

NEWS posted July 3, 2013, updated July 7, 2013

Joint American/Vietnamese war memorial seeks spot in Veterans Park



A scale replica of the planned Joint American/Vietnamese War Memorial. The memorial will feature a bronze sculpture of an American soldier and nurse helping a wounded Vietnamese soldier, by artist Jason LeTran. Image courtesy of Thai Phan.

For many, the Vietnam War is a wound that will not heal.

Although it's been nearly 40 years since South Vietnam fell to communist North Vietnamese forces, many veterans and their families continue to feel the effects of the conflict.

For the more than 2.7 million American soldiers, Marines, airmen and sailors who fought in the war, the healing process has been aided by the recognition granted by such memorials as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial or The Wall, which was opened in Washington D.C. in 1982.

For the more than 700,000 South Vietnamese – many of them now American citizens – who fought alongside Americans in the war, however, recognition of their sacrifice has been largely ignored.

"Our war dead have no place of honor in Vietnam," said Lan Phan Jones, co-chair of the Joint American/Vietnamese War Memorial Alliance. "Cemeteries of South Vietnamese soldiers are destroyed or abandoned. There is nowhere to place a flower or say a prayer for their sacrifice."

Jones, along with alliance co-chair and Vietnam War veteran Tom Stoddard, are hoping that will change soon with a proposal to erect a joint memorial to veterans of the war at Auburn's Veterans Memorial Park.

"I started working on this project to honor my father, Khanh Van Phan, and all the soldiers like him who fought for freedom and democracy in Vietnam," Jones said.

A father and family torn

According to Jones, her father was a lifelong soldier originally from North Vietnam who didn't support the communist takeover and moved his family to South Vietnam to support the struggle for a democratic republic.

After the war, she said, her father was sent to a re-education camp, where for five years he was forced to do hard labor with little food, no medicine, all while undergoing communist indoctrination.

"Life was very hard under communist rule, and we waited many years to escape," she said. "Finally, in 1990 my father, mother, grandmother, one brother, one sister and I were allowed to emigrate to the U.S."

Soon after the death of her father in 1999, Jones began working to erect a memorial to honor both American and Vietnamese soldiers who fought and died together.

"We hope to restore pride and honor to American and South Vietnamese Vietnam War veterans and their families," she said. "It is very important that this is a 'joint' memorial. As South Vietnamese refugees, we want to say thank you to the American soldiers who came to Vietnam to support our struggle for freedom and democracy. Though we lost in South Vietnam, it was worth fighting for."

After attempts to place a memorial in Olympia failed, the alliance contacted Auburn about six months ago, Mayor Pete Lewis said.

"Because we have the large Veterans Day Parade, they asked if we might be willing to look at putting a joint Vietnamese and American war monument in the park," Lewis said. "They were wondering if this would be a good place for it."

With Auburn's rich tradition of honoring war veterans – coupled with the fact that King County has the sixth-largest concentration of Vietnamese Americans in the country (38,726 or 2 percent of the population, according to the 2010 census) – the location seemed appropriate.

"We sent it to the parks department who started working on designs and locations and figuring out where it should be," Lewis said. "We're going to choose where it might go. We're going to make sure it's not stacked up against the existing monument."

Initial plans call for a pavilion, with American and South Vietnamese flags and a bronze statue of an American soldier, assisted by a female nurse, helping a wounded South Vietnamese soldier, Stoddard said. The scale and size of the monument has yet to be determined.

"We talked about and stressed back and forth that we want to put something in more than just a bronze statue," Stoddard said. "We want to achieve something more. The planned purpose is to unite the community and bring about more understanding about what the veterans went through. If it's managed well, it will have something for everybody and serve everybody."

Memorial with a message

The emphasis of the memorial will be education and healing, Jones added.

"We want a place that Americans and Vietnamese can come to show respect for those who fought and those who died for what we believe in," she said. "We Vietnamese refugees are proud of our veterans. We've found that the partnership of American and South Vietnamese veterans can be a powerful healing force. Working together can restore honor and pride to veterans that have felt abandoned. American veterans are heroes to the Vietnamese refugee community. South Vietnamese understand what we were fighting for: freedoms and human rights Americans take for granted because South Vietnamese lost everything with the Communist takeover in 1975, understanding the South Vietnamese experience and seeing through our eyes can transform bitter emotions and heal old wounds of American veterans."

Previously, the idea of the monument being erected in Auburn brought out opposition from local veterans, including American Legion Auburn Post 78 past commander and current chaplain Roger Olson, who was concerned that the size and height of the monument was out of scale with the existing veterans memorial. Olson also said the post was "totally against" the permanent display of the South Vietnamese flag, an emblem of the country that went out of existence in 1975.

The City Council will decide at its July 15 regular meeting whether to approve and move ahead with plans for the monument.

Jones hopes the vote will come out in their favor because time is running out for many of the surviving veterans.

"We hope this monument can restore pride to American veterans and make them feel better about their sacrifices while they are still alive," she said. "They are growing older, and soon it will be too late. We want our children to be proud of their parents, family members, or ancestors."

Time is running out to honor Vietnam War veterans while they are still alive. It is time to lay aside our differences of race, culture, and politics. Constructing the memorial here in Auburn says with one voice, 'thank you,' to all who fought for freedom and democracy in Vietnam. Your sacrifices are appreciated and will not be forgotten."

SHAWN SKAGER, *Auburn Reporter Sports Reporter*
sskager@auburn-reporter.com or (253) 833-0218, ext. 5054