Volunteers plant ‘living memory’ trees at Flight 93 National Memorial in Somerset County

Michael French of the American Chestnut Foundation holds the ceremonial first tree to be planted on Saturday, April 20, 2013, at the Flight 93 National Memorial near Shanksville. The tree, an Eastern Hemlock, was grown from the seed of a tree on the Gettysburg battlefield.

By Bob Stiles

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Alan Kersten gently pushed the sapling into the open ground and remembered 40 heroes.

On a blustery Saturday, Kersten and about 150 other volunteers planted trees at the Flight 93 National Memorial in Somerset County. More than 15,000 seedlings will be planted this weekend and April 26-27 by 600 volunteers as part of a reforestation effort at the memorial.

On Sept. 11, 2001, 40 passengers and crew on United Flight 93 gave their lives and thwarted a planned terrorist attack on the nation's capital. They stopped the attack by overtaking terrorists on the plane, which crashed near Shanksville.
“Those people were so great with what they did, and they’ll never be forgotten,” said Kersten, 58, who works in the Alcoa Technical Center in Upper Burrell and planted trees for the Alcoa Foundation.

“I wanted to do something, with everything that happened that day. Our lives changed that day,” he said.

Deborah Borza of Annapolis, whose daughter, Deora Bodley, 20, was the youngest passenger on the plane, planted the first sapling of the day, an Eastern Hemlock grown from the seed of a tree on the Gettysburg battlefield.

“It’s an honor,” she said. “May it grow tall.”

The trees symbolize the past and the future, Gov. Tom Corbett said.

“The 40 heroes of Flight 93 rose up against their captors and spared the nation further harm on Sept. 11,” he said. “We are planting these trees not only in their memory, but in honor of the futures they assured for countless citizens by planting the first seeds of resistance to assure our nation’s freedom.”

He called the site “the first battlefield in the war on terrorism.”

Volunteers were expected to plant about 3,500 trees on Saturday, said Jeff Reinbold, superintendent of the National Park Service in Western Pennsylvania.

“As you plant the trees, know that you are helping us create a living memorial,” he told volunteers. Eventually, more than 150,000 trees will be planted. Last year, hundreds of volunteers planted 15,000 seedlings.

Half of the trees are conifers and half are native hardwoods. They eventually will form a windbreak to protect trees planted in the nearby memorial grove.

Hillary Hoover, 23, of Hunker, who works in information technology for Alcoa's global business organization, said she wanted to be a part of the planting as soon as she learned about it two months ago.

“I just knew it was a great cause for the Flight 93 Memorial,” she said.

She joined her friend, Jacqueline Hawkins, 23, a Duquesne University student, in planting dogwoods.

“I thought it was a great opportunity to come out and make a difference,” Hawkins said.

Volunteers worked in pairs, their bright orange and blue buckets with saplings inside spread here and there across the hillside. White clouds moved swiftly behind them as they planted the trees in rows.

Hoover and Hawkins were sixth-grade students when the attacks occurred in 2001.

“I don’t think we understood what terrorism was at that time,” Hoover said. “But it was definitely scary to know how close it came to this area.”

“I never experienced anything like that,” Kersten added. “I’ll never forget it.”

Bob Stiles is a staff writer for Trib Total Media. He can be reached at 724-836-6622 or bstiles@tribweb.com.