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Honoring disabled veterans

Longwood man helps get D.C. memorial built



COURTESY OF DENNIS JOYNER

For Dennis Joyner, life changed with a single step.

That's all it took to transform a fresh-faced Army infantryman barely out of high school into a young Vietnam vet consigned to roll through life in a wheelchair. A land mine cost Joyner both of his legs and one of his arms.

Disability is an inescapable threat of military service on and off the battlefield — a reality now facing some of the soldiers wounded in Thursday's massacre at Fort Hood in Texas.

Though Joyner spent only a year in the military, his sacrifice has always made Veterans Day a time of deep kinship with others who suffered wounds.

But Wednesday's commemoration of the



Darryl Owens
Sentinel
columnist

men and women who've worn our nation's uniforms in war and peace will carry greater resonance. It should mark the bell lap of a marathon effort to recognize the enduring sacrifice of more than 3 million American disabled veterans, an effort in which the Longwood resident has had a hand.

Sometime late next year, The American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial in Washington, D.C., should break ground. It would be the first national monument to those living with war-related disabilities. That is, if organizers can patch together enough cash by then.

Officials with the Disabled Veterans' LIFE Memorial Foundation in Delray

PLEASE SEE **OWENS, A8**

OWENS

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Beach, which has shepherded the fundraising effort, have collected about \$70 million of the \$86 million goal. Counting additional pledges and commitments, they're about \$4.2 million short, says Wendy Gueldner, foundation spokesperson.

In July, the U.S. Commission on Fine Arts issued final design approval. Construction documents are being drafted for approval by the National Capital Memorial Commission and National Park Service.

"The memorial's location — in the footprint of the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. — offers an ever-present reminder to our nation's leaders that the true cost of war and conflict involves human sacrifice," Gueldner says.

For more than 40 years, Joyner has paid that cost.

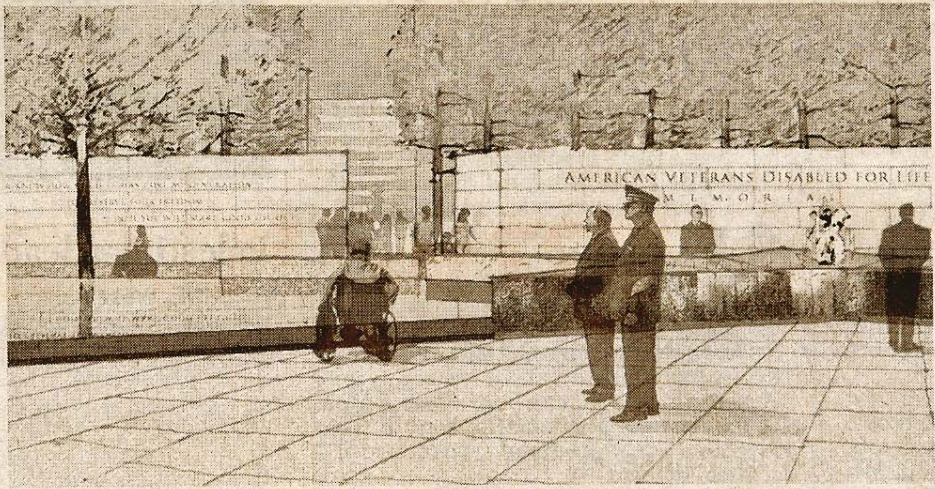
By December 1968, he'd dropped out of college, taken a job and a wife, and welcomed a son. Then came the draft notice.

Joyner was deployed to Vietnam in May 1969, attached to the Army's 9th Infantry Division. His team did three-day recon missions, corroborating intelligence reports, often amid enemy fire.

Then, on June 26, Joyner had what he calls "a bad afternoon."

While on patrol in an area of the Mekong Delta, thick jungle cover forced his team onto a path — an often-dangerous move. Along the path, Joyner, third in line, took that fateful step.

After that, he doesn't know what happened (piecing it together later, he believed it was a landmine). Flat on the ground, Joyner slowly realized the



DISABLED VETERANS' LIFE MEMORIAL FOUNDATION

An artist's rendering shows the design for The American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial. The memorial, near the U.S. Capitol, should break ground next year.

consequences.

He noticed his right leg cradled in a tree that had been split like a wishbone by the blast. His other leg was in an impossible angle, a broker femur standing at attention. Hearing footsteps, Joyner craned his head to the left to look for enemy soldiers. He noticed his sergeant coming to help, but Joyner also noticed his left hand was missing.

"You don't feel the pain," he says.

At first, quickly assessing the situation, Joyner pleaded with the sergeant, whom the men nicknamed Gomer, to "just let me die." Gomer had other plans. Slapping Joyner, he reached down, let loose some choice curses and said, "Here you are 12,000 miles from home, with a wife and son waiting for you." As the sergeant cocked his hand to deliver a follow-up slap, Joyner saw the light.

"I said: 'OK, OK, let me live.'"

And he did.

Five surgeries later, Joyner was discharged in December 1969.

For his service, Joyner received the Bronze Star and the Purple Heart. Not that scraps of metal and ribbon seemed fair trade for what Joyner, a 21-year-old with a wife and son who'd yet to negotiate his first steps, had lost in the jungle.

But he was eager to move on with his transformed life. Only "not a lot of people were looking for infantry soldiers for a job," he says. Especially of the triple-amputee variety.

"I went back home, and all these job promises [evaporated]," he says. "All these well-wishers and nothing ever materialized ... I just came to the realization that if I wanted to make something of myself in life, it's going to be up to me. It's not going to be handed to me."

So Joyner returned to college, earning an accounting degree. Through the years, he served in county courts and county government, including a brief stint filling in as supervisor of elections for Seminole County.

After serving as national commander of Disabled American Veterans in the

'80s, he was recruited about two years ago to the board of the Disabled Veterans' LIFE Memorial Foundation.

Though each war churns out its share of disabled veterans, the importance of the memorial project has deepened with the heightened numbers of wounded warriors who survive traumatic injuries thanks to vastly improved battlefield medicine.

For many, it equates to winning that battle, and losing a longer war.

The memorial, as a reminder of what disabled veterans forfeited, is important. So too, Joyner says, is what the memorial also stands for: stone proof that life for the disabled doesn't end on the field of battle.

"People look at me and think: 'Oh, my goodness. How terrible.' I've been very lucky. I've lived a very productive life. Life isn't over for most of us. It's what you want to make it."

Darryl E. Owens can be reached at dowens@orlando.sentinel.com or 407-420-5095. For more information or to donate to the memorial, go to www.avdlm.org.