

Aging veterans organization seeks new members

Published: January 31, 2014 | Last Modified: January 31, 2014 01:25AM

By Jeff Gebeau Record-Journal correspondent

MERIDEN — The Antique Veterans, a local organization that performs military burial ceremonies, has an age-old problem. The average age of its members is 82, said Ken Muravnick, 64, the group's third youngest member. "If we don't get new members, I don't see us lasting more than another five years," he said of the group, which formed in 1996.

The organization boasted 230 members in 2010, although only about 75 actively participated in ceremonial observances, said Jack O'Neill, 88, its funeral coordinator. That number has dwindled to around 40 today, he said. A growing number of its members are either physically unable to perform ceremonies or have died, he said.

Peter Burch, 76, who runs the group's website, said a year-round schedule and all-weather availability tax the elderly members. The group performed 11 funerals in the past month, he said, adding that it has done almost 1,300 since 9/11.



Members of the Antique Veterans march in the Memorial Day Parade in Meriden on May 27, 2013.

| Justin Weekes / For the Record-Journal

President and co-founder Dick Egan, 89, said the group is renowned for its robust funeral detail, but that is being whittled down. "We have 31 flags in our color guard, but the guys are too old to carry them anymore," he said. "We had four buglers, but two of them died."

Pablo Soto, 37, said the Antique Veterans have long discussed the issue, but its urgency has been renewed by the deaths of three of their brethren in the last six months. Soto embodies the type of veteran the organization seeks. He discovered the group through his involvement in a local wreath-laying service in which it also participated. Soto is prominently featured on the Antique Veterans website in a photo with its senior member, 94-year old Henry Muszynski, to depict their age range, but he is a demographic outlier. The second youngest member is Mark Bender, 53, a retired Meriden firefighter.

Burch and Soto said the organization tries to promote itself through the website, social media and local newspaper stories, as well as having booths at city festivals and placing fliers in the library and senior center. It also attempts to recruit members by networking at the American Legion and events other than burials in which it participates, such as parades and educational programs.

Soto said the organization has received limited response from its promotional efforts because it is completely voluntary. The group gets no compensation for its services other than donations. Members supply their own uniforms and pay for their own gas. The organization also has to provide the blank rounds used in its ceremonial rifle salutes. Soto said that schedule constraints on the part of younger veterans may prevent some from joining. "Most of the Antique Veterans are retired, so they have more time," he said.

Burch said most of the group's members are veterans of World War II and the Korean War. "I'm not sure if younger people just tend not to join things," he said.

The Antique Veterans have about a half-dozen members who are Vietnam veterans, Egan said. None of its members have served in more recent conflicts, although Soto is a peacetime veteran.

Muravnick is uncertain how many Vietnam veterans live in the region. He is in the process of trying to obtain a list of all veterans who reside in the area from the Connecticut Department of Veterans Affairs or the Veterans Service Center in Wallingford. The group's perceived somber nature may also discourage veterans from joining, Muravnick said. He says that perception is a misconception, citing the group's annual picnics, Christmas parties and regular Dunkin' Donuts outings. "It's not all funerals and gloom and doom," he said.

Soto said the organization's name also inhibits its drive to attract younger members, asserting that people equate the word "antique" with "old."

Despite the connotation, Muravnick stressed that the group is open to all veterans, including women, although it currently has no female members. It is also free to belong, he said.

Soto said having a mix of older and younger members could be mutually enriching. He said he enjoys the company of the older servicemen and hearing their stories. At the same time, Soto said he provides "a different perspective and persona," to the group. He hopes additional reinforcements from the ranks of younger veterans can help give the organization a facelift. "This is a great thing that we do," he said. "I don't want it to end."