Korean War memorial plan unveiled

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By Nelson Schwartz
Inquirer Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — The design for a $6 million memorial to the Korean War — "a dreamlike" collection of 38 stone soldiers marching into battle — was unveiled yesterday at a White House ceremony that also honored four Penn State architects who designed it.

The winning design was one of 543 submissions received by the Korean War Veterans Memorial Design Jury and will be located on the south side of the Reflecting Pool, across from the Vietnam War Memorial, on the Washington Mall.

The four architects who will share the $20,000 first prize are Veronica Burns Lucas, Don Alvaro Leon, John Paul Lucas and Eliza Pennypacker Oberholtzer.

This is the first national project for the members of the team, who range in age from 31 to 52. Describing the team's interest in the project, Oberholtzer said: "We knew it as the forgotten war, which made it so intriguing." More than 54,000 Americans died in the war.

The one-eighth scale model that was unveiled in the Rose Garden depicts two lines of soldiers walking toward an American flag. The soldiers are surrounded by water and barberry bushes; visitors will walk along a path between the two lines of soldiers. On one side is a semicircle of arborvitae, according to Leon, while dogwood and plane trees surround it.

According to the architects, "From a distance, one sees the memorial as an elusive, dreamlike presence of ghostly figures moving across a remote landscape... The visitor is observer, in the act of commemoration, and is simultaneously at one with the figures, the 39th presence."

The 38 figures in the memorial symbolize the 38th Parallel, which divides Korea today; the 38 months between 1950 and 1953 when the war was fought; and the number of soldiers that usually make up an army platoon, according to the design team. The visitor will walk up a slight hill toward the flag, the upward slope representing the progress of the war and the action of the war in gaining ground," according to Veronica Lucas.

Veronica Lucas and Oberholtzer are professors of landscape architecture at Penn State, as well as professional designers. John Lucas, who is married to Veronica Lucas, and Don Leon are professors of architecture as well as professional architects.

Noting their university affiliation, President Bush joked during the Rose Garden ceremony that "somehow, it seems that you might even eclipse Joe Paterno and the Nittany Lions as Penn State's most noted team — a reference to the university's football coach and team.

Since the team members were too young to have served in the war, one of their first tasks was to "find out as much as we could," said Leon, 52. They interviewed veterans of the war, read about it and looked at photos. "The more I looked at the photojournalistic images, the more power I felt from them," said Veronica Lucas. She added that as the team worked on the project, "Emotions of sympathy became greater and greater."

Oberholtzer, who is pregnant, said that she intended to put some of her portion of the prize money away "for the little one's college." She added that "what's going to be a real thrill for me is bringing future students to the Mall to see the great axis, the Vietnam Memorial, the Lincoln Memorial, the Washington Monument and our Korean War Veterans Memorial."

The drive to create a Korean War memorial gained momentum after Vietnam veterans built and dedicated their own memorial in 1983. On Oct. 28, 1986, President Ronald Reagan signed a measure authorizing a monument and last fall Congress selected the site. Only $3.2 million of the $6 million that the memorial is projected to cost has been raised by the Korean War Veterans Memorial Fund, set up by a presidentially appointed group to raise the money. Construction will not begin until at least $6 million is raised.
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