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'Funerals come first for Johnny'

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Reader comments: An unnamed reader says, "I've kept the one about giving veterans send-offs at their funerals, but my funeral director didn't give me that option when my husband died."

The night before, Mary Ryzak always asks her husband, "Johnny, are you ready for the funeral?"

He checks his olive uniform, which hangs in his bedroom closet. If it was dry-cleaned since the last service, he needs to pin back onto the jacket a dozen medals and other decorations.

He pulls the shoe trees from his patent leather shoes. And he checks his white cotton gloves, on a shelf in the closet. If they're smudged, Mary hand washes them in the kitchen sink.

In the morning, he can dress quickly and leave his home in Dearborn Heights, to stand at attention for another dead veteran.

In honor of 600 comrades

John Ryzak is 84 years old. In the past 20 years, he has dressed in this same honor guard uniform 600 times, for the funerals of 600 comrades.

"It's a little loose now," he told me a few days ago. Then he chuckled. "It used to be a little tight."

World War II ended 55 years ago. It's over for John, too, who spent almost four years as an Army medic in Italy and France. He doesn't think much about those years.

But he's made lots of friends at his VFW post, No. 6996, on Detroit's west side.

It's named for Sgt. Stanley Romanowski, a dead soldier whose family used to shop at Ryzak's Market, a corner store where John and his parents made kielbasa and other Polish specialties.

When he ran the store, John let other guys go to the funerals. "I had to work every day," he said.

But on his 65th birthday in 1980, he closed the market and retired.

Now, funerals are his turn.

A quickening pace

Sometimes John goes to three a week. The vets are dying faster. And the honor guard is shrinking. Only 21 of the original 100 men remain. Some can't drive anymore. Some, like John, the oldest, have trouble walking.

Sometimes only six or eight make it to a funeral.

If John's not sick, he goes.

"I've never heard him say no," says Mary. "Funerals come first for Johnny."

John doesn't know all the men whose funerals he attends. But he knows the routine as well as a man can know anything.

At the funeral home, John and his cohorts take turns standing at attention at the casket. Used to be each man stood for an hour. Now, it's 15 minutes.

Each salutes before the casket is closed.

At the cemetery, John is the one who salutes to signal the firing of rifles and the playing of taps.

Used to be John bent to pick up three spent shells, making sure they were tucked into the flag other men had folded for the widow.

"But I don't bend anymore," he says. "Now the guys save me the shells they fired last time, and I keep 'em in my pocket to pull out for the flag.

"You have to adapt, you know."

At the end, one man calls out "Last salute!" And every man does.

The funerals do not bring down his spirit. He's glad to be there, especially if the gathering is small. "I'm always sorry he died," he said, "but hey, I'm gonna die someday soon."

So why does he do it, so long and so steadily?

He pauses and says something touchingly true. "I'm going to have somebody, guaranteed, to carry me out" -- with a rifle salute, with a folded flag, with taps and honor.