

# Vietnam Veterans' Memorial

**Former Assemblyman  
Dick Floyd  
Author of AB650**

It started with a few very persistent Vietnam veterans and their vision.

It ended honoring 5,822 fallen California Vietnam veterans. Today, it stands as a lasting reminder and tribute to all who made sacrifices — those who made the ultimate sacrifice — paying respect to all of our Vietnam veterans.

In the early 1980s, I was approached by Vietnam veteran Herman “Woody” Woods. A double-amputee who lost his legs in Vietnam, I remember Woody as a man proud of his service. He wore his prosthetic legs — made of hard plastic and cold metal

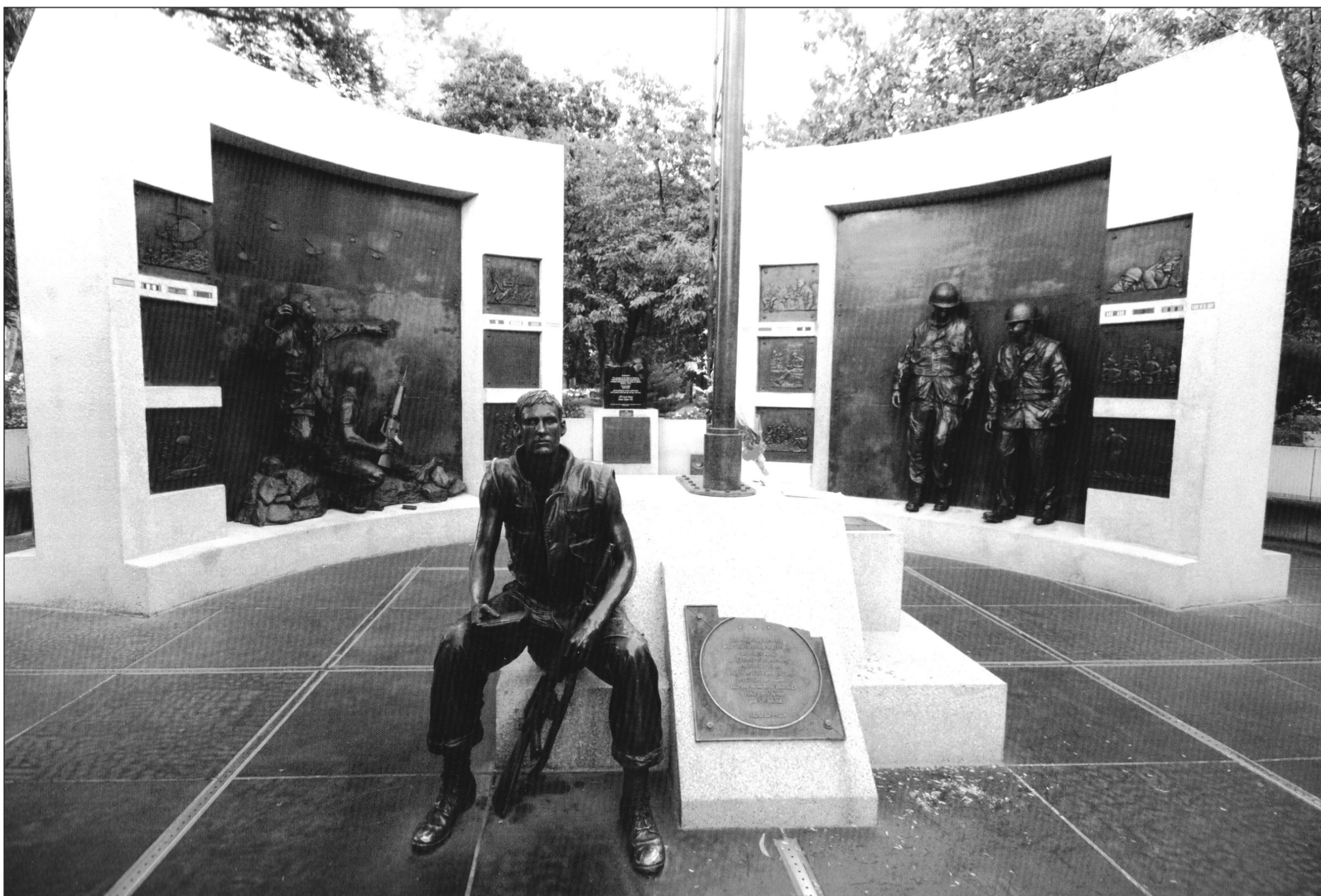
— with conviction. In fact, I don’t believe I ever saw him without a pair of shorts on

— a testimonial of the importance of freedom and the costs sometimes associated with having those freedoms.

Woody wanted a memorial.

