

VETERANS

Arlington Vietnam helicopter monument unveiled

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Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — If there was any doubt left about the significance of the new monument at Arlington National Cemetery honoring Vietnam War helicopter pilots and crewmembers, it was quashed Wednesday by the number of people who traveled from across the country to attend its dedication.

Arlington officials estimated 3,000 veterans and military family members were there to witness the unveiling of the Vietnam Helicopter Pilot and Crewmember Monument — a moment that was the result of a four-year fight initiated by a group of Vietnam veterans.

"This monument was a long time coming," said Frank Lafferty, 75.

Lafferty, an Army helicopter crew chief in Vietnam, traveled from Florida for the ceremony, which quickly developed into a reunion. Lafferty spotted several friends he served with in the 1st Cavalry Division.

"It's a brotherhood," he said. "These are the same guys we flew in combat with. It's a bond that's not broken easily."

Veterans wearing hats, vests and jackets emblazoned with their military units filled the sun-drenched Arlington Memorial Amphitheater on Wednesday afternoon for an hourlong service. Afterward, with bagpipes playing, the crowd walked in a slow procession along Memorial Drive to get a glimpse of the monument for the first time.

The audience created a massive semicircle around the granite monument, which stands 2½-feet by 2½-feet. More of the crowd climbed a nearby hill to look down on the scene and snap photos with their phones.

As a bugler finished playing taps, the group looked in unison to the east, toward the distant sound of rotor blades. They applauded when four UH-1 helicopters, nicknamed "Hueys," flew overhead.

The ceremony ended with a reception near the cemetery entrance, where a combat UH-1 helicopter was on display. Paul Benoit's daughter took his photo with the helicopter, and emotion started to overtake him as he stood in front of it. Benoit, 72, drove to the ceremony from South Carolina.

"The bond with these guys — that's the unwritten stuff that people don't understand," said Benoit, a former Army pilot in the 1st Cavalry Division. "This monument is very important to us. I was happy to see it was finally coming to fruition."

The 'Helicopter War'

The face of the monument reads, "In honored memory of the helicopter pilots and crewmembers who gave the full measure of devotion to their nation in the Vietnam War," with the dates 1961-1975.



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According to the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association — the group that lobbied for the monument — 11,827 helicopters operated in Vietnam and 5,086 of them were destroyed. Nearly 5,000 pilots and crewmembers were killed.

Soldier David Kink, 19, was in Vietnam only one month before he died in a helicopter crash in 1969. His sister, Julie, was 8 years old at the time.

"When I was growing up, the sound of a helicopter was the sound of sadness," Julie Kink told the crowd gathered at the amphitheater Wednesday. "My mother would put her hand over her heart and lower her head. Without a word, I knew she was grieving for the son she lost to the skies over Vietnam."

"I know now what that sound meant to the men who were fighting the war — it was the sound of hope," Kink continued. "It meant someone was coming to push back the bad guys, to bring supplies and ammo, to rescue their wounded and eventually to carry them out of hell."

In the months leading up to the ceremony, Kink contacted hundreds of Gold Star families letting them know of the new monument. Some of them showed up Wednesday, a few wearing signs with the names and photos of their loved ones. Those few walked through the crowds, hoping someone would recognize the name or face and stop to share some memories.

Vietnam is often referred to as the "Helicopter War." Pilots and crewmembers were continuously performing missions, transporting infantry and artillery units, resupplying troops, providing aerial support and evacuating the injured.

"The Huey was our workhorse," said Bob Baden, 78, an Army helicopter pilot in Vietnam who traveled from Detroit for the ceremony.

Chau Tran, 78, was one of the few South Vietnamese soldiers who attended Wednesday's ceremony. Tran, who now lives in Virginia, was trained as a helicopter pilot in Dothan, Ala., in 1964.

"I hope to see an old friend or something," Tran said of why he attended. "I'm almost 79 years old right now."

Arthur Fantroy, another Army helicopter pilot, said he impulsively decided to travel from Ohio



PHOTOS BY MEREDITH TIBBETTS/Stars and Stripes

Two men salute the Vietnam Helicopter Pilot and Crewmember Memorial at Arlington National Cemetery.



Vietnam veteran James Baber, center, is greeted by retired Maj. Gen. Jim Jackson, director of the Vietnam War Commemoration, after the dedication of the Vietnam Helicopter Pilot and Crewmember Memorial.



The Vietnam Helicopter Pilot and Crewmember Memorial was dedicated at Arlington National Cemetery on Wednesday.

for the ceremony. He plans to return to the monument someday with his family.

"It's too bad that now everybody is starting to die out and didn't get to see it," said Fantroy, 68. "At least I did."

Four-year fight

The Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association started campaigning for the monument in early 2014. By 2015, it appeared the effort was doomed.

That year, the group pleaded its case to Arlington's advisory committee and former Army Secretary John McHugh. They were rebuffed. McHugh said the monument would take up some of the precious remaining space in the cemetery, which he argued should be prioritized for burials.

In the fall of 2016, the group of veterans took their fight to Capitol Hill. In September of that year, they went before a House Armed Services subcommittee — initiating the arduous process of having Congress order the Army to install the monument.

"I think we have an uphill battle," Bob Hesselbein, chairman of the group's legacy committee, said after the September 2016 hearing. "We're fighting to get just a small memorial, and it's been a struggle."

That struggle paid off in April last year, when the pilots association struck a deal with Karen Durham-Aguilera, executive director of the Army National Military Cemeteries.

The deal cleared the way for the small monument located just off Memorial Drive in section 35 of the cemetery, near the Tomb of the Unknowns.

Rep. Mark Amodei, R-Nev., was one of the lawmakers who introduced legislation to establish the monument. He spoke at Wednesday's ceremony.

"It's hard to get a memorial in this place, and it should be," Amodei said. "But I can't think of a group more deserving."

Marshall Eubanks was part of a group of 12 veterans and eight spouses who traveled to Arlington from Huntsville, Ala. They wore matching pale-yellow polos

with the logo of their chapter of the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association and gathered in the shade during the ceremony reception, drinking beer, laughing and swapping stories.

Eubanks repeated what Frank Lafferty and many other veterans said Wednesday — that the monument was "a long time coming."

"It was tough to get this approved," he said. "This is our monument. We had a very tough job in a very tough war, in an unpopular war."

As part of the deal struck with the Army, the pilots association was responsible for funding the monument.

"In his last letter home, my brother wrote, 'You're never alone when you're on a mission,'" Kink told the audience Wednesday. "This monument was conceived, funded and placed — not by the government — but by the men who flew beside our loved ones and thought of them as brothers. I'm proud to say my brother was one of you."

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