'Good Cemeterian' volunteers to restore veterans' headstones

At grave markers of veterans, he kneels with brush in hand.

Andrew Lumish, 45, kneels over World War II veteran Harry R. Littleton's headstone in the Lutz Cemetery to restore it.Photos by BRENDAN FITTERER | Times

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By Arleen Spenceley, Times Staff Writer

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LUTZ

At the Lutz Cemetery, Andrew Lumish kneeled in the grass over a World War II veteran's grave. Under a gray sky, he used a soft bristle brush to scrub the headstone.

It had been darkened by "mold, mildew and 40 plus years of weather," Lumish said.

He wanted to fix that, to honor a veteran whose stone had been forgotten. Doing that, he said, is his hobby.

A few years ago, Lumish, 45, of Land O'Lakes, whose other hobby is photography, carried a camera into the Oaklawn Cemetery, an aged Tampa burial ground.

"It was beautiful," he said.

He shot photos of historic graves. He sought more cemeteries because they are "gorgeous," he said, and because he loves history.

He discovered that the bodies buried beneath a lot of the headstones he saw belonged to military veterans.

But "something bothered me," he said. "Their final resting places were total disasters."

The granite, marble and sandstone monuments that marked their graves had been battered by bad weather. Mold, mildew and lichens had grown over them. Some of the headstones had been there for more than a hundred years.

"They'd been neglected from the time they'd been buried," Lumish said.

Some were partially illegible. But he would read whatever he could on each decayed stone.

"Who they are, when they lived," he said.

Lumish, a history buff, would determine in which conflict each soldier may have fought.

"I think about their parents, if they were very young," he said. "I think about their spouses, if they were in World War II and there was no way to communicate the way we can communicate now. I think about a wife at home, not knowing if (her husband is) dead or alive."

Lumish said soldiers take risks. They make sacrifices. We know how to honor them while they are living, he said.

"Somebody walks through that door and they're wearing Army, Navy, Marine, Air Force, whatever uniform, say 'Thank you for your service,' shake their hand and walk away," he said.

In the cemeteries that he photographed, he decided how he would honor them after they've died: by cleaning the monuments that mark their graves.

"If you're going to restore monuments, the key is, you don't want to do more damage," Lumish said.

While he owns a Chem-Dry upholstery and carpet cleaning franchise, he had never cleaned a headstone. So, he did some research and discovered the proper product.

"D/2 Biological Solution, which is the only product approved by the U.S. government to clean national cemeteries, including Arlington," Lumish said.

He bought some and a soft bristle brush. Then, he brought them with water to the Lutz Cemetery, where he got to work.

"You really should get permission, but I never get permission," he said. "I'm like a pirate."

The first stone he restored there belongs to Henry J. Fletcher, who was born in 1839 and died in 1914. Fletcher was a Civil War veteran.

The same day, Lumish scrubbed a second stone clean. He has returned to cemeteries most Sundays, his only day off, ever since and has earned a nickname: the Good Cemeterian.

In the two and a half years since he started, he guesses he has cleaned 300 headstones in three cemeteries in Pasco and Hillsborough counties. Some take five minutes to clean, others take three hours.

They have belonged to men and women in every military branch. Lumish can quickly list the wars in which they all fought.

"Civil, Spanish American, World War I, World War II, Korean War and Vietnam," he said.

Lumish's son, Tyler, 19, has started to help him with the restorations.

When Lumish cleans stones that represent soldiers who died at his son's age or younger, he thinks about his son.

"To me, he's a kid," Lumish said.

So were the young soldiers who died at war.

"They fought for the freedoms that you and I enjoy today," Lumish said. "If I know that they did these things for my future, my children's future, and I see that they're forgotten, I feel a sense of responsibility to give their family a little bit of light."

He has restored almost all the veterans' monuments at Lutz Cemetery. He intends to go to cemeteries that he hasn't visited yet, to search for more veterans' graves.

When he finds one, he will kneel in the grass for as long as it takes to restore the stone above the veteran's body.

Then, he will do what he usually does when he has finished restoring a veteran's monument.

"I thank them for their service," he said, "and walk away."

Contact Arleen Spenceley at (727) 869-6235 or aspenceley@tampabay.com. Follow @ArleenSpenceley.

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