Fight within hurts effort for Korean War memorial

By RICK BOWERS South News Service

WASHINGTON — Three years ago, Peter Stumberger of Boca Raton sent more than $200 to a fund-raising group, seeking to build a memorial here to the 5,000 Americans killed in the Korean War.

Stumberger, scarred in an artillery barrage near Pocphuk, Hill, is now wondering if the embattled fund-raising group will ever build a monument. The little-known Korean War Memorial Inc., modeled after the successful private fund-raising drive that resulted in the national Vietnam Veterans Memorial, has been torn by a bitter power struggle and is in the red.

Corporate records, court documents, Internal Revenue Service reports, Federal Election Commission filings and interviews with past and present members paint a picture of an organization plagued by personality clashes and dogged by controversy.

The main points of contention are:

- The private, nonprofit corporation has fewer than 23,000 contributors, none of them giving more than $500,000, and its fund-raising drive has netted more than $600,000 from some 23,000 contributors.
- Its founders felt the Korean War memorial contributions have been "embellished." Federal investigators have probed the allegation, but have found no basis for formal charges.
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- The group was plagued by an internal feud that led to the ouster of a founder. Angered by the loss of her position, the founder established a new corporation with the same name, causing confusion among potential contributors.

Korean Memorial Inc.'s current directors concede that the controversy has tarnished its image and battered its finances. The organization has raised $7.5 million, said director Edward Borchert, who recently became president of the group. "Every penny that has come in has been tracked."

Borchert is chairman of an international trade consulting firm with offices in Washington and Seoul and served as a captain and platoon leader in Korea.

"We're at a very fragile point right now. We're like a baby in its infancy," he said. "We can either get stepped on and squashed or we can survive."

The story begins with the incorporation of the National Committee for a Korean War Memorial in 1981. It was formed to finance the first permanent monument in Washington honoring the more than five million American men and women who served in Korea between 1950 and 1953.

Its founders felt the Korean War had been forgotten, despite a casualty list nearly as long as Vietnam's. The private, tax-exempt corporation was headed by Chayon Kim, a former curator of a U.S. military museum in Seoul. Kim paid incorporation and office expenses out of her own pocket and oversaw the daily operation of the fledgling organization.

"It was my idea, my experience, my money," said Kim, the daughter of a wealthy Korean land owner and now a U.S. citizen.

In an act she later came to regret, Kim enlisted as executive director Myron McKee, then 35, a former diplomatic superintendent from Minnesota and an unpaid staffer for the Reagan-Bush transition committee. McKee's primary job was to convince Congress to set aside federal land for a memorial site.

In the process, McKee inherited the old records and fund-raising bilblank.

The group used the names of prominent public figures such as Ambassador Douglas MacArthur III, former President Ford and Attorney General Edwin Meese to solicit funds. Ford and MacArthur denied being involved.

McKee dismissed all allegations of misappropriating memorial-fund contributions and added that the organization's debts resulted from the high cost of direct mail fund-raising.

"We think that when you see the money go where it can, everyone can see that no one was getting rich off this," he said. McKee left the group in mid-1984 to run for Congress in Minnesota, but his bid failed.

Korean Memorial Inc. financial records indicate that more than 3 million mailings have netted more than $600,000 from some 23,000 contributors. Its financial statements show that it is $42,354 in debt. Most of its money has been used to cover fund-raising costs. All officers are unpaid.

Since her ouster, Kim has worked tirelessly behind the scenes to bring down her adversaries. She has gone to the FBI, IRS and U.S. Postal Service with charges of fraud and embellishment.

An IRS examination of the organization's 1983 and 1984 books turned up only minor omissions, according to an IRS report provided by the group. Some Internal Revenue Service agents for the FBI and Postal Service said their investigations have been terminated and no charges have been filed.

The conflict has led some in Congress to look to the federal Treasury as a less controversial and more cost-effective funding source. Problems have been filed calling for a publicly funded Korean Memorial.