

Crest collection remembers army units for 23 years



When soldiers arrive at Fort Pickett, the supply office is one of the first stops. Expecting the usual ritual forms and more forms, soldiers are always surprised by a collection of military crests covering the rear wall of the supply clerk's office.

While requests are being filled, soldiers, whether reservists, national guard, or regular army, walk up to the wall and examine the emblems. Always driven by the same compelling questions, they want to know: Is my unit represented here?

Winter and summer, the scene never changes. The collection continues to grow like leaves on a tree. When Betty Branum, who has been collecting crests since 1971, pins new crest on her wall boards—no soldier has ever worn his crest more proudly—you can sense why crests keep coming.

A Supply Clerk at Fort Pickett for 28 years, Betty is remembered by soldiers from all over the United States, including NATO countries. She receives each crest given her as if it were the most important crest in her collection.

"It's just amazing what they will give me," exclaimed Betty. The crests, which are issued for Class A uniforms are hard to come by and are not cheap.

While military units come and go, and army personnel change every year, Betty and her crest collection are a constant at Fort Pickett. Every soldier wants to have his unit displayed on her collection boards—which hold about 800 crests now, so many the office doesn't have enough wall to hold them all.

In addition to posting the crest, she included the name of the unit and the soldier who gave it to her. Some have sent the history of their units, which she keeps at home.

This is more than just a collection of collar pins. Each crest is a miniature shield or battle flag, a symbol that soldiers have given their lives for since soldiers have given their lives.

The crests represent the greater whole of which each soldier is a part: that mysterious bond that gives each soldier his meaning, that "mother" who holds all her sons in one embrace.

"I get accused of knocking them down and ripping them off their lapels...But I really don't do that," she added, just in case a qualifying footnote was needed.

“I have crests to collect before I retire,” she said with a laugh. “They say there are about 11,000 out there.”