

New organization salutes high school seniors joining military after graduation

BY MATTHEW ENFINGER
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Pat Blewett was 17 years old when he enlisted to serve in the U.S. Army in 1965.

Although grateful, his send-off wasn't met with much fanfare, Blewett recalled.

"I had family and a couple friends wish me well and off I was," Blewett said.

After his service and several years later, Blewett and fellow Aiken resident Tom Matthews learned of Our Community Salutes, a national organization focused on honoring high school graduates who have enlisted to serve in the U.S. military.

The organization has spread to chapters in 18 states and Puerto Rico since starting in New Jersey in 2009.

A new local chapter, called Our Community Salutes – Aiken County, kicked off in December 2019 and is the first and only chapter in South Carolina.

Blewett and Matthews serve as co-chairmen, along with fellow board members Mike Graham, Gary Beikirch and Aiken County Public Schools Superintendent King Laurence.

"We thought it was important to recognize these young adults and give them a good send-off and let them know how much we appreciate them stepping up to

serve our country," Blewett said.

Aiken County has 26 enlistees with a few more being added in the coming weeks, Blewett said.

Each year, 1% of graduating high school students enlist in the armed forces, according to the organization's website.

Our Community Salutes – Aiken County strives to recognize area graduates under the motto, "The first to say thank you."

Recognition ceremonies are usually held by local communities each year; however, the new local organization had to cancel its first ceremony in Aiken, scheduled for May 19, due to social distancing guidelines regarding the coronavirus pandemic.

In place of the event, the ceremony's guest speaker, Medal of Honor recipient Clint Romesha, sent an autographed copy of his book, "Red Platoon," along with his challenge coin and a personal letter congratulating the new recruits.

"Seniors, you inspire me," an excerpt of Romesha's letter reads. "With this choice that you are about to make, you will demonstrate a depth of character that is both rare and precious because it is rooted in a commitment that extends far beyond your own interests to embrace something greater than yourself. I believe that each and every one of you harbors the



STAFF PHOTO BY MATTHEW ENFINGER

Our Community Salutes — Aiken County board members, from left, are Aiken County Public Schools Superintendent King Laurence, Pat Blewett, Mike Graham and Tom Briatico.

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Pat Blewett, Our Community Salutes – Aiken County

potential for greatness."

Enlistees will also receive a \$150 gift card and a letter of gratitude from the board.

Blewett hopes to continue Our Community Salutes – Aiken County indefinitely and plans to host a ceremony in 2021.

"It can't take the place of the in-person event that is more significant, I think, but this is the best we could do under the circumstances; and we didn't want the year to go by without them knowing how much we appreciate them joining the service," Blewett said.