Korean War memorial stops in Del.

Statues displayed here en route to Washington

By TED CADDELL
Staff reporter

NEW CASTLE — Cleon Eckler marched the length of the Korean Peninsula in the winter of 1950 as a young riflemen in the 24th Infantry Division of the U.S. Army. He came within eight miles of the Yalu River before a wave of Chinese soldiers forced Allied troops all the way back to South Korea.

In April 1951, Steve Barczykowski made the same trek north, but he was force-marched at gunpoint after being captured, and spent the next 29 months in a POW camp.

The two former soldiers Eckler, 65, of Townsend and Barczykowski, 64, of Brandywine Hundred — were among about 120 Korean War vets who gathered at the War Memorial at Delaware Memorial Bridge Plaza Monday morning, waiting to see 19 statues that will form the National Korean War Veterans Memorial in Washington. The statues, transported on three flatbed tractor-trailers, made only a brief stop.

The statues — cast of stainless steel in a New York foundry and trucked to Washington — represent 10 years of effort by veterans of the "Forgotten War" to establish a memorial honoring the soldiers, sailors and airmen who took part in the conflict. The Korean War Veterans Association, with chapters in all 50 states, was instrumental in getting the project completed and raised $17.5 million to pay for it.

The memorial will be dedicated July 27, the 42nd anniversary of the 1953 armistice.

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The official toll of the war was 54,246 U.S. servicemen killed in action, 103,284 wounded and 8,177 missing in action. Sixty-six Delawareans gave their lives, and nine are still listed as missing.

As the three trucks pulled in to park, the constant buzz of soldiers trading war stories died off. When the engines stopped, the old soldiers moved slowly to the trucks to look at the metal incarnations of themselves.

Although the statues were lying on their sides strapped to the trucks, visitors could see that the artist caught the fatigue on each face, and the cold winds whipping ponchos and cloaks.

"That's what we looked like when we were on patrol," said Jake Keifer, 66, of Harrington, looking at the larger-than-life replicas of slogging infantrymen. Keifer, who was in Korea in 1951 and 1952 with the Army’s 7th Division, remembers the cold the most.

"It was 40 below in the winter-time," he said, shaking his head.

Rodney Reed took a closer look at the statues. "That's an M-1 rifle there," he told an observer. "The finest rifle in the world."

Reed, 64, of Wilmington, spent 1951 through 1953 in Korea with the Army’s 3rd Division. Reed, and many others at the ceremony Monday, thought it was about time the veterans of the Korean War were honored with their own national memorial.

"There were many people who didn't come back ..." he said. "They called it a 'police action.' But it damn sure wasn't ... How the hell can it be a police action when you get [so many] people killed and wounded? This is way overdue."

Reed and several other veterans pointed to the absence of Sens. Chris Coons and Mike Carper and Sens. William Roth Jr. and Joseph R. Biden from the short ceremony. Coons sent a letter, Roth and Biden sent representatives who spoke. Rep. Michael Castle was there, either, but nobody mentioned his absence.
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"This is just the way the government treated the Korean War," Reed said. "People just don't give a damn."

After a brief ceremony, the trucks continued south, and a convoy of vets trailing behind had grown to about 50 cars and trucks. There was one more planned stop, in Baltimore, before the convoy was due in Washington Monday afternoon.

Rudy Townsend of Robscott Manor, a sailor who served during the war, said he hoped the national memorial would provide the recognition every veteran deserves. The war, he said, "left an empty hole in the heart of many a man who served in Korea."