

The Bulletin

By [Jane Koropsak](#) | May 26, 2010

## Building Arches of Honor for Fallen Firefighters and Soldiers



[Jim Vaz](#)

Most Americans vividly remember where they were and what they were doing on September 11, 2001 — 9-11. While events of that day will be a dark stain in history books forever, it was a day that sparked an unusual sense of patriotism in many Americans.

For one Lab employee, it sparked an idea on how to further honor our fallen firefighters.

Jim Vaz, an employee in the Laboratory Protection Division, remembers the sadness he felt when he was notified that some of his firefighter friends lost their lives at the World Trade Center that day. "I've been a volunteer firefighter for many years," said Vaz. "As we all know, it is never easy to say goodbye to a friend. It was especially difficult under those circumstances."

Vaz said that one day shortly after the events of 9-11, as he was having a cup of coffee and conversation with a friend at his hometown firehouse in Brookhaven Hamlet, they came up with an idea to further express their sympathy and gratitude to their fallen comrades. The idea: Raise "arches of honor" on the day of each funeral. Arches of honor are formed when ladder trucks park across from each other and a large American flag is suspended between them. "So, in the days following 9-11 we spent a lot of time in our full dress uniforms, saluting, mourning, and standing under arches of honor," said Vaz.



Raising Arches of Honor [Photo: Bob Romanowski]

But the idea didn't end there. Vaz and his firefighter friends thought they should extend this honor to soldiers — to pay tribute to them and show their families how much their supreme sacrifice is appreciated. In order to honor soldiers in the same manner fallen firefighters are being honored, Vaz made contact with the United States military. "The military has been extremely cooperative and grateful," said Vaz. "When I receive a call from the military that a Long Island soldier has died, I know that neither, snow, rain, or glaring sunshine, will keep firefighters from putting on their dress uniforms and volunteering their time to raise arches of honor. These soldiers have died for our freedom and we all want to honor them appropriately."

One of the first soldiers to have his funeral motorcade driven under multiple arches of honor at the entrance to Calverton National Cemetery was Specialist Thomas J. Wilwerth of Mastic, NY. Specialist Wilwerth was killed in action in Iraq by an improvised bomb on February 22, 2006. Although his family was devastated, his mother, Elaine Wilwerth said, "Tommy just wanted to serve his country. When 9-11 happened it made him want to go more. We're so sad he was taken from us, but proud that he died with such honor."

Vaz said, "From the moment the first soldier's motorcade drove under the arches we all knew this was the right thing to do. Volunteering our time to express our sympathy by forming arches with a large American flag flying freely in the wind to honor our fallen soldiers is the least we can do. I think it helps to show their families their loss is felt by all of us."