Financing a Korean memorial

By Ernest B. Furguson
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Washington — Conservative fund-raisers are getting the jump on lawmakers by soliciting money for a Korean War memorial here even before Congress has approved the project.

To avoid another controversy like that over the somber Vietnam War memorial unveiled last year, the committee involved emphasizes that it wants a "traditional, patriotic and compelling" monument in the spirit of the Marines' famous Iwo Jima statue near Arlington Cemetery.

Myron McKee, executive director of the campaign, said Alabama's Senator Jeremiah Denton, a former admiral who became a hero as a prisoner of the North Vietnamese, will chair the design jury and be in position to cast a deciding vote in case of deadlock.

The authorizing resolutions were sponsored this year by Senator Rudy Boschwitz (R. Minn.) and Representative Charles Rose (D. N.C.), and now have a long list of co-sponsors aiming at final passage this fall. Official sponsorship would provide a federal fund to be selected by Interior Secretary James Watt and assure its permanent maintenance.

But Mr. McKee said that if Congress should not approve, the committee would go ahead with its campaign and build a memorial anyhow. Funds are being held in an escrow account, he said.

Using the names of some well-known and other lesser-known figures, mass mailings have begun with a goal of $5 million, an estimated $5.45 million of it earmarked for actual construction of the memorial. Another $700,000 is tagged for fund-raising and public relations, and the remaining $350,000 for office, administrative and travel costs.

The fund-raising firm, run by Bruce Eberle, previously has done campaigns for charity drives as well as for right-wing Senator Jesse Helms, the National Club and such Republican candidates as California's former Representative Barry Goldwater, Jr., and Florida's Senator Paula Hawkins.

Mr. Eberle said he was using about 150 different mailing lists, including magazine subscribers and contributors to various causes. The firm has written 23 different mailing "packages," and 10 to 14 of them already are in the mail. Returns so far were called "very encouraging."

Mr. McKee said the committee was founded in 1981 by Timothy Hallinan, who was with the U.S. Agency for International Development in Korea and has been a professor at the University of Maryland and the universities of Kyoto and Tokyo in Japan. He is now listed as president of an international business firm called First Western.

The committee itself has no payroll, and is manned entirely by volunteers, Mr. McKee stated. He is a Minnesota Republican who has real estate and consulting businesses in that state and in the capital. Asked whether this was a distinctly conservative campaign, Mr. McKee said "I am a cheap Republican who was with the Marines'." He is now listed as president of an international business firm called First Western.

The committee has invited to support the committee, which so far has the endorsement of the Disabled American Veterans and several other groups. The commander-in-chief of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, James Curran, is listed on the sponsoring committee, and the American Legion is yet to be heard from.

A prize of $10,000 will be awarded for the winning design. Individuals, students, professionals or companies are eligible to compete. But "draft evaders or those with discharges under other than honorable conditions need not apply," according to the committee's prospectus.

Mr. McKee said the traditional, patriotic style was endorsed after the committee conducted an informal poll.

"Frankly, we are more partial to the opinion of veterans than to other special-interest groups," the executive director said.

The foregoing is an objective report on a little-noticed committee that has not sought national publicity until the expected lift comes with congressional passage of the joint resolutions. The following is a subjective response from a recipient of one of the hundreds of thousands of fund-raising appeals already in the mail.

At first I thought it had come to me because I wrote a column last spring making the case for a Korean War memorial, to fill a gap by honoring the Americans who died and served there. I received-warm, sometimes emotional letters of endorsement from readers.

But of course I had only to look at the envelope to see beyond that. Its return address was "Maj. Gen. R. G. Butler, United States Army (Ret.)."

Besides it was a twin-starred crimson flag. Above my own name and address peeking through the cellophane window was a question from the general: "Will you let me put your name on my Honor Roll in tribute to General MacArthur and his men?"

Although I follow military matters fairly closely, General Butler's name did not ring a bell. Inside, the letterhead again featured the general's flag and name in bold letters.

"Dear Friend," the letter began. "As a retired major general in the U.S. Army, I'm writing to you...

Noting that the Korean War is the only one not memorialized in Washington, it stated, "Old soldiers never die," General MacArthur said, "they just fade away."

"Will you let the memory fade?" it asked. "Or will you join me in honoring General MacArthur and those who stood with him in Korea?"

It said the names of contributors would be sealed within the base of the memorial, and added that a cassette recording of MacArthur's farewell address to Congress would be sent to those giving $25 or more.

The enclosed form, entitled "Personal reply to Maj. Gen. Butler," had blanks to be checked, for contributions from $10,000 down to "$1 other."

It had negative blanks, too, saying "No, do not place my name on your Honor Roll in tribute to General MacArthur and his men," and further, "No, I cannot make even a small contribution toward honoring our veterans of Korea — the only war in which our veterans have not been honored."

It did not have a blank saying, "Sorry, I am a cheap SOB," but that was implied.

Seeking background from Mr. Hallinan, the founder of the committee, I called his First Western Corporation and left a message on a recorder. He didn't call back yesterday. Had I gotten through, I would have offered some free advice:

Not everyone who would like to see Korean veterans honored is an automatic worshiper of Douglas MacArthur, and not everyone who might contribute is receptive to the high-pressure tactics that pay off so big in political fund-raising.

Any memorial to those who died and served in the Korean War will be the property of all the people. Those who feel strongly enough to try to build it will do so, without being patronized by mail.