Dallas man remembers the forgotten war

Like so many of the rest of us at this time of year, Hal Barker would like to raise some extra cash. Not counting what he's going to need for Christmas presents and stuff, he figures he's short about six million dollars. Around here, when you're dealing in dreams of suddenly raising those kinds of figures, the name and apparition of Ross Perot tends to loom in your fantasies. Oddly enough, Barker found himself almost rubbing elbows with our mythic moneybags not long ago - not the apparition, but the man himself.

This was in a ballroom at the Fairmont, where Hal Barker was wearing his work gear, a carpenter's belt, and Perot was stalking the premises waiting for rehearsals to begin for the Symphony Deb Ball. "I realized I was standing three feet from the man who could probably help me reach my goal. He was engrossed in thought, and I couldn't bring myself to talk to him. I don't hold him in awe, but I did decide to respect his privacy, and I had my own work to do besides. I just didn't think it was appropriate to enter his 'space' and make a pitch."

Barker and Perot may have more in common than most stage-set carpenters and computer billionaires. Barker shares the knack of making money multiply, having recently turned $10 into $2,492,200.67. Only war without a memorial

In late 1984 he sent a $10 check to the American Battle Monuments Commission to open a trust fund for the building of a Korean War Memorial. At that time the Vietnam Memorial was new, making veterans of the Korean War more acutely aware of how they had been commemoratively leap-frogged. The Korean conflict had become our only big war without a memorial.

Only now 41, Hal Barker did not serve in Korea, but his father, Col. Edward L. Barker, was at Heartbreak Ridge. The younger Barker had grown up to tales of Korea, which wasn't nearly as funny as "M*A*S*H" reruns recall it.

Single-handedly, Hal Barker contacted the battle monuments commission to learn how to go about getting a memorial. They suggested the trust-fund approach, and his ten dollars started it. Then Sen. William Armstrong, R-Colo., and Rep. James Florio, D-N.J., introduced bills authorizing the memorial. Of the almost $2.3 million raised so far, $1,200,000 was donated by Korea's Hyundai Motor America.

His year-end progress report, other than the $6 million still to go, is that the official site has been designated in the Ash Woods, diagonally across from the Lincoln Memorial.

"There's a design competition going on right now, although there doesn't seem to be much publicity about that anywhere. Just as there wasn't much mentioned on Veterans Day about the sacrifices of Korean vets." (Design bidders should contact the American Battle Monuments Commission in Washington.)

Planning trip to battlefield

His job as lead carpenter-set builder for Bill Reed Decorations puts him in proximity with some of the richest people in the world. The firm builds decorations, sets, exhibits and suchlike for events like the Cattle Baronos and Crystal Charity Balls. Barker builds many of the animated Christmastime sets we see at places like Valley View, Fort Worth Town Center, and The Parks in Arlington.

He says it's his savings from the Christmas work that are paying for his flight to Korea in February. He and a friend, Tom Ryan, who is command historian for the Eighth Army's Korean chronicles, plan to walk the winter battlefields there. "A very close friend of mine spent his first night of combat at a place called Chip Yong Ni on the night of Feb. 13, 1951. Ryan and I have figured the location of my friend's bunker, and we're going to camp out there on the night of Feb. 13. It was the scene of one of the greatest perimeter defenses in history - 100,000 Chinese versus 4,500 Americans and French of the 23rd Infantry Regiment."

May strike some as a strange hobby, but it's a free country. So's South Korea.