

The Philadelphia Vietnam Veterans Memorial

HISTORY

In the late spring of 1984, encouraged by what was taking place throughout the country as a result of the Washington Success, a small group of Vietnam veterans in Philadelphia decided to begin a local campaign to build a memorial honoring those from the city who had lost their lives in Vietnam. Others had earlier suggested the placement of a plaque in City Hall, a proposal quickly dismissed by the group which felt strongly that the sacrifices made in Vietnam by the more than six hundred young men of the city who had been killed deserved something more fitting than a bronze tablet tucked away in a dim corridor. It was time to begin planning for something on a much larger scale.

After scouring the city, the Site Selection Committee, led by its Chairman, Corky Hall, a US Air Force veteran of Vietnam, soon settled on what was considered an ideal location at Front and Spruce streets in the burgeoning Penn's Landing area. The site was a small park on an overpass straddling, appropriately, Vietnam Veterans Memorial Highway (Interstate 95). Obtaining the site, however, would prove to be a sometimes daunting, often frustrating endeavor.

To avoid the possibility of a similar controversy erupting over the design of the Philadelphia Vietnam Veterans Memorial, as had occurred with the Washington Wall, the directors and Design Selection Committee Chairman Jack Schimpf, a highly decorated US Army Vietnam Veteran, agreed the seven-member jury panel chosen to select the memorial's design must include a majority of Vietnam combat veterans. The directors then chose Schimpf, retired US Army Sergeant Major John Keogh and US Marine Corps veterans Lamar Golden and Richard Gresko to serve as the jurors alongside three noted architects - Paul Spreiregen, Edna Andrade, and Lee G. Copeland, selected by H. Mather Lippincott Jr. whom the Memorial Fund had commissioned to oversee the design competition. The competition, which was limited to submissions from those residing within a fifty-mile radius of Philadelphia, ran from August through October, 1985. A total of 102 entries were received, and on November 21, the seven jurors deliberated for nearly twelve hours before choosing the design submitted by Perry M. Morgan, a 27 year-old landscape architect with Sullivan Associates of Philadelphia.

Long before the site was selected and the design chosen, the Memorial fund began raising money, primarily through the sale of commemorative souvenirs - t-shirts, hats, coffee mugs and other similar items. The souvenirs were emblazoned with the campaign's boldly distinctive logo - an American eagle clutching dog tags in its beak, superimposed on the Liberty Bell. Each element in the logo was designed to be symbolic. The American eagle denoted the United States, the dog tags representing the men killed in action, and the Liberty Bell signified the City of Philadelphia. Taking the lead, the area's veterans, individually and as groups, began organizing fund raisers including celebrity golf and softball tournaments, beef 'n beer nights, picnics and other events. Other groups and organizations soon were involved. Ultimately, the campaign raised nearly \$1.2 million for the construction, dedication and maintenance of the Memorial as Delaware Valley citizens from all backgrounds, neighborhoods and walks of life rallied to the cause.

The long Dedication Weekend, October 22-26, 1987 began with a City Proclamation, and included a banquet, candlelight march, "Veterans Awareness Day," a brunch for Gold Star Parents, and an enormous parade which was covered live by TV.

It was a weekend which not only the veterans, but the entire City of Philadelphia would not soon forget. Any history of the Memorial Fund Project would be incomplete without noting the Fund's most successful campaign - Operation Brotherly Love and The Last Patrol. Long time Memorial Fund volunteer, US Air Force Vietnam veteran Rick Boettinger, conceived the idea in the fall of 1986. His Plan: a visit to the national Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington to trace the names of the Philadelphians listed on the wall, followed by a march back to Philadelphia with the tracings. The theme would be Operation Brotherly Love, "the march to bring our brothers home." Carrying the tracings would be ten Vietnam veterans - the "Last Patrol". The ten veterans comprising the Last Patrol, eight of which were from the Delaware Valley, began the march on Sunday, May 10, 1987 (Mothers Day) after collecting the tracings made by several hundred family members, and friends and other volunteers who had made the trip to Washington. The march would take six days, at an average of twenty-four miles per day, to cover the approximately 140 miles from Washington to Philadelphia.

