

A Place for Solace, Reflection on Combat Experience

War Memorial for Danville site

*By Patricia Jacobus
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Some days, Vietnam veteran Norm Mahalich retreats from his hectic schedule and spends a moment aching for his 53 friends who died in battle.

When the emotions well up, the real estate broker from Diablo tries to find somewhere to reflect on his seven years of combat. Usually, that quiet place is in his car or on a street bench.

"Sometimes you feel a need to be with your friends," said Mahalich, 56. "But not everybody can just jump on a plane and go to the (Vietnam Veterans Memorial) wall in (Washington) D.C."

That is why Mahalich, a former U.S. Marine pilot, helped start a campaign in 1991 to build an All Wars Memorial at Oak Hill Park in Danville.

The memorial, designed by Scott Smith of TERRA Design & Construction, will be at the top of a hill in the park, on land donated by the town of Danville.

It will include a spiraling 200-yard path of granite blocks which will be engraved with the names of dead soldiers. The eight-inch-square blocks will be sold for \$100. Units or organizations may purchase larger blocks for \$250.



Alongside the path, "liberty" panels that have not yet been designed will depict such things as grieving families or battlefield scenes, said Ron Azarcon, an insurance agent and Vietnam veteran.

At the top of the hill, five benches will overlook the sweeping vista of Mount Diablo.

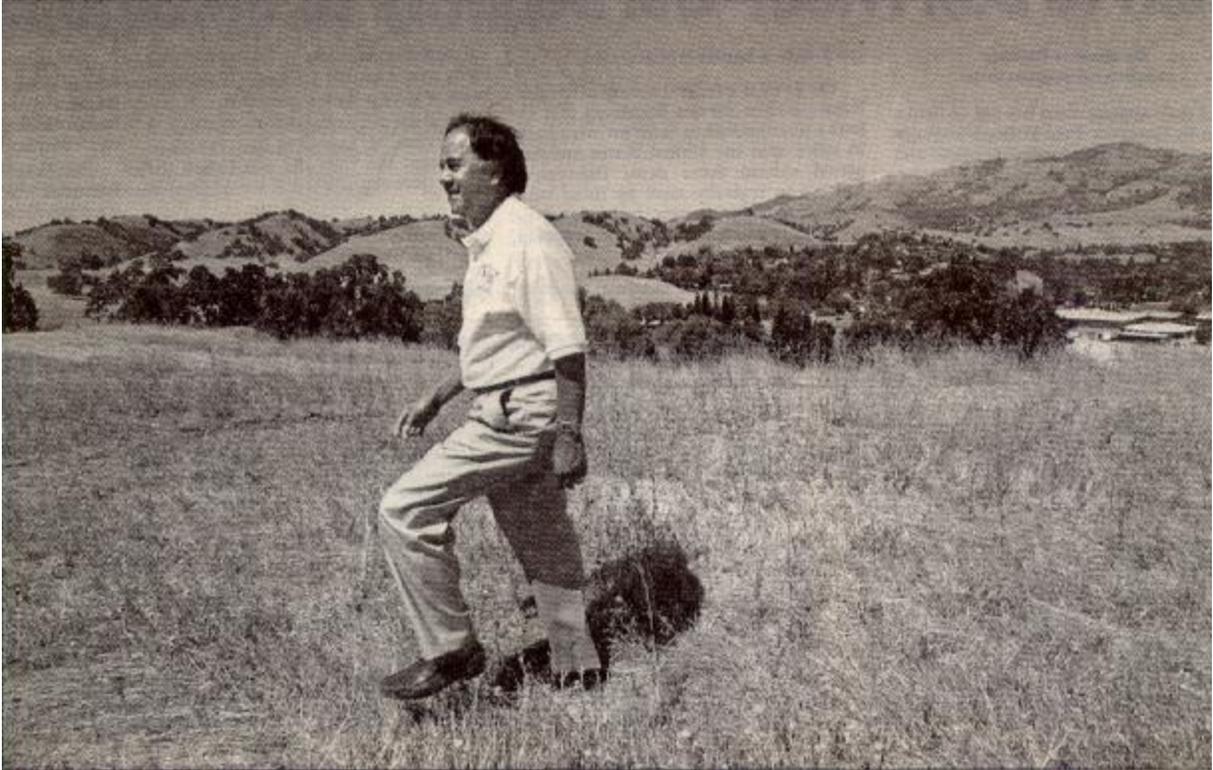
"This will be called the place for reflection and healing," Azarcon said, "where people can come and think about their loved ones."

Leading up to the reflection area will be a bronze statue, slightly larger than life-size, of a soldier helping a wounded comrade up the hill, Azarcon said.

"It doesn't reflect any particular war; it's for everybody," he said.

The rest of Oak Hill Park now has duck ponds, volleyball courts, and barbecue pits.

The All Wars Memorial is expected to cost \$500,000. So far, through golf tournaments and popcorn and granite block sales, the Vietnam Veterans of Diablo Valley has raised \$100,000.



An anonymous donor promised to give \$250,000 if the group can raise the other half by December 31.

If all the money is collected, Mahalich and the others hope to have the memorial built by next summer.

"There isn't anything in the Tri-Valley that speaks to not only the soldiers who had to bear the brunt of the war, but also to the wives, children, mothers and fathers who were left behind and had to suffer," said Danville Councilman Michael Shimansky.

Shimansky recommended a memorial park when Mahalich said he wanted to take on a project after organizing a club for Vietnam veterans in 1991.

Mahalich, who has visited the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial in Washington, D.C., was touched when he saw a photo of the moving version of the wall published in *The Chronicle* in 1984.

At the bottom of the photograph was the name Richard E. Heister and a note with the words "Dad, I miss you."

Heister had been a fellow Marine pilot with Mahalich and had died in action.

It took seven years after he saw the photo, but Mahalich finally tracked down Lance Heister through a persistent check of phone numbers, finally reaching a sister.

When Mahalich contacted Heister in Albuquerque, N.M., he was hungry for information about his father. Ron Jennings, a pilot friend of Mahalich's, flew Heister to the Bay Area and Mahalich met with him in Danville.

"We were drinking beers and smoking cheap cigars and we were on my porch yelling at each other, then I said, 'Hey you want to know what your dad was like?' and I told him to go look in the mirror."

Because his oldest brother had died earlier in the Vietnam War, Richard E. Heister - the sole surviving son - did not have to go to war when he was drafted in 1962.

But he couldn't stand to watch his two best friends, Mahalich and Jennings, march off without him.

Two months later, he was killed.

"Ron and I were at the Officer's Club drinking beers when one of the guys came running in saying Heister went down," Mahalich recalled, his voice strained. "I ran as fast as I could to the colonel's tent and heard the news. I didn't cry. I didn't cry for 30 years."

Mahalich went on to serve seven years in Vietnam. He later worked for a time as a Trans World Airline pilot.

He has kept in touch with Jennings, a Federal Express pilot in Los Angeles.

Over the years, the two old friends have supported each other through painful emotions they had both tried to "stuff away," he said.

But there are times when Mahalich would like to be alone and quietly remember. He knows other veterans, family members and friends of dead soldiers would also like somewhere to go and reflect.

Somewhere like the proposed All Wars Memorial at Oak Hill Park.

"It's not only a place to go up and cry and feel bad," he said. "It's also a place to go to feel good about what we have and what these guys fought for."