

War Memorials - Honoring Our Fallen

by John Alan Arnold, PhD



One of the best ways to respond to their sacrifice is by honoring the individuals who served in the military and particularly those who gave the ultimate sacrifice with community war memorials. For many reasons a memorial can serve to remember the fallen of the past and can help strengthen ties to the community in the present. Among other things, a memorial demonstrates to all how high a priority remembering the past is for the community. A City or County memorial brings the sacrifice to a much more personal level and can result in high participation from families, churches, civic groups and businesses--prompting a sense of unity akin to that which existed when the brave men and women went off to war originally. Once the decision is made to proceed with a memorial and the design and cost have been considered serious thought will need to be given to who will be included and honored. We have worked with many communities and helped guide them through this process. On the surface it can seem simple but it can be very complex and it helps to have official documents to back up decisions.



The first decision will be what wars the community plans to include in their Memorial. Depending on the history of the locality this could go as far back as the Revolutionary War. Although there is often confusion surrounding actual dates that a given war or conflict began and ended, the following is a list of major US wars that is intended to be a general guideline only:

- ✧ Revolutionary War: September 1, 1774 – September 3, 1783
- ✧ War of 1812: June 18, 1812 – March 23, 1815
- ✧ Mexican War: April 25, 1846 – February 2, 1848
- ✧ Civil War: April 12, 1861 – April 9, 1865
- ✧ Spanish American War: April 25 – August 12, 1898
- ✧ World War I: 1917 - 1918
- ✧ World War II: December 7, 1941 – September 2, 1945
- ✧ Korean Conflict: June 27, 1950 – June 27, 1953
- ✧ Vietnam Conflict: First casualty June 8, 1956—April 30, 1975
- ✧ Iraq & Afghanistan Wars: March 20, 2003 -

Each war or military conflict has its own unique history and unique challenges for deciding who, in fact, is eligible for inclusion in the memorial. Also many service members have lost their lives in undeclared wars or police actions that will still qualify as killed in action (KIA). Often these dates are harder to clarify and will need to be taken on a case by case basis. The military has its own set of identifiers and the community may or may not want to follow to the letter their designations. The following is a list of official definitions:

KIA—Killed instantly in combat or having died of wounds received in action on the field before reaching an aid station (U.S. Army Glossary of Terms). An individual who was killed in action either at the front or in rear areas, or if a prisoner of war by air bombardment of his prison camp or shot while escaping (Army WWII honor list). Casualties include those on active duty in the Navy, Coast Guard and Marines that died as a result of direct enemy action or from operational activities in war zones (Navy WWII honor list).

KHA—Killed by hostile action. This was a term used during the Vietnam War and distinguishes between those killed while directly engaged with the enemy and those killed as a result of being in the vicinity of enemy action, such as land mine fatalities.

DOW—Died of wounds received in battle after reaching an aid station. Note this could be some time after the actual event.

DNB—Died non battle, includes accidents, suicides, illness, homicide

The further back in time the more difficult it can be to make accurate assessments. Often a family's oral history has made their ancestor a war hero when in fact archival documents will show their ancestor died of yellow fever or some other illness shortly after enlisting. This can be a sensitive area that a professional research firm can be of great help by providing evidence for the commission to aid in the decision process. Conversely, the military, particularly in later conflicts, like Vietnam, will not give a KIA designation and investigation will show that the service man was labeled as a KHA or other such designation –killed by hostile action which is another category but still a viable candidate to include in a memorial.



National Personnel Records Center, St. Louis, MO

Gathering information regarding potential candidates for inclusion in the memorial can be a challenge as well. Plan early in the process to advertise in all appropriate media for candidate names to be submitted for inclusion in the memorial. Scour cemeteries, archives, and newspapers for lists. Enlist all interested civic and church groups to aid in the name search. Contact schools, libraries, historical societies. The more names a professional research firm has to work with the more cost effective the actual archival work will be and the more accurate will be your memorial.

Not all of the cases will be clear cut and time will need to be allowed for archival documents to be gathered by the research firm. Most of the official archival documents are held at major facilities that have a lengthy bureaucratic process to get personnel files, action reports, burial case files and other needed information.

These are just a few of the things that will need to be considered as your community takes the noble step to honor those who have given so much so that we can live in peace and freedom. Please email us at seek@nicom.com to respond to this blog if you have questions about the above and in moving forward with a memorial for your community. Assisting those who wish to honor our service members that have given their all is considered a privilege at NICOM and we look forward to helping more communities with their war memorial projects.