Korean War vets still seek a monument
Funds just trickle in to build memorial

By John Omicinski

WASHINGTON — Korean War veterans are approaching 60, their bodies at Heartbreak Ridge, Chosin Reservoir and Pork Chop Hill little known and less remembered.

Now, those who can recall America's "forgotten war" are fighting one last battle — to finally build a monument to the 54,000 Americans who died and the 100,000 who were wounded in nine years of fighting against Chinese and North Korean troops.

It may take five or six more years to raise the $6 million necessary. Even then, supporters will have to negotiate a tangled congressional thicket to secure a site as prominent as that of the Vietnam memorial.

Without change, a law passed last year could relegate the monument to areas outside the central Washington Mall that encompasses the Capitol and the Lincoln, Washington, Jefferson and Vietnam memorials.

"We're a long way away," says Col. William Ryan of the American Battle Monuments Commission, designated by Congress as the agency to lead the effort.

Many Korean War veterans are bitter about the long wait.

"It's a moral betrayal," said Bill Temple of Bryn Mawr, Pa., who organized a 1984 rally of Korean veterans in Philadelphia.

One way, the monument was a casualty of Vietnam.

"We went to the federal budget people in 1987-88," said Ryan. "Right when the costs of Vietnam were growing enormous. They told us: 'Come back and talk to us after the war's over.'"

In 1972, with the war winding down, the monument commission returned. "We never got the money," said Ryan. "This time they said the budget deficits were too large. It's not a good time for memorials, they said."

As the 70s passed, the Korean monument was overwhelmed by the clamor for a monument by returning Vietnam veterans, resulting in the stark, black marble slab near the Lincoln Memorial.

But in another way, the Vietnam effort was a catalyst for the Korean monument.

"That very successful effort to get a Vietnam memorial gave real impetus to a Korean effort," said retired Gen. Richard Stilwell, who commanded a 3rd Infantry Division regiment in Korea.

Though the $10 million Vietnam memorial effort saw less than half the money go into the monument's stones, a precedent was set.

"The government wants us to go with private contributions," said Ryan.

The $1 million laid aside by Congress last year hinges upon raising enough private money to build the Korean monument.

Late last year, a Korean carmaker, Hyundai Motor America, made a $1 million donation.

Other cash, however, has flowed in a trickle. A plea from the Veterans of Foreign Wars so far has netted all of $3,084.

At that rate, it will be well beyond the 40th anniversary of the start of the Korean War, which began in June 1950, before anything's built.

Over the years, there have been sighing, often mysterious efforts to raise money for a Korean memorial. Ryan said one group, calling itself the National Commission for the Korean War Memorial and the Korean War Memorial Inc., raised a good deal. "They got a lot of money, but nothing ever happened."

Why has a monument taken so long to be built?

Stilwell thinks it has something to do with the way the wars ended.

"It left a psychological difference," he said. "We came out of Vietnam with our tails between our legs.

"We came back from Korea thinking we'd served honorably and done something valuable. People came back and just went about their lives."