Bill Gilbert
Other
Heroes —Without a
Washington Memorial

More than 50,000 Americans were killed, about the same as in Vietnam, according to the World Book Encyclopedia. Eighty thousand men a month were being drafted at one point. President Truman declared a state of national emergency. People were calling it "World War Two and a Half."

Today it could more appropriately be called "America's forgotten war." It was the Korean War, which exploded onto the world's front pages 35 years ago, but today is often overlooked by the public and overshadowed by the wars on either side of it in the history books—World War II and Vietnam.

Some people have taken to calling it the "Korean Conflict," President Truman insisted it was only "a police action." But it was a war, all right, and calling it something else couldn't change that. If you needed confirmation, all you had to do was ask the families of those 50,000 dead Americans, or of the 15,000 American casualties and prisoners of war and people missing in action.

If you weren't convinced it was really a shooting war going on over there, you could ask the helicopter pilot from a M*A*S*H unit who told me, when he made it back to the States: "If that's a police action, then it's a tough goddam beat and we need a few more cops."

In the midst of the justified attention given this year to the 40th anniversary of the end of World War II and the 10th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam war, American victims of the Korean War also deserve our attention—and a memorial in this city. Yet phone calls to places such as the Korean Embassy, the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the National Park Service all bring the same response: "either there is no Washington memorial to these dead American fighting men or, if there is, no one around here seems to know about it."

This was a war that few questioned then, and few remember now. The humor of the M*A*S*H series, which most of us enjoy thoroughly, nevertheless does an unintentional disservice at times to the veterans and the victims of that war by creating a false picture for the young, and dulling the memories of those who might otherwise remember but don't.

Close to Home

If you are old enough to remember when Harry Truman, while still president, was boose at the opening baseball game in Washington in 1951, and when Douglas MacArthur told Congress that "old soldiers never die" and when Al Jolson died of a heart attack in a San Francisco hotel room right after entertaining the troops in Korea in the war's first frightening months, you'll remember other names: The 38th Parallel, Old Baldy, Inchon. They all had one thing in common: American fighting men died there.

M*A*S*H units were introduced as a new way to reduce battlefield deaths dramatically by giving emergency treatment—"meatball surgery"—before casualties were evacuated for further treatment. It worked. Jet fighters, after their debut in the closing days of World War II only five years earlier, took over the skies above Korea—one flown by baseball’s Ted Williams, Captain, U.S. Marine Corps, who was recalled from the reserves after also serving in World War II. It happened to thousands of others who, for the second time in five years, were called to active duty to fight in a real war thousands of miles from home.

Others were drafted or enlisted, including those of us who were going to college only part-time while working full-time. A full-time college career had more value than ever—you were deferred from the draft. Only we part-timers went from the campus ranks, and we did it without protest.

Some of us, especially those of us who enlisted and were lucky enough to avoid Korea itself, were gone for four years. Like the Vietnam veterans who came after us, we went away to war amid much acclaim and came home later with no fanfare.

The concern here, however, is not for those of us who came home but for those who didn't. That war, fought on mountain terrain more rugged than any encountered in World War II, in temperatures 50 degrees below zero, lasted three years and one month—almost as long as America's participation in World War II.

Last year, this country corrected a serious oversight by building a memorial here to the American dead of the Vietnam War. Nine years after the war's end, this memorial in our town was made possible by a special kind of effort and a special kind of organization. Next year, another special undertaking will finish restoring the splendor of the Statue of Liberty.

Maybe the same sense of awareness and the same kind of organized approach can be brought together in still another special campaign. If so, there may yet be a memorial in this capital city to honor the American dead of the Korean War—more than 30 years after the final one in their number fell, while giving his last full measure of devotion.

The writer, a former reporter for The Post, is president of a local consulting firm.