Veterans of the forgotten conflict surrounded the statues. Some tearfully remembered their experiences.

By Michael E. Ruane

WASHINGTON — Forty-five summers after they first were shoved back to the famous Pusan perimeter, tens of thousands of Korean War veterans completed their long road back yesterday, receiving a last their nation’s thanks and a striking new monument to the war the world forgot.

Assembled in a jaunty but perspiring multitude along the Mall east of the Lincoln Memorial, the veterans, their families and friends stood in wilting heat as President Clinton and South Korean President Kim Young Sam dedicated what is officially known as the Korean War Veterans Memorial.

Clad in countless baseball caps and T-shirts, the veterans — most in their 60s — guzzled water and puffed cigarettes while the two leaders recounted the soldiers’ deeds and proclaimed that they had struck the first blow against communism’s curtain of iron.

“Now we know that those of you who served, and the families who stood behind you, laid the foundations for one of the greatest triumphs in the history of human freedom,” Clinton told them.

And when the speeches were over and the gates to the monument opened, the men and women of Korea launched their last assault, engulfing the steel-and-granite sculpture and surrounding the memorial with affection.

It was a moving confluence of humanity, art and history. “This is your day,” a retired Marine general had told them. “Beautiful,” one crimson-faced veteran said. “Beautiful.”

The new memorial, just across the Mall’s reflecting pool from the Vietnam “wall,” has been as long-suffering as the men and women it honors, and as stark and arresting as the bitter war it commemorates.

At its heart are 19 steel statues depicting GIs on patrol during the war. The 7-foot-tall, thousand-pound figures are clad in rain ponchos, their haunted faces etched with the anguish of combat, their movements frozen in eternal alert.

Serving as a backdrop is a 144-foot-long polished granite wall etched with ghostly faces taken from photographs of people who served in the war. And, arrayed on a slight rise on the ground, the memorial is surrounded by a shallow reflecting pool and a towering American flag.

For many, the names of the places they served, and the families who love them, were recounted. It was at night. Parallel around the middle of Korea.

For 45 years, they have been tormented by not knowing his fate. So long ago.

“We had been back in a rest area for 10 nights” before reaching a prison camp near the Chinese border, he said.

Hanbaum said he was treated brutally. “They beat the hell out of me with rifle butts, flashlights, whatever they had a hold of.” He was a captive for almost 2½ years.

“We marched for 41 days and nights” before reaching a prison camp near the Chinese border, he said.

They wore kilts and berets and overseas caps, and swathed through T-shirts and be-medaled vests that proclaimed what outfit they were in 40 years ago.

Many sported paunches and faded tattoos. Some carried canes, or used crutches, or were pushed in wheelchairs.

But when they spoke, they spoke about bloody and terrible and glorious places Inchon; Chosin; Koto-ri; Hill 355, also known as Little Gibraltar. Sometimes they didn’t know the official names of the place seared into their memories. “Just put in ‘the apple orchard,’” Tom Pulliam, 71, said of a bloody spot he recalled.

“Everybody’ll know where it was.”

“For many, the names of the places brought tears.”

Before the festivities, Russell Kingston, 64, of Kutawa, Ky., and Oren Hanbaum of Paducah, Ky., stood outside the fenced-off ceremonial area wondering how to get in.

Both wore the maroon overseas caps of the Western Kentucky Chapter of American Ex-Prisoners of War. Hanbaum used metal crutches, a result of his treatment while imprisoned.

Both men had been Army riflemen. Hanbaum, who was in the Second Infantry Division, was captured May 17, 1951, when his unit was overrun by the Chinese near the 38th Parallel around the middle of Korea.

“We had been back in a rest area” and had just returned to the front lines, he recounted. It was at night. He and a buddy had just returned from the perimeter to their foxhole and covered themselves with their tent.

Suddenly they heard a commotion and some shots being fired. Someone yanked the tent off, and Hanbaum and his pal were staring up at six Chinese with burp guns.

“We had nothing else to do but put up our hands,” he said.

“Nobody knows the trauma you experience when you have to put up your hands and surrender,” Hanbaum said. His eyes filled with tears, and he turned away.

“We marched for 41 days and nights” before reaching a prison camp near the Chinese border, he said.

Hanbaum said he was treated brutally. “They starved us to death,” he said. In addition, someone told the Chinese that Hanbaum was an intelligence officer, and the Chinese battered him for information. He said.

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Nearing the Korean War Veterans Memorial at its dedication are President Clinton (center), South Korea President Kim Young Sam (left), and retired Marine Gen. Raymond Davis, recipient of a Medal of Honor. The memorial has 19 statues, a reflecting pool and photographs.