

Paul Loeffler: We can become Veterans Valley USA

So many questions surround the future of Fresno. Will high-speed rail ever become a reality? What will it take to attract more tourists and conventions, transforming our city from pit stop to destination?

My question: What if the key to forging a flourishing future for Fresno lies in honoring heroes from our history?

For nearly a decade, I've had the privilege of interviewing World War II veterans about their experiences. There aren't enough column inches in this newspaper for me to adequately detail how amazed I've been by their stories, how inspired I've been by their courage and humility, or how much fulfillment and blessing I've enjoyed along the way.

Watching people from all walks of life support Central Valley Honor Flight over the last year with their time, talent, and treasure has multiplied that satisfaction exponentially. In an era of partisanship, strife, and cynicism, the mission of taking World War II veterans to see their memorial in Washington, D.C. has proven to be a unifying force.

Ironically, it's one thing that Honor Flight cannot deliver that provided the impetus for my vision of Fresno's future. At the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall, with more than 58,000 names carved into black granite, our Honor Flight contingent feels the emotional power inherent in the wall's simultaneous immensity and specificity.

At the World War II Memorial, a thick band of gold stars above the words "HERE WE MARK THE PRICE OF FREEDOM" provides the tribute to those who made the ultimate sacrifice. That WWII price of freedom has a number (405,399), it just doesn't carry any names.

I'm not suggesting that this magnificent memorial is somehow incomplete. It will always be the "jewel of the mall," honoring our Greatest Generation with a power and scope that can't be matched. But what if, to supplement, not supplant that solemn site, there were a physical monument permanently recognizing by name those 405,399 Americans who gave their "last full measure of devotion" during World War II?

And what if we built it in Fresno?

What will it look like? Perhaps a spiraling wall, curling out like the petals of a rose, with names on both sides of the wall. Maybe some rendering of a torch, like Lady Liberty's? Better yet, let's seek concept drawings from the Valley's best and brightest, holding a contest to find the design that matches the spirit of the memorial and the men and women it seeks to honor.

Fresno has long been a beacon of freedom. From Armenians a century ago to recent Hmong immigrants and other groups in smaller contingents, our city has proven to be a refuge for those who saw the flame of freedom flicker elsewhere but found it burning bright here. Dot Fulton Street with markers honoring different groups of veterans who paid for that freedom, like the Nisei soldiers of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, or our local ex-prisoners of war.

Let that pathway lead to the ideal downtown location for the monument which will cement Fresno's new identity as the heartbeat of Veterans Valley, USA. Imagine the educational impact, with students from around the Valley and across the U.S. researching names from the memorial and adding photos and stories to an online database.

When Fresno State students interview veterans for the university's budding oral history project, they could visit the memorial, and trigger those recollections of foxhole buddies who died overseas. The educational implications are endless, but that's not the biggest reason to build it.

Military reunion groups and conventions would have a compelling new reason to consider the Valley. Maybe we'd even start seeing Honor Flights to Fresno, but that shouldn't be our motivation either.

Over the next year, the world will recognize several significant anniversaries. We'll mark 70 years since the Battle of the Bulge, since Iwo Jima, V-E Day, Okinawa, V-J Day, and others. World War II will linger on the global consciousness, and perhaps some lessons from history will be brought to bear on the geopolitical challenges of today. Fresno has a chance to be a focal point, a leader on the national stage, and I'm convinced the benefits reaped through such an effort could be staggering. The possibilities are exciting, but newfound prominence can't be our priority either.

Here's one axiom about veterans that rings as true as any: All gave some, and some gave all. In WWII, 405,399 Americans gave us the most costly gift imaginable. It's a debt we can never repay, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't try. The purest reason I see for displaying their names in Fresno? It will be *our* gift to those fallen heroes, their families, our Greatest Generation, and perhaps most importantly, future generations of Americans who will visit it and gain a new understanding of the price of freedom.

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