



A VIETNAM VISION: THE MAKING OF THE MEMORIAL STATUE

By Kathleen Keenan

War is an inevitable element in the course of human history. It stems from a potent and powerful desire to confront and conquer the malevolent forces of the world. It is a fight that has propelled the weak to be strong, the timid to be brave, the unsure to go forward in confidence. In short, it is survival at its supreme level, the unique and awesome responsibility for maintaining life in its fullest form.

The figurative sculpture that stands before you, three fighting men caught in a moment of watchful awareness, addresses the endless confrontation of man and his own mortality. These veterans stand in solitary repose, viewing from afar the long, dark wall that recounts the 58,022 names of those who have died or who are missing in battle.

They stand together and yet are separate, each displaying a distinctly different reaction to what they behold. On one face there is an expression of grave incomprehension; on another, anguish and anxiety; on a third, almost angry defiance. Their faces mirror the turbulent passage from innocence to experience, from boyhood to manhood, and their

individual reactions are reflective of the men who have passed before them.

Frederick Hart, sculptor of the statue, explains the expression he sought.

"I wanted," he said, "to get the youth and to some degree the sense of psychology of what took place, the fact that there is a kind of shadow that passes over these young faces that will never go away. I wanted to capture them at that moment when that shadow passed."

Hart spent two and a half years creating the statue. When contemplating his initial design, Hart was confronted with the problem of how to work with the refined simplicity of the wall and successfully coordinate his own figurative work with it.

His solution to the conflict was to keep the figures small in order not to compete with the scale of the wall, and, secondly, to withdraw them from the wall itself so the men would not infringe upon it.

Hart also sought to unify both the sculpture and the wall by having them interact with each other, where the figures emote and relate to what the wall represents. Therefore, the viewer is offered a myriad of experiences: the somber and reflective event of the wall, the dramatic display of the sculpture, and the meaningful interaction between the two.

After solving the question of design, Hart was then confronted with the quest for accurate details on the uniforms and weaponry.

Acutely conscious of the need for specific and verifiable details, he relied heavily on historians and was advised by members of the Army Institute of Military History and the Marine Corps Historical Society. Along with employing the help of several experts, Hart borrowed military gear from Vietnam veterans. The use of authentic materials that have the look of being used in the war was essential for a realistic representation.

The men wear cracked boots, crumpled and tightly rolled fatigue pants. Observors will note the overstuffed jacket, a worn hat and a bandolier full of bullets draped across one man's chest.

The uniforms are a composite of all the services represented in field combat and each figure wears a variety of gear. The important aspect is the uniformity and resolve of the figures, where the clothes worn by the men form a tightly woven pattern depicting the war experience.

Selection of the models for the sculpture was done in an unconventional way.

For example, Hart used three models for the black figure and each was discovered differently. The first was found when Hart was walking the streets and surveying the passers-by and saw the face he had long sought.

The second model was selected during a search through a Marine Corps barracks and the third chosen in a hospital where Hart had gone to visit a sick friend.

Representation of the ethnic groups that fought in the Vietnam war was an important consideration for the sculpture. The head of the Hispanic was modeled after Guillermo Jose Smith-Perez de Leon, a resident of Maryland who is 24 years old. The black figure evolved over the study of three men: Corporal Terrance Green of the Marines, Rodney Sherrill and Scotty Dillingham, a 15-year-old Washingtonian. The caucasian was inspired by James Connell, also a corporal in the Marines.

Each model sat for two to three hours at a time for approximately two months. The common characteristic Hart sought among all his models was that of youth and innocence, the delicate balance between childhood and manhood that is essence of his expressionistic sculpture. Hart's use of young models was sadly close to the truth of the war experience. The average age of both the Vietnam combatant and those recorded as killed or missing on the wall was 19 years old.

Often, during his sessions of sculpting, Hart would listen to Verdi's "Nabucco," an opera which depicts the enslavement of the Jews by the King Nebuchadnezzar. The piece, a highly spirited men's chorus, starts off soft and gentle as the men sing of happy memories of being free, then swells into full force in a passionate bravado reminiscent of a martial march. The passage signified the essence of what Hart was trying to convey in his work - a wistful longing for the past and an urgent beckoning to fight for the future.

To construct the clay model, Hart built an armature that would carry the skeletal structure of the figures in the pose desired. From there he added the clay in bits and pieces to form the figures. He used 2,500 pounds of green clay to make the statue, which stands seven feet high. It will be placed on a 10-inch black granite base made of the same material used in the wall.

Now that the clay model of the sculpture is complete, a complex process of casting by the foundry, Joel M. Meisner Co. of Plainview, N.Y., begins.

A plaster cast will be made here, then shipped to New York to make a rubber mold with a wax positive. From the rubber mold, a ceramic mold will be formed.

The final casting will be in bronze. The bronzing is called a "lost wax" process because when the hot bronze is poured, the wax is lost and the statue's final form takes place.

The "Three Servicemen" statue will be different than most sculptures seen in Washington. It will be finished with a rarely used "patina" process which produces surfaces with a rich variety of subtle color variations. The flesh areas will be a rich carmel bronze and the uniforms a slightly olive drab patina. Throughout the statue will be accents of high polish on the hair, eyes, buttons and pieces of military equipment.

Yearly maintenance of the sculpture will insure the patina process endurance. Therefore, the sculpture will not turn typically green or aged looking in appearance, but will retain its freshness and authenticity throughout time.

And how has the sculpture changed the sculptor who created it?

Says Hart:

"When I first got involved with this project, I was excited because the war itself was such a difficult subject philosophically, emotionally, theologically, and politically, so that in every sense it was many faceted and intriguing - a fascinating subject for study.

"A big change that came over me in these past few years is that I began to appreciate who these veterans really were, what they had been through and what they are undergoing now. I became very compassionate about their experiences and sympathetic to their feelings.

"The statue I created is meant to elevate the veteran, to say something about their experience to them, to help them be acknowledged and understood."

The "Three Servicemen" statue has been called breathtaking, moving, and memorable. It is this and more. But most importantly, it is an eloquent and realistic response to both the Vietnam War and the veterans who so courageously fought in it. It strikes at the heart with its image of youthfulness and painful poignancy and yet it speaks

of hope wherein the men's strength and loyalty lie.

This great work of art, which displays even greater men, will grace the Constitution Gardens this fall when the sculpture will be placed at the memorial site. On Veteran's Day it will be turned over to the National Park Service to rest there in honor and in peace.

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