A memorial, I remember telling him, was no easy feat to accomplish. We needed support, we needed loud voices — I needed confirmation that a memorial honoring Vietnam veterans was something California wanted. “Don’t worry,” Woody said. “You’ll get it.”

I proposed a mea-



Photos courtesy of the California Vietnam Veterans' Memorial

**The centerpiece of the memorial shows a young seated soldier reading a letter from home.**

those boys. Sure, we got the permission to build the memorial, but at a \$2.5 million price tag, how the hell were we going to pay for it?

About that time, a commission was formed. Consisting almost entirely of Vietnam veterans, these were people that not only brought their respected field expertise, but also a genuine, heart-felt passion. They wanted this memorial, and if blood, sweat and tears were currency, it would have been built long before 1988.

When their blood, sweat and tears did do was pave the way toward a grassroots effort that would eventually envelope the State of California. And while all of the commissioners were plenty of different hats, the late and charismatic B.T. Collins led the effort in securing funds for the creation of what would become one of the greatest tributes to Vietnam veterans in the nation.

B.T. Collins was a Vietnam veteran and Purple Heart recipient. And the grenade that took his arm and leg did not dampen his spirit or love of country. Instead, it seemed to instill a deep appreciation for our nation’s freedoms — despite his atrocious experiences coming home from Vietnam. His sacrifice and devotion to this nation, combined with his ability to rally — and move — an audience, made

the fundraising process not necessarily easy, but easier than most endeavors of this kind. He could, in fact, make a grown man cry — and reach for their checkbooks. In short, when he pointed his hook into an audience and shared his and thousands of other Vietnam veterans’ stories, no one could say no to B.T. Collins.

“The money began to trickle in — slowly, but surely. And although several large corporations and organizations donated, most of the money came from the citizens of California. Five dollars here, \$20 there, and sometimes just a couple of crumpled, weil-worn dollars shoved into an envelope — “This is all I have,” a barely legible note would say. This would truly become the peoples’ memorial.

Several long years of hard work were rewarded in December 1988, when the California Vietnam Veterans Memorial was finally dedicated. We gathered to pay respect — and say thanks — to these sometimes forgotten heroes. It was a chance for some to say hello or finally say goodbye — to gently slide their fingers across a name or touch the sitting soldier that to this day, still holds that reflective, haunting, gaze.

“This memorial moves people, and if it moves people — whether it makes them proud,



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**Close-up view of Rolf Kriken’s scarred hands working on the nurses panel, the first memorial to recognize women in service.**

sad, thoughtful, angry, forgiving or thankful — then people will remember and they will never forget.

Because of the California Vietnam



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**The outside of the memorial at night displaying the panels with 5,822 names of the California soldiers killed during the Vietnam War.**

Veterans Memorial, we will always remember. Ultimately, this is what Woody wanted, what the commission wanted, what I wanted and most importantly, what the thousands of California veterans and their families wanted — remembrance, thanks, and above all, never to be forgotten.

Lake County artist Rolf Kriken brought the memorial to life with his three-dimensional bronze sculptures.

Kriken’s hands are larger than life — and the epitome of dichotomy. Rough and calloused, his nails are filled with grit — representing years of fire, heat and metals. On

the other hand, these strong, scarred hands are responsible for some of the most influential, powerful and beautiful art of our time — moving hardened soldiers to tears.

An artist and founder, Kriken created the panels and three-dimensional, life-size sculptures for the California Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and in the process, gave more than 5,800 soldiers a face — a soul — to accompany their names.

Kriken wears the expression of a proud and loving, but critical father. Walking around the memorial, he is quick to point out

details he thinks he could have done better. “This piece over here,” he says pointing to a relief and shaking his head, “it didn’t quite turn out the way I wanted it to.”

The centerpiece of the memorial, however, makes his eyes light up — he smiles. “This guy has held up pretty well,” he says looking affectionately at the young seated soldier, running his tough hands gently across his arm.

A target of vandalism, the memorial’s central figure has had his gun barrel bent and broken, and his ace of spade card swiped. “I

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**Rolf Kriken, the artist who created all the bronze work at the memorial.**

sure. I held a rally in support of the measure. And Woody did not disappoint. When 800 people gathered around the Capitol that day, I was convinced the construction of the California Vietnam Veterans Memorial was the will of the people. Assembly Bill 650 was introduced and signed into law by Governor Deukmejian in September 1983.

But that was about as easy as it got. Governor Deukmejian agreed to the bill, but didn’t agree to any funding. This was, in short, a hard slap in the face for all of our Vietnam veterans and their families who gave so much, and upon return from Vietnam, got so little. Those of you who know me, know my tendency to be frank — and I will be frank in saying this — I will never forgive Governor Deukmejian turning his back on