

*The Eagle Bryan/College Station*  
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# Bigger than ever

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For years, the annual Veterans Day parade in downtown Bryan has been a small affair, often seeming to have more participants than spectators.

But that won't be the case this weekend -- and hopefully never again -- organizers are now saying.

This time around, a team of volunteers has spent months organizing a roster of events before and after the parade that will include a fly-over of World War II-era fighter planes, a USO canteen with live music, current and vintage military vehicles and other war artifacts, a food court, a Harley-Davidson patriot guard and a blood drive.

The parade itself -- which begins at 2:30 p.m. Sunday -- will include families of area troops who died in Iraq, Bryan High's marching band and Corps of Cadets units, including one comprised solely of veterans. For the first time, bleachers for spectators will be erected at several downtown Bryan locations.

"It will probably be the biggest parade we've ever had," said Robin Silva, a Vietnam-era veteran who operates [www.honorthenames.com](http://www.honorthenames.com) -- a Brazos Valley-based Web site devoted to veterans issues.

Silva said she was disappointed to see what appeared to be waning participation from the community as she attended the parade year after year. So after last year's parade, she began coming up with ideas for events that could be scheduled before and after the parade to help attract a larger crowd of spectators.

The planning effort this year has been a grass-roots movement that seemed to explode as more and more people stepped up to volunteer, she said.

"Everything just fell into place," she said. "What happened was, every time I talked to everyone, everyone kept saying, 'Yes,' so I just kept dreaming.

"The community has absolutely opened up their arms to this. No one has said, 'No.' It's everybody coming together to remember, to honor and to celebrate."

The idea started with the re-creation of a USO canteen, which will be operating at Downtown 202 from 1 to 5 p.m. USO -- a nonprofit organization known for providing recreation and entertainment for troops and for hosting dozens of Bob Hope specials over the years -- is 66 years old this year. It's a theme Silva decided she could work with.

At the canteen will be the requisite free coffee and donuts, as well as live music to dance to. There will also be computer kiosks set to informational Web sites for veterans and an exhibit combining items from the African-American Museum, the Museum of the American GI, the Hearne POW camp, the Corps of Cadets museum and Project Hold in College Station.

Items from individuals, such as medals and personal photos of a concentration camp, will also be on display, as will historical photos from the Carnegie Library -- including a 1917 picture of a tank sitting in the middle of town.

In addition, local television station KBTX has agreed to compile footage of past Veterans Day ceremonies and the LaSalle Hotel will host a Bob Hope Theater -- featuring footage of his specials between 1964 and 1972 that Silva was able to obtain from Linda Hope, his daughter.

The USO shows will also be playing without sound at the Palace Theater, where a brass quintet from the Brazos Valley Symphony will give a patriotic concert at 3:30 p.m.

On 28th Street, there will be two National Guard Humvees equipped with weapons and a World War II-era jeep from the Museum of the GI. Recruiters and veteran-related booths will be on 26th Street, and on 27th Street, the Red Cross will hold a blood drive. Motorcyclists in the patriot guard will also park their bikes there.

Food will be available in the courtyard of the LaSalle Hotel.

Bryan Councilman Mike Southerland, a Vietnam veteran who served as chairman of this year's Rotary Club parade committee, said he expects about 700 people to participate in the parade. Now in its fifth year, the event has attracted several hundred spectators in the past, he said.

"This seemed to be a thing the community didn't have that was important," he said, explaining that it is difficult for children to relate to the sacrifices solely through speeches.

Southerland said he expects about twice the amount of spectators at this year's parade, which will have a theme of "We will never forget you." The USO canteen appears to have succeeded in generating a lot more attention for the event, he said.

Silva formed a separate planning committee of about half a dozen residents to organize the other events last spring.

"We're trying to have something for everyone," she said. "It's going to have that historical downtown little fair type ambiance to it."

The roster of events has gotten big enough that organizers have set aside a group of special-rate rooms at two area hotels. And with Brazos County being such a "military, flag-waving, pro-American" area, there's no reason the events can't continue to get bigger, she said.

"I think we need to remember, these people stepped up," Silva said. "No matter what our political views are, we have to remember our history has been built on people stepping up to enter the military."