

Veterans Parade continues practice of honoring troops, service



Steven Lane/Columbian files

The annual Veterans Parade at Fort Vancouver starts at 11 a.m. and typically lasts two hours.

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The booming mortar salute and Air Force flyover are relatively new, historically speaking, as a means for honoring veterans at Fort Vancouver.

But parades, like the 26th annual Veterans Parade, have been a familiar sight since the military's earliest presence in the region, said retired Army Maj. Jeff Davis, president of the Vancouver Barracks Military Association.

Back in the 1880s and early 1890s, when Medal of Honor recipient Maj. William Wallace McCammon was stationed there, military parades would have been a common sight — and often their families and other civilians would turn out to watch, Davis said.

"There would have been daily parades here," Davis said. "In the military, one of the ways you know everyone is there is to have a formation. It's a long tradition. And a parade is really just a formation on the move."

Formations and parades are used to make sure that uniforms and weapons are in good condition and that troops are ready. Having the public watch "shows good community support," Davis said.

"Everybody's boots are shined, the uniforms are perfect," he said. "In the military a parade is just as tough as an inspection."

This year, about 120 organizations, including several military units, community groups, school marching bands and a variety of scouting troops, will participate in the Veterans Parade and march around the historic grounds in a show of support for veterans.

"It's the community coming out for the veterans that have served our country," said retired Army Col. Larry Smith, a Vietnam veteran and member of the Vancouver City Council.

Smith and Dan Tarbell, who are co-chairmen of the Community Military Appreciation Committee, will serve as grand marshals. They will represent CMAC and its work helping veterans and their families, Smith said.

"(Public support for the military) has changed with the commitment to those that have served in Iraq and Afghanistan," Smith said of the focus of CMAC. "Vietnam veterans, they remember the (poor) treatment they received when they returned. They're very conscientious that we don't repeat that history and mistreat soldiers returning now."

About 2,500 people will march, and a similar number of spectators are expected to turn up to watch the event, said Cara Cantonwine, programs director of the Fort Vancouver National Trust.

The event will begin with a special ceremony at the Marshall House on Officers Row and a keynote speech by retired Air Force Col. Joe M. Jackson, who was awarded the Medal of Honor in 1968 for a rescue during the Vietnam War.

"The parade runs about two hours, and people should remember to dress warmly for the weather," Cantonwine said. "Everyone that attends will have a little American flag to wave."

The parade used to go downtown and end in Esther Short Park, but organizers changed the route two years ago so that it trails around Officers Row, Vancouver Barracks and Fort Vancouver before ending at the Pearson Air Museum.

"When it went downtown it was a bit long, especially if you have kids," said Smith, who's been involved with the parade since its inception. "With it ending at Pearson Field, it's a lot easier for them."

Even back in McCammon's day, children were a common sight during military parades. In his diary, McCammon described children at a Fourth of July march in 1894.

"The Battalion was formed at 9:30 a.m. and marched around town to the park, returned hot and dusty about noon. The children have kept things lively during the day with their firecrackers and such," the entry reads.

Another entry in McCammon's diary in 1895 describes a parade that went from Vancouver to downtown Portland and back — and included ferry rides across the Columbia River.

That can be tiring work, said Davis, who added that he far prefers watching parades to participating in them.

"The ceremonies and veterans holidays mean a lot to me, but being a participant in the parade — mostly I'm grateful I don't have to stand in formation any more," Davis said.