

Memorial

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don't think it's ever done maliciously," Kriken says. "I think people just want to take something with them — something they can identify with."

And like a mother lovingly wiping her child's nose, he sometimes grabs the corner end of this shirt and polishes a helmet, a gun or the cheek of a soldier. The majority of the reliefs, he says, were taken from Time Life photos. A few, however, were based on conversations with commission members — almost all in-country Vietnam veterans.

Leo Thorsness, for example, was commission vice-chair — he was also a POW — held for six years after his plane was shot down. "I really had no idea where to start on the POW relief," he says. "Leo really gave me the direction I needed — down to the sandals and the pajamas, even the photo floating directly behind the figure is based on his description of how Hanoi Hilton looked."

Various bits and pieces of the commission can be found — like treasure — throughout the memorial. B.T. Collins' hat, Linda McClenahan's fatigues and other valuable keepsakes, all forever immortalized in shiny bronze.

Standing in the center of the memorial, Kriken says, "I was meant to do this — this was my purpose."

Kriken's purpose, however, almost never was. "The commission originally went with another sculptor but it fell through," he explains. "So when I was approached, I jumped at the opportunity."

Kriken quickly learned that the magnitude of the actual design, combined with its large size, did not lend itself well to the original concept.

"In the beginning, the design called for several small reliefs throughout the memorial — the only three-dimensional figure planned was the sitting soldier," Kriken explains. "But when the walls came up, I realized the concept would not work."

He smiles, his blue eyes again lighting up. "I immediately thought to myself, 'What an opportunity to bring the memorial to life.'"

His new concept was a hard one to sell — especially with B.T. "I don't think he realized what I wanted to do — and the additional time and money it would take," he says, adding with a chuckle, "I'll never forget B.T. blasted me — basically blaming me for the memorial's incompletion.

It was so much more complicated than that."

After convincing B.T. to come to his foundry and showing the life-like figures he planned to bring to life, he says, "B.T. finally got it." From that point forward, B.T. became his best friend.

But, money was tight and fundraising was tough. "The money just wasn't there, but we all knew the end result was going to be a powerful and deserving tribute to our Vietnam veterans — both living and dead."

Today, it's hard to imagine why fundraising was such a difficult endeavor. Kriken's contribution ensures visitors will not only grasp the magnitude of the thousands upon thousands of names on the wall, but take away something that makes these names very real — the pride, the pain, the expressions of will and determination, and the faces of friendship.

"This type of subject matter can be difficult for people to grasp," he explains. "It's not easy for people — it forces them to deal with the issue of war—but think this one works in the sense that it makes people reflect."

Kriken hopes the memorial will continue to heighten society's consciousness and make them realize the magnitude of sacrifice — and the consequences that often come with freedoms.

"When I began working on this memorial, I became really aware of my responsibility — my purpose — of how important this would be to so many people on so many different levels," he says. "When I look at the memorial today, 20 years later, it's still as overwhelming as ever — I'm very lucky and proud to have been a part of this."

Like Kriken's hands, the memorial could also be viewed as a dichotomy. In one sense, it represents death — 5,822 deaths — their names forever etched in granite and reminding visitors of the sacrifice of freedom. It also celebrates the living, bringing to life the stories of young soldiers who fought not for war — but for each other.

"A memorial should allow everyone to take something with them — if this memorial can do any healing, to bring closure and completion — then you've done your job," he quietly says. "When people find out I was involved they thank me — but it's these guys," he says pointing to the names on the 800-pound granite panels. "It's these guys we owe our gratitude to."



Photo by Ginny Craven

One of three sculptures that were included with the Moving Wall at the Lake County Fairgrounds in Lakeport.

Voices From the Other Side

..."The figure is based on a friend of the artist who served in Vietnam. He also helped Mr. Kriken with the Vietnam Memorial in Sacramento. The figure stands, eyes slightly to his right, looking as if he were caught between two worlds, He wears the helmet of a knight and the uniform of a soldier. He is a knight in shining armor, a fallen warrior, and much more. He has a missing leg, a missing arm and one angel wing upon his right shoulder. I felt a presence trapped between two worlds, he has fulfilled his knightly duties, defender and protector of others, but has been left in pieces, not a whole man, and not able to be a complete angel either — kind of an undeserved purgatory. Many of us in life are what I would call the walking wounded. Whether our scars are visible on the surface or reside deep inside our souls, none of us escape this life unscathed. This figure, looking strong and noble — deserves an honorable place in the cosmos."...

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