Hope's Honor Guard Salutes Our Veteran Community

Although it's been decades since Ben Polk was in the military, he is quick to point out, "I am still a Marine."

Once a Marine, always a Marine." He served his country for eight years during the late 1940s and 1950s.

Polk came to Port Myers from Illinois more than 22 years ago. He settled into the Lexington Country Club community where making new friends was as easy as joining the nearly 150 service men and women belonging to the Lexington Veterans Association.

"A representative of Hope Hospice came to speak to our group about the VALOR program and its volunteer Honor Guard. I wanted to be involved," Polk says. "I now have the time to volunteer, and it's important to me to support our military community."

The Honor Guard is part of Hope's VALOR program, developed especially for military veterans. (Read more about VALOR in the highlighted section on page 8.)

The Honor Guard offers special presentations to the service men and women in Hope's care. Family and friends are invited to attend the presentations, with each veteran receiving a certificate of appreciation along with a lapel pin and a stuffed "burden bear." Each presentation concludes with a moving military salute.

Polk, who always dresses in his military uniform for presentations, says, "It is amazing what patients are capable of doing at this moment. Veterans in wheelchairs will stand up to salute. Men and women who seem completely non-responsive make every effort to salute. Nurses and families are astonished to see this. No matter what their state, they hear us." Most often, it is the veteran's family and friends whose reactions move Polk. "They are the most touched. To see their eyes light up during the program, to watch their pride as we tell their veteran how much we appreciate their service—it is very rewarding."

Last year, when Polk's wife, Millie, became ill, Hope Hospice was there. Through his volunteer work with the Honor Guard, Polk felt reassured. "I had every confidence in Hope and knew the type of help she would get."

Fellow Honor Guard volunteers wondered if Polk would continue volunteering after his beloved wife passed. Polk is happy to say, "I came back stronger and better. It is special to see the men and women, at this time in their life, still so proud to have served our country."

As Veteran's Day approaches on November 11, Polk says that for many, the holiday will be celebrated simply as a day off of work or a fun weekend. He comments, "As a veteran, all I ask is that each person give a moment of thought to those in Afghanistan and Iraq who will hopefully soon become veterans. And give a moment of peaceful thought to those who have served, and all that they have given to our country."

If you are interested in joining Hope's Honor Guard or would like to help in other ways as a volunteer, please contact Volunteer Services at 800-835-1673. Prior military service is helpful but not required for Honor Guard participants.

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