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Silver trumpet in hand, Gary Edmondson pays his respects to veterans at Lafayette's VA Clinic

BY KAILEY BROUSSARD | Special to the Advocate

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Army veteran Gary Edmondson plays service songs for each veteran entering or leaving the Lafayette Veterans Affairs Clinic to their branch of military service Thursday, August 24, 2017, in Lafayette, La.

Advocate staff photo by LESLIE WESTBROOK

Sporting a red volunteer shirt and his silver trumpet, Gary Edmondson stands outside the VA Clinic on Ambassador Caffery Parkway and plays the tunes he knows best: military hymns.

With 71 years of trumpet and bugle playing under his belt, Edmondson has spent his weekday mornings for the last six months outside the clinic playing patients in and out of the clinic's sliding doors.

He plays for around 40-45 patients each morning from 7:30 a.m.-9 a.m. and plays whichever hymn corresponds with their military branch.

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“It made me feel good that I could bring this thing to them where they were happy,” he said. “They thanked me, they said I made their day, they appreciate what I’ve done and what I’m doing there.”

As he plays, some veterans march in time or dance. Edmondson said he’s seen some shed shed tears during his morning serenades.

“Some of them, I could see it in their eyes, they were breaking up because the melody had a point that made them think of the past,” he said.

However, Edmondson said, the constant playing has taken a toll and he's not sure how much longer he can maintain his weekday regimen of “Anchors Aweigh” and “The Wild Blue Yonder.” His stints outdoors last less than two hours, which is about how long he can hold up before tiring.

To keep his tradition humming along, Edmondson has begun raising funds through the Lafayette Veterans Coalition to accrue \$1,500 for a speaker system that plays the songs on loop.

“When I leave, they can play music all day long,” he said.

“When we put the music out there, it won’t be as loud, but that’s OK,” he said. “That’s not the purpose. The purpose is entertaining them. They enjoy listening to their music.”

Edmondson is also seeking an additional \$2,500 to \$3,000 in donations to host a 75th anniversary of the end of the second World War in 2020. He hosted the 50th anniversary celebration in 1995.

“Hopefully we can recognize our veterans,” Edmondson said.

A U.S. Army veteran born in New York City, Edmondson picked up a bugle as a 10-year-old as part of his Boy Scout troop’s drum and bugle corps. As a bugler, Edmondson appeared with his scout troop on “The Jackie Gleason Show,” where he met famed trumpeter Louis Armstrong

Years later, his mother gave him a trumpet. He hasn’t stopped playing since.

Edmondson first played “Taps” at a military funeral in 1946. He kept playing the 24-note-long tune as he served in the U.S. Army at 21 in Louisville, Kentucky, and played in the Army’s band.

Following his discharge from the service, he became a salesman for Metlife and was transferred to Lafayette, where Edmondson said he felt he could “grow up with a small city” instead of being one of more than 100 Louisville agents. In Lafayette, he’d find flexible hours to work and could touch base with local veterans.

“When I came down, I told most of the funeral homes that if they wanted me to play “Taps” for the military, just give me a call,” he said.

Since then, Edmondson has become a staple at military services, often performing for free with the local honor guard until it disbanded in 2013. He helped spearhead a new Acadiana Veterans Honor Guard in 2014, which has played for 66 veterans’ funerals this year alone.

Linden Comeaux, who volunteers at the VA Clinic, recalled Edmondson playing at his father’s funeral.

“He’s very active with that horn,” he said. “I think most people enjoy hearing the songs that he plays.”

Comeaux said Edmondson has acknowledged the wear and tear on his lips, especially during the Air Force hymn, which features the highest notes in any of the songs he plays.

Despite the challenges, Edmondson said, people enjoy his music — mistakes and all.

“A lot of people say they don’t care whether I miss a note or whether I make a bad note — they enjoy having me, personally, out there playing,” he said.