

Illinois Vietnam Veterans Memorial



History and Annual Vigil

The Illinois Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Springfield's Oak Ridge Cemetery honors all those who served during the Vietnam War, and especially the 2,997 Illinois servicemen who died or are still missing. The Memorial was dedicated on May 7, 1988.

Illinois' monument to the Vietnam veterans was inspired by the National Vietnam memorial in Washington D.C. Attending the November 11, 1982 dedication were two Illinois Vietnam War veterans, Richard Stahl and Michael K. Ferguson. The two believed that an Illinois memorial honoring the state's Vietnam War casualties should be constructed. After Richard Stahl's untimely death in 1984, Mike Ferguson became chairman of the Illinois Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund Committee, and the drive to build the Memorial was underway.

The Illinois Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund Committee set about raising the \$1.25 million needed to construct the Memorial. With a goal of raising the money from private rather than government sources, the committee sponsored its first fund-raiser on July 4, 1984.

Later in the year, a statewide competition was held for the Memorial's design. With the assistance of an architect, an art professor, and a monument specialist, a committee of forty-four veterans and their families selected the design of twenty-year-old Jerome Lager of Breese, Illinois, from among the ninety-two submitted. The project architect was Vietnam veteran Gary Likins of the firm Bradley, Likins, Dillow and Drayton of Decatur, Illinois.

Support for the monument poured in once the design was chosen. The location of the Memorial was settled in March 1986, when the Oak Ridge Cemetery and the City of Springfield donated 1.93 acres of the cemetery for the Memorial site. Groundbreaking ceremonies were held November 9, 1986.

A year later, on November 10, 1987, Governor Thompson announced that the Memorial would be deeded to the State of Illinois and that administration of the site as a permanent state memorial would be assigned to the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency.

The circular plan of the Memorial - there is no front, back, or sides - is symbolic of the unity of all fighting men and women. Visitors can enter the interior courtyard from any direction, just as Illinois servicemen came from all parts of the state. The Memorial incorporates five black granite walls upon which are inscribed the 2,995 names of those who died or are still missing. The names originally etched on the Memorial are listed alphabetically. Names added later are listed at the bottom of the panel upon which they would have originally appeared. Servicemen killed in action are indicated with hollow circles before their names; those still missing have circles with smooth surfaces, awaiting a final determination of their fate. The fates of these sixty-four men remain unknown.

The five walls form interior courtyards, one for each of the five branches of service. Each branch is designated by its insignia, which is etched on the fifteen-foot-high gray granite walls. Also inscribed on the walls are the names of those listed as missing-in-action or as prisoners of war, as well as the names of the most highly decorated veterans in each branch of service at the time of dedication. An eternal flame burns atop the Memorial where the gray granite walls converge. The inscription on the outer walls reads:

***TO THOSE WHO DIED HONOR AND ETERNAL REST,
TO THOSE STILL IN BONDAGE REMEMBRANCE AND HOPE, AND TO THOSE WHO
RETURNED GRATITUDE AND PEACE.***

The Memorial is constructed of 250 pieces of granite that together weigh more 300,000 pounds. Some of the granite came from the hills of Vermont, the remainder from the valleys of India. Delicate craftsmanship was required in the Memorial construction. After the stone was polished, a clear rubber stencil of the inscription was placed on the stone then sandblasted, engraving the letters.

Thousands of Illinois veterans and their friends and families attended ceremonies May 6-8, 1988, dedicating the Illinois Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The Memorial was formally dedicated on May 7, 1988, with the lighting of the eternal flame.

Original Memorial Officers:

Chairman: Michael K. Ferguson

Vice Chair: Perry Murry

Treasurer: James Mathes

Secretary: Ralph Walker

=====

Lawyer: Edward W. Huntley

Accountant: Gerald W. Gardner

=====

Illinois Annual Vietnam Veterans Vigil

Once the Memorial was dedicated, a group of Vietnam Veterans decided that, once a year a 24-hour Vigil should take place, to Honor those who died and those still unaccounted for. Each year on the Saturday following the first Friday in May this task still takes place, with a Vigil starting at noon on Saturday and lasting through noon on Sunday. Honor Guards from throughout Illinois circle the Memorial, honoring Illinois' losses in the Vietnam War and showing our highest respect to their families. Everyone is invited to become part of this effort.

Your attendance is welcome: 11a.m. and 6 p.m. on Saturday and 11 a.m. on Sunday

General Information: Jim Mathes 217-793-9394

Honor Guard Duty: Bob Mathias 217-259-1545

FaceBook: Search "Vietnam Veterans Annual Vigil"