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'A soldier does not die alone'

No one claims body; ex-private buried in national cemetery

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MONTEVALLO - Of the 15 people attending the Monday morning funeral of former Army Pvt. David Leroy Hill, not one knew the man inside the casket.

Hill, 54, died almost two months ago in a local nursing facility, and no friends or family came to claim his body.

He had no one.

But as a former soldier in a military town, he wasn't entirely alone. To prevent him from being buried in the



Patricia C. McCarter/The Huntsville Times

In a borrowed minivan, Max Bennett, president of the Redstone Arsenal Chapter of the U.S. Army Warrant Officers Association, drives Pvt. David Leroy Hill to Montevallo Monday.

county's pauper cemetery, a plan was made to get him to a more respectful burial place. Members of the Patriot Guard Riders led the way from Spry Funeral Home to Monteval-

lo, where Hill became the area's first indigent pauper to avoid potter's field thanks to the new Alabama National

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A member of the Alabama Military Honor Guard stands by the casket of Pvt. David Leroy Hill, who was brought to the Alabama National Cemetery by volunteers because he had no family or friends to pay for transport.

Soldier

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Cemetery.

"The pauper's grave system is a very necessary thing in our society, but it isn't a necessity for veterans," said Max Bennett, retired military and president of the Redstone Arsenal Chapter of the U.S. Army Warrant Officers Association, who helped make arrangements to get Hill to Montevallo.

In a minivan borrowed from Serra Toyota in Decatur, Bennett drove Hill to the cemetery. The deceased man had no money, and there were no other resources to pay for his transport. Via the national cemetery that opened June 25, veterans don't have to pay for a burial plot or any expenses of graveside services.

The Rev. James Henderson, chaplain for the local Association of the United States Army, officiated Hill's service, but there was no way to personalize it for the former soldier because no one knew him.

Instead, Henderson focused on the search for peace, "and no one wants peace more than a soldier."

Hill's Army service was brief. In research performed by the Alabama Depart-

ment of Veterans Affairs, Bennett said it was learned that Hill joined the Army at age 17, and he was honorably discharged four months later.

"Private Hill died without family and friends to say goodbye, but he has not died forgotten, as his brothers- and sisters-in-arms stand here today, on this hallowed soil, to say goodbye and ensure a soldier does not die alone," Bennett said at the funeral service.

To make sure that no other local indigent veterans are buried in the pauper's cemetery, Bennett plans to meet with Alabama National Cemetery director Quincy Whitehead, Madison County funeral home directors and members of the North Alabama Veterans Fraternal Organizations Coalition.

Because the 479-acre cemetery is new, not all funeral directors immediately think to check if the indigent deceased might have been in the military, thereby making them eligible for burial in Montevallo.

"No veteran in Alabama ever has to be buried in a pauper's grave again," Bennett said, "and that's the way it should be."

For more info, visit www.cem.va.gov/cems/nchp/alabama.asp.