PHILADELPHIA — Think of a limited, undeclared war euphemistically called a police action in a divided, Asian country where U.S. troops helped a southern republic against communist-backed aggressors in the north.

Imagine 54,246 American dead, 8,177 missing in action and 389 unreturned prisoners of war. Add fiery napalm, helicopters and forsaken soldiers who came home without flag-waving parades or a fitting monument to their sacrifice.

Vietnam?

No, Korea.

Veterans of the Korean War's nasty battles, mindful of the mix-up in the public consciousness, are building a monument so they will be remembered.

"The forgotten war was not Vietnam, but Korea. Any American who fought and died should have a better fate than to be forgotten," said ex-Marine Charles Edward "Mac" McCarren, a Philadelphia insurance executive who is chairman of a campaign to build the International Korean War Memorial.

"These guys gave so much and got so little. There should be some symbol to show that freedom is never free. Its price is sacrifice," McCarren said.

Some wonder why it has taken more than 30 years, since the war's end in 1953, for veterans to get together on a memorial. McCarren responded, "When the war was over, all of us came home, picked up where we left off, went back to school, went back to raising families."

The group plans to raise $5 million in private donations for a memorial to be built in Los Angeles. Groundbreaking at Angels Gate Park is scheduled for June 25, the 37th anniversary of the North Korean invasion of the South. Work is expected to take two years.

The memorial will honor the 16 countries from the United Nations whose soldiers fought the North Koreans and Chinese.

The memorial will show 15 soldiers fighting in the snow. The scene was inspired by the battle of the Chosin Reservoir, where 15,000 trapped Marines battled 120,000 Chinese and subzero temperatures to escape to the sea.

Felix de Weldon, the sculptor who created the Iwo Jima Memorial in Washington, D.C., will build the monument.

"It will probably be more dramatic and more moving than any others I have done," de Weldon said in a telephone interview from Newport, R.I.

The memorial, he said, would show "the courage, the determination, the suffering, the power of survival" of those who fought. "It's a monument of heroism," he said.

The international memorial is distinct from a $6 million national project to honor America's Korean veterans, authorized by Congress in October. Congress allocated $1 million; another $1 million came from Hyundai Corp., the South Korean automaker.

A 12-member advisory committee hopes to have a site selected by fall, and the design will be selected by a competition, according to Col. William Ryan of the American Battle Monuments Commission.

"We're not in conflict or competing with the national monument," McCarren said. "... Frankly, we wanted a memorial erected in our lifetime."

The mountainous peninsula of Korea is where America decided to draw the line on communist expansion and where the United Nations first mustered troops to back up its orders.

Northern invaders trained by the Soviet Union nearly crushed the South Koreans and U.N. forces. But after a daring amphibious landing at Inchon devised by Gen. Douglas MacArthur, U.N. forces routed the invaders and drove to the Chinese border.

The war in Korea inspired the movie and television show M*A*S*H, but the committee organizing the international memorial complains that an encyclopedia gives five neglectful paragraphs to Korea, six pages to Vietnam and 26 pages to World War II.

"We were the silent veterans of the forgotten war. We feel an obligation. If we don't let people know what happened, nobody would know," said ex-Marine Frank Kerr, founder of the Chosin Few.