



MILITARY

New memorial honoring disabled veterans takes shape near US Capitol after 16 years of planning

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WASHINGTON – Army Lt. Dawn Halfaker was on patrol 10 years ago in Baqubah, Iraq, when a rocket-propelled grenade tore through her military vehicle and exploded inside.

When she woke up from a coma, the West Point graduate found out her right arm was gone and her career as a military officer was over at age 24. It's the kind of sacrifice