Remembering 'the forgotten war': Hard work begins on Korean War memorial

WASHINGTON

For generations, men went off to war — with confidence that whether they returned in a proud parade or a coffin, they would have the respect of their countrymen. When their wars faded in the national memory, there would be lasting memorials to remind that once they had done their duty honorably.

But those assumptions fell apart in the decades after World War II. Our two wars then were undeclared and controversial — although the men who fought them were just as brave, and those who died were just as good.

More controversy surrounded the Vietnam War memorial that has now become one of Washington's busiest tourist attractions. And now at last, after years of arguments, Congress has moved to correct an even older injustice by authorizing a memorial in those who served and died in the Korean War.

Last Tuesday, after the House enacted the bill by voice vote, phones rang here and in Pennsylvania, Texas, Wyoming, New York, all across the country. Men and women who had thrown their lives into the effort to build a Korean War memorial were passing the good news, in some still shaded with disbelief. Their hopes had been lifted and smashed repeatedly as bills disappeared in the labyrinth of the Capitol. Group raising funds had been embroiled in lawsuits, investigations over where the money went.

Now, at last, the track is clear to get it done without further controversy. This bill authorizes the American Battle Monuments Commission, which cares for U.S. military memorials and cemeteries, to build a Korean War memorial with tax-deductible donations.

Doing it this way assures that all the money contributed will go directly into the memorial. It cuts out the middlemen. It bypasses the political fund-raisers who charge a huge percentage of total donations as their fer. It eliminates scam outfits that exploit scandalously loose tax laws to support their organizers nicely, without being required to turn over a penny to the cause for which they solicit.

But in removing the profit motive, it also puts the fund-raising burden on volunteers — veterans, groups, patriotic organizations, civic-minded corporations, and especially individual Americans.

The memorial will cost about $56 million, start to finish. The bill authorizes $500,000 for design and $5 million for site work. But a fast start in public donations is required to get the project moving promptly toward meeting the five-year deadline in the bill. The federal money will be repaid with contributions funds at the end.

Thus there was more than just rejoicing when disabled Korean veterans Bill Temple and Tony Stanage of suburban Philadelphia, and Seymour Harris of upstate New York, phoned each other last week.

The calls to and from Bill Burkett of Dallas, whose father was in Korea, John Clay of Cheyenne, whose husband was killed there, and Chuyin Kim, a Korean American who has dedicated years full-time to the project, were more than exchanges of glad tidings. The frustrations of getting the bill passed were over, but the straight hard work of getting the memorial built still lurs ahead.

Sen. Bill Armstrong, R-CO; Sen. Jerman Denton and Malcolm Wallop; Representatives Jim Florio, Stan Parrish, Mary Rose Oakar, Sonny Montgomery and John Paul Kehoe have all been instrumental in getting this project moving promptly toward finishing the Korean War Memorial.

And across the avenue is the site of a parking box, ignored by those who pass by. That oversight is about to be corrected. Now, at last, the more than 54,000 Americans who died in Korea, the hundreds of thousands who served there, will be remembered, too.

Those who want to help should remember that congressional authorization makes this fund the official Korean War memorial effort. Only the American Battle Monuments Commission can accept donations for it.

Checks should be sent to the commission at Washington, D.C. 20334, marked "Korean War Memorial."

Until the drive gathers speed, Tony Stanage's leg was amputated not long ago, and, he says, still will send out the bumper stickers about "America's forgotten war" that he has paid for from his veteran's checks. But now he knows it won't be forgotten forever.