South Korean President Kim Young-sam and President Clinton inspect one of the 19 statues at the Korean War Veterans Memorial, dedicated Thursday in Washington. Thousands of veterans endured searing temperatures to hear the two leaders praise their sacrifices of 40 years ago.

Korean War memorial is dedicated
Clinton honors vets of the ‘forgotten war’

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WASHINGTON — Forty-two years after the armistice, President Clinton dedicated the Korean War Veterans Memorial on Thursday in honor of the men and women who fought in what often has been called the “forgotten war.” “They set a standard of courage that may be equaled, but will never be surpassed in the annals of American combat,” Mr. Clinton said.

South Korean President Kim Young-sam said, “We take pride in the progress of history that has turned the Korean War from a forgotten war into a war most worthy of remembrance.”

Thousands of veterans withstood punishing summer heat to see the memorial — a field of statues, a black granite mural and a reflecting pool — and to hear Mr. Clinton recall the “terrible hardships” so many endured.

He spoke of the deadly cold, of the weeks in cramped foxholes and bunkers, of the hand-to-hand combat on Heartbreak Ridge and Pork Chop Hill and of confronting the world’s fastest
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jets in "MiG Alley."

"To this impressive monument, we can see the figures and faces that recall their heroism," he said.

In steel and granite, in water and earth, the creators of this memorial have brought to life the courage and sacrifice of those who served in all branches of the armed forces from every racial and ethnic group and background in America.

The multidimensional memorial sits near some of Washington's most famous monuments, including the Lincoln and Vietnam memorials.

Nineteen steel soldiers of all ranks, ages and races, clad in combat gear and ponchos, push forward from the shade of a wood toward a distant American flag. Their faces are worn with tight lines of tension and fatigue.

Each statue weighs more than 1,000 pounds. Some figures look toward a 164-foot-long granite wall, carved with images of nurses, cooks, mechanics and other support personnel.

Near the eastern end of the wall, just before it reaches a 30-foot reflecting pool, are engraved the words: Freedom is not free. All told, the memorial covers 2.2 acres.

A North Korean invasion of the South in 1950 started the war, which dragged on for three years until an uneasy armistice. It cost more than 50,000 American lives.

Americans fought alongside soldiers from 21 countries against Communist troops from North Korea and China, marking the first time an international force was gathered to fight under the United Nations flag.

The $18 million memorial, authorized by Congress in 1986, was delayed six years as organizers struggled to win approval for their design. Ground was broken in 1992.

"It's been a long time coming, but I'm glad it's finally being recognized," said 66-year-old John Mitchell of Venice, Fla., who served in the 2nd Infantry Division.

Vernon Miller, 65, another 2nd Division veteran, agreed.

"It was a terrible, terrible experience to fight in the war," said Mr. Miller, of Westminster, Md. "You hope everybody has to go through anything like that, but if they do their efforts should not be forgotten."

Curris Harry, 67, of New York, said the memorial held particular significance for him, since he was one of the first black soldiers to serve in his branch.

"This honors us as black, white, people of all colors, everyone who served," he said. "It's also a way to remember those we couldn't save."

Historians say the war has long been overshadowed by the magnitude of World War II and the controversy that surrounded Vietnam. Rep. Sam Johnson, R-Dallas, a veteran of both Korea and Vietnam, knows that firsthand.

"People ask me all of the time about my experience in Vietnam. But rarely do I get asked about Korea," said Mr. Johnson, who was taken prisoner in Vietnam. He did not attend Thursday's ceremony because of the heat.

Bottled water was passed out to guests at the afternoon ceremony, but several fainted. The temperature reached 93 degrees.

Mr. Clinton and Mr. Kim both spoke of the war's historical consequences.

"The free world's participation in the Korean War, its first resolve and effective action to stem the expansion of communism, changed the course of history," Mr. Kim said. "In this sense, I would say that the Korean War was a war that heralded the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the demise of communism."

Mr. Clinton quoted President Dwight Eisenhower's words 42 years ago when he called the "end of hostilities an armistice on a single battleground, not peace in the world."

"The larger conflict of the Cold War had only begun," Mr. Clinton said. "It would take four decades more to win. In a struggle so long and consuming, perhaps it's not surprising that too many lost sight of the importance of Korea."

But now, he said, the world knows of the foundation that was laid in Korea.

"By sending a clear message that America had not defeated fascism to see communism prevail, you put the free world on the road to victory in the Cold War," he said.

Communism prevails in North Korea, and the United States still has 34,800 military personnel stationed in South Korea. During Mr. Kim's state visit, Mr. Clinton pledged that the U.S. forces would remain as long as they were needed and wanted.