

His rare talent honors the lives of the fallen

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Robert Krupinski half-dreaded the summers he spent with the drum and bugle corps called Dynamic Royalaires. But the experience with the Oradell- and West Paterson-based junior drum and bugle corps taught him discipline, responsibility and how to memorize music and perform.

On the down side, he suffered from homesickness when the corps traveled to Pennsylvania, Ohio and Long Island to be in competitions.

But the lessons learned over those lonely summers between 1975 and 1977 have served him well. Today, he is one of a few musicians who can play taps on the bugle at funerals or memorials for fallen officers or members of the military. Although Krupinski, 45, of Clifton has retired from the Bergen County Sheriff's Department, he continues to volunteer his time to play at funerals.

Bergen County Sheriff Leo McGuire says not many have Krupinski's skill on the bugle. McGuire bases his opinion on his service in the Army and 20 years in law enforcement, serving as sheriff and on the Ridgefield Park Police Department.

Krupinski joined the sheriff's department in 1994 but had aspired to be a firefighter like his father and brother. Although that never happened, it was his father, Martin, who first handed him a trumpet at age 5 and taught him to play.

"He started it all," Krupinski says about his father, who served with the Clifton department for 30 years before retiring in 1983.

Krupinski studied music in school, had private lessons and spent summers practicing with the drum and bugle corps. In 1993, he started taking state and local civil service tests in an attempt to join the Clifton Fire Department. He was placed on the firefighter list and interviewed but never got an appointment to the department. That led him to apply at the sheriff's department.

There were 65 people on the list and the department wanted to hire 20 officers. After a series of four interviews, Krupinski was selected and sent to the Public Safety Academy in Mahwah for training.

During the 19 weeks of classroom work and field training, the academy held a memorial breakfast to honor deceased officers. Krupinski was surprised that a tape recorder was used to play taps. He approached a drill sergeant and told him that he could perform the tribute live on the bugle.

After graduating from the academy, Krupinski was assigned as a corrections officer at the county jail in Hackensack. He also was named a member of the honor guard and started to play at law enforcement funerals and memorials. And although he never was able to join the ranks of the fire department, he plays taps every Memorial Day at the Engine Five firehouse in Clifton.

Seated at the kitchen table of his Valley Road home, Krupinski thumbs through the pages of scrapbooks filled with photos and mementoes of himself playing taps. He played taps at the January funeral of slain Paterson Police Officer Tyron D. Franklin and, more recently, this month, at the funeral of Bloomfield Sgt. Gerald Mastronei, who died of cancer.

Krupinski has lost count of the number of funerals he has attended, but he remembers clearly that he was in tremendous demand after 9/11. He played taps at 32 of the 37 funerals for Port Authority officers. He has pictures of all the fallen Port Authority officers on the wall of his study.

Krupinski also played at the funeral of Bear, a search-and-rescue Golden Retriever whose paws were cut searching through the rubble on 9/11. Bear died the following year of respiratory problems related to the attacks.

"People always ask how I can stay strong during a time of mourning," says Krupinski. "It's a job I need to do. It's something I can provide that others can not. The first two years were the hardest of my life at police funerals.

"Emotionally, I feel sad like everybody else. I put a lot of feeling into it when I play. I make the horn cry."

Injured responding to an inmate attack on another officer in the county jail, Krupinski was forced to retire in July 2000. Both officers were thrown down a flight of concrete steps, and Krupinski injured his left ankle and lower back.

Although he'd prefer to be back at the jail working, he expresses pride that he still represents the sheriff's department at ceremonial functions.

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