Changes in Korean War memorial approved despite designers' plea

By Tim Weiner

A federal commission yesterday approved a design for a Korean War memorial despite a plea from the memorial's original architects to stop.

The architects, who won a national competition to design the memorial, say their design was "brutally changed" by federal bureaucrats and a retired general, and now "glorifies war."

"I urge you to just stop — stop and consider," Don Leon told the National Capital Memorial Commission at a public hearing. The commission is a part of the Interior Department.

Leon appeared at the hearing with John Paul Lucas. Both are with the architectural firm of Burns Lucas Leon Lucas in State College, Pa.

The firm's design has been dramatically altered since it was unveiled by President Bush at the White House in June 1989.

Leon described the changes as "an insidious erosion."

The changes have been executed by Cooper-Lecky Architects, the Washington firm that added heroic statues to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial after a bitter battle.

Cooper-Lecky presented its revised design for the Korean memorial at yesterday's hearing.

What were to be statues of a unit on patrol will be soldiers poised for battle. W. Kent Cooper, chairman of Cooper-Lecky, told the commission that this change was "significant value added."

What was to be a ceremonial plaza has been altered at the request of the Army Corps of Engineers to include an entirely new element — a large mural that will define the history of the war. Its details remain unsettled.

The definition of the war is at issue in the debate over the memorial.

Most historians define the war as a violent stalemate, one of the first great battles of the Cold War. After three years of combat between U.S., Korean and Chinese forces, and 54,000 American deaths, Korea remained divided between North and South, as it is today.

At the original design's unveiling, Bush characterized the Korean War as an "American victory."

It is "a forgotten victory," said a statement released at yesterday's hearing by the Korean War Veterans Memorial Advisory Board, chaired by retired Gen. Richard G. Stilwell, a former CIA operations chief for the Far East.

Stilwell, who commanded U.S. ground forces in Korea, has been a central figure in the fight over the memorial.

He said in an interview after the commission's unanimous vote that the new design was "dynamic" and the memorial was "on the right track."

"Our hope is that all this is behind us," he said, referring to the dispute over the memorial.

It is not. The revised design must still pass muster before the U.S. Fine Arts Commission and the National Capital Planning Commission. Lucas and Leon said they would appeal to those panels in meetings next month. If they fail, a lawsuit is possible, their lawyer, Robert Sokolov, said yesterday.