

## **Times Herald-Record: Prison event salutes our veterans**

### **Hailing 'a debt we can never repay'**

By Heather Yakin

HAMLET OF WALLKILL — An early Memorial Day ceremony at Wallkill Correctional Facility was dedicated to the memory of U.S. Army Sgt. Shawn Michael Farrell II of Accord.

Farrell, 24, was killed in action April 28 in Kapisa province, Afghanistan, when his unit came under fire.

Frank Sammratano, the correctional officer who heads the prison veterans' committee, said Farrell's family was appreciative of the choice. They were unable to attend Friday because of a prior commitment.

Members of the Wallkill Correctional and New Paltz VFW Post 8645 color guard and rifle teams, and the Minisink Valley High School Army JROTC, made up the color guard.

The Wallkill High School Choir sang the national anthem and led the Pledge of Allegiance.

On hand to honor the military service of war pigeons in World War I were pigeons from Leo Bozydaj of Highland, brought in on a vintage 1934 Dodge pickup in military green.

Pastor Steve Slakovitz, the Protestant chaplain for the Wallkill and Shawangunk correctional facilities, delivered the invocation.

"This is a holy and sacred moment in life, because there is no greater love in this world than when one person willingly and sacrificially gives his life to save another's life," he said. "We are called today to honor the sacrificial love, courage and bravery of all men and women who serve this great nation. We are called and privileged today to give thanks to the life of Shawn Farrell."

Wallkill prison Superintendent Tim Laffin asked that people take a moment to remember fallen military members when they celebrate this Memorial Day weekend.

"Just give these men and women a little thought, maybe a prayer, a little smile or a nod, and say thank you," Laffin said.

Commander William West of the Wallkill VFW and American Legion posts reminded the crowd that Memorial Day is meant to honor the sacrifices of those who served and died.

"We owe these men and women a debt we can never repay. God bless them, and may they rest in peace," West said. "A war that was supposedly winding down, that is now the longest war the country has been in, was brought home to Accord. A soldier, 24 years old, married 16 months, gave his life."

"Today we honor Sgt. Shawn Farrell as a hero, along with heroes across the United States," said Master Sgt. Dennis James.

Laffin and James laid a red, white and blue wreath at the base of the prison's military monument.

Three volleys of fire from rifle teams followed. Two trumpeters played taps, and a bagpiper launched into "Amazing Grace." Slakovitz finished with a benediction.

As the Wallkill High School Choir sang "America the Beautiful," Laffin and James released the birds. They soared above the crowd and off into the gray sky.