The JROTC program at Social Circle High School was set to memorialize Sept. 11, 2001, with a service project the day before the anniversary of the tragic terrorist attack.

Then the hurricane came through.

“The whole point of the memorial is to make sure we don’t forget,” Col. Bruce Chick, commander of the JROTC unit at SCHS, said. “Hurricane Irma almost made us forget.”

For the second year in a row, the JROTC program decided to create the 9/11 memorial as its annual community service project.

“It proved very popular last year and they chose almost unanimously to do the 9/11 project again for the second year in a row,” Chick said.

This time around, though, Chick said they hoped to learn from their mistake.

“Last year, it took the cadets almost 10 hours to plant all the flags,” Chick said. “So this year, we invited others to come out and help us plant the flags. We put it all over social media and the school in hopes others would come and participate in the project.”

But when Sept. 10 came around, the Sunday on which they had planned to start inserting the flags, the coming storm dangers of Tropical Storm Irma pushed them to postpone the project.

“We delayed a week,” Chick said. “We didn’t want the winds to come through and blow the flags all the way to Sanford Stadium or something.”

A week later, after a second blast of invitations on social media, Chick assembled his cadets on a bright Sunday morning and wondered if anyone else would come.

“We didn’t know if anyone would come,” Chick said. “Sept. 10 had come and gone and no one had said anything or asked us what happened. So we didn’t know if there was any interest.”
As the day dawned, though, crowds of people began to arrive and Chick’s fears of low attendance proved groundless.

“We had so many come out,” Chick said. “We had elementary school kids, we had primary school kids, we had teacher, we had parents. It was overwhelming.”

With such a large group, what had been a 10-hour labor last year took less than three hours on Sunday.

“It went smoothly,” Chick said.

The crowd ultimately planted 2,977 American flags in the front lawn before Social Circle High School — one for every victim who died on Sept. 11, 2001 — and left them there through Friday as a memorial to the tragic day 16 years ago.

“It allows us to pay tribute to shoe who died that day and to the law enforcement and first responders who saved so many that day,” Chick said.