those who went before him.

"This isn't about me," he told a group of 12 masked and socially distanced veterans, friends, and family members assembled for the ceremony.

This was about his uncle Walter Zielinski, he said. After serving in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, "the Sarge," as he was known, was part of the rescue effort at the Mount St. Helens volcano in 1980. It was also about another uncle, Joseph Zielinski, a medic during World War II.

"He was ready to ship but they found out he was missing a lung from birth and they kept him back to teach other medics," the younger Zielinski said.

This was about his father, Benjamin Zielinski. "His family needed help working its pig farm on Brushy Plains Road, so he got a deferment from duty, but he still served in the Army National Guard," he said; about his mother's brother Frederick



Lisa Reisman / Contributed photo

From left, Theresa Zielinski with Quilts of Valor honoree Phil Zielinski, Zielinski's daughter Kimberly Zielinski and son-in-law Rich Krueger.

Petre, a master woodworker who served in the Navy during World War II; and John Coolac, another relative, who fought for the Army in France during World War I.

"I haven't done anything close to what they did, but they're the reason I do what I do," he said.

No matter that he enlisted in the Connecticut Army National Guard from 1982 to 1988 as a tank turret repairman, fixing M1 Abrams tanks and, as he put it, "anything else with a turret."

Along with keeping the flags — and overseeing the firing squad at Memorial Day and Veterans Day ceremonies — the husband and father of two daughters has served in other ways as well since then.

In 2018, it was his idea that inspired the town to include more than one parade marshal to lead the Memorial Day parade. That paved the

way for five World War II veterans to be honored.

"It was a terrific idea," chairman of the Veterans Parade Committee Bill O'Brien said back then.

At the event at the American Legion last week, Post 83 Commander Donald Langlois, Sr. sounded a similar refrain.

"Thank you for stepping up for us these several years and especially this year," he told Zielinski, who currently serves as Sargent of Arms.

"Like many others, Phil signed on the dotted line to go where he was needed," Quilt of Valor's Dougherty said. "He's honored us all, and particularly the town of Branford, with his quiet service."

► If you know a veteran you'd like to honor, visit www.qovf.org, find the "take action" tab, and click "request a quilt," or email jane.dougherty@qovf.org.