

2 September

Dear Bob, Jack, Jan, et al,

Art Mosley called me last night as the "Action Officer" on my editorial piece. He proposed five changes (deletion of reference to compromises made "behind closed doors"; putting the flag "near" rather than "at" the intersection of the walls; deletion of "poised for battle" from statue description; deletion of back wall "becoming only" a backdrop; and deletion of negative reference ~~to~~ to "those who didn't serve"). Upon reflection, I believe his suggestions are reasonable and even improve the palatability of my piece. Accordingly, I have made them and enclose a copy F. G. I. I intend to submit this to a newspaper or two, unless I hear further objection/suggestion from V. V. M. C. - let me hear, we're not doing things in the dark anymore.

Best -



COMING OUT OF THE SHADOWS OF VIETNAM

by
Tom Carhart

Several years ago, Congress authorized the construction of a Memorial on the Mall in Washington "in honor and recognition of the men and women of the Armed Forces of the United States who served in the Vietnam war". Thereafter, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (the private organization sponsoring the Memorial) held an open design competition. The winner was a V-shaped five hundred foot long black granite wall sunk ten feet below the surface of the Mall into an excavated area, on which would be listed the names of those who had died in Vietnam. Nothing more. No inscription. No flag. While some members of the artistic community praised this design as a thing of beauty, many of us Vietnam veterans felt it was nothing but a shameful black ditch. The jury that selected this design was made up of eight artists, none of whom were Vietnam veterans. Their choice of a black underground wall may be appropriate to their personal memories of the political war they necessarily lived through in this country, but what does it say about our faithful service in Vietnam?

Nine years ago, U.S. Armed Forces left South Vietnam and Cambodia, and it has been seven years since those countries fell to the Communist onslaught. Over the ensuing period, America has staggered through shadows of guilt and shame, doing penance for our supposed sins as latter-day colonialists. But we must realize that, from the time of the Communist triumphs in Southeast Asia, some thirty percent of the population of Cambodia and fifteen percent of the population of South Vietnam have been slaughtered, sent off to "reeducation camps" never to be heard of again, or cast ruthlessly into the sea. Another half million South Vietnamese prisoners are now being sent to work as slave laborers in Siberia, this to repay part of the enormous war debt owed by the North Vietnamese to the Soviet Union. There is your "bloodbath" - and yet our self-inflicted pain continues.

As you read this, international Communist forces are gearing up in Central America. Under Somoza, Nicaragua had seven thousand men under arms; their present Marxist regime has over eighty thousand, amply supported by the Soviet Union via Cuba. And the pipeline into El Salvador is running fulltime.

El Salvador. I lived in Los Angeles for three years during the seventies, and I was then geographically closer to El Salvador than I was to Washington, D.C. And yet the Left in this country continues to scourge us with "no more Vietnams!". Why is that symbolism so ugly? Are we ashamed of the principles we fought to protect in Vietnam?

Nowhere are the negative feelings some Americans still have about our Vietnam experience more bluntly apparent than in the design chosen for this Memorial; it generated a storm of controversy among Vietnam veterans and others that threatened to destroy even the possibility of any Memorial. The major concern we felt was that the design chosen for this Memorial was supposed to honor Vietnam veterans, but instead seemed to be making some sort of abject apology for us to the world - and it was being made by a jury that included none of our number. The legs of the proposed wall would be directed toward, and form a triangle on the Mall with, the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial. These others are well known white marble edifices rising in splendor to honor great American heroes, while the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial would be their direct opposite: black, not white; going down, not up. To future

generations, what would that say about America's feelings for her Vietnam veterans? A number of us were outraged, and we got our message into the media, generating considerable support across the country for our opposition to this design. Several lengthy compromise meetings were then held, and while they provided the opportunity for a lot of hot emotion and frustration to be expressed among Vietnam veterans, their content will remain behind closed doors. The outcome was that V.V.M.F. agreed to improve the design with the addition of a strongly worded inscription, an American flag on a fifty foot pole at the point of the V, and a statue of three infantrymen, poised for battle, within the V.

That is the compromise. While I still object personally to the black underground aspects, we Vietnam veterans on both sides of the issue have met and resolved our differences, and now we have once again closed ranks as brothers. And the statue that will be the centerpiece will strike this nation like a thunderbolt.

Before I saw the first drawings of the proposed statue, a man who had just seen them told me on the phone, breathlessly, that this statue will be more moving than the Marine Corps "Iwo Jima" Memorial at the edge of Arlington Cemetery. I didn't really believe that at first, but having since seen the model by sculptor Frederic Hart (being made public today), I have to agree. The main difference is that Iwo Jima is a cluster of Marines planting the flag, but their faces are all hidden by helmets, and one gets the impression of a machine more than of men. But our statue is of three soldiers standing together, one black, two white, but all cast in bronze that will soon be the color of the fatigues we wore. One wears a wide-brimmed "boonie hat", the other two are bare-headed. All are festooned with the weapons that defined our role. And, most important, they all wear the smooth, innocent young faces of the nineteen year old American soldiers who, in the tradition of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, offered their lives for their country in Vietnam. They are all staring at the flag, so that the lines of tension in the Memorial run from them to Old Glory and back. The black wall will become only a backdrop to this powerful statement of what we were then, what we will always remain.

We all agreed that it is important for the statue to be of armed infantrymen bonded in the brotherhood we earned under fire, for it will graphically convey to every visitor some measure of the courage and self-sacrifice implicit in all American military service in Vietnam, and it will cast us in an image of the highest patriotic honor: it has always taken young men bearing arms to protect the freedoms we cherish and even take for granted. We are tired of the guilt trip foisted on us by those who didn't serve. It is time for America to recover the courage of her convictions, to come out of the shadows of Vietnam and reassume her rightful place as the true beacon of liberty in the world today. We Vietnam veterans will lead the way. Follow us.

Tom Carhart is a lawyer now working for the Department of Defense in Washington, D.C. He earned two Purple Hearts as an Infantry Platoon Leader with the 101st Airborne Division in Vietnam.

Bob - somewhat of a dilemma here - I don't want to capitulate all fights, but if I ignore the controversy, this just becomes hard promotionism - I'm trying to re-touch the spark that caught people's eye, but slow we is together