

Friday, April 30, 2004

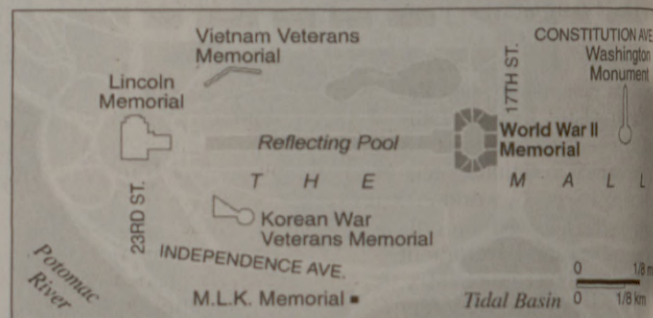
THE BATTALION

World War II Memorial opens on National Mall

NATIONAL WORLD WAR II MEMORIAL

Memorial opens to the public

The National World War II Memorial site honoring the 16 million U.S. men and women who served during World War II opened to the public Thursday. The dedication ceremony is on May 29.



SOURCES: Department of Defense; Department of Veterans Affairs; American Battle Monuments Commission

By Jennifer C. Kerr
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — Gray-haired war veterans sat in quiet reflection. Tourists came by to quietly say thanks. Schoolchildren on field trips crowded around asking for autographs. Decades in the planning, the National World War II Memorial opened to the public Thursday.

Under brilliant spring sunshine, visitors of all ages streamed in to look at Washington's newest memorial and to pay their respects to those who served during one of the country's most difficult and triumphant periods.

The memorial, which sits prominently between the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial on the National Mall, was long overdue but worth the wait, some vets said.

"It is beautiful," declared George Lynch, an 81-year-old former Marine from Washington. "To see this memorial after all these years is absolutely marvelous."

Lynch was accompanied by another World War II Marine, William "Abby" Abernathy, 91, also of Washington.

"So many people have stopped both Abby and me and said thank you," Lynch said. "I can hardly talk about this without my eyes watering up. It really touches you."

The granite-and-bronze monument features waterfalls, fountains, and a curved wall bedecked with gold stars representing the more than 400,000 who gave their lives in the war. It has two hulking 43-foot arches at each end, one marked Atlantic and the other Pacific. They symbolize the two theaters of the war.

Fifty-six smaller granite pillars adorned with two bronze wreaths form the oval shape of the memorial and encircle a sunken plaza and pool. Each pillar is engraved with the name of a state or territory from that period. While the formal dedication ceremony is a month away, project organizers raced to put the finishing touches on the memorial so the ever-dwindling number of World War II veterans could come to see it as soon as possible.

World War II vets are dying at a rate of 1,056 a day, the Veterans Affairs Department estimates. Fewer than 4 million of the 16 million who served will be alive at the time of the May 29 dedication.

Fred Smith of Rockville, Md., served in the Army Air Corps, which later became the Air Force. He said the memorial is a grand tribute. "There are an awful lot of guys who I knew that are gone now, but they would have loved this," he said.

Another veteran, Henry Wilayto, said the size of the memorial—which stretches the length of a football field—was especially fitting.

"I think it's far more than I thought they were going to do," said Wilayto, a former Army staff sergeant from Concord, Mass. "I thought it would be a real small one, but they've gone completely into the depths that they should have."

Among the first in line on opening day were hundreds of schoolchildren from Newtown, Conn., and Toledo, Ohio—some of whom had grandfathers who served in the war.

The \$174 million memorial was almost two decades in the making.

Legislation was introduced in 1987 by Rep. Marcy Kaptur, D-Ohio, who was prompted by an encounter with World War II veteran Roger Durbin. In front of a crowd at a political event, Durbin asked Kaptur why there was no World War II memorial.

Together, they worked to get legislation passed so the memorial could be built.

Congress gave its approval in 1993, but that was followed by court challenges from critics who claimed the monument would clutter the Mall and interfere with sweeping vistas long enjoyed by visitors. Construction began in late 2001.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Bush, Cheney recount efforts to thwart terrorism

WASHINGTON (AP) — Hoping to shape history's judgment, President Bush told the Sept. 11 commission Thursday his administration tried to protect America from terrorists as warnings grew before the devastating attack of 2001. Members pressed him on his response to a controversial memo that raised the threat of plane hijackings and attacks with explosives.

"I answered every question they asked," Bush said after he and Vice President Dick Cheney met with the 10-member commission for three hours in the Oval Office. Presidential scholars called the session unprecedented.

Some of Bush's answers were "surprising" and "new," said former Sen. Bob Kerrey, a Democratic member, but he declined to give details. On Bush's demand, the questioning was done behind closed doors without a transcriber to make an official record, and the president refused to discuss the substance of the discussions.

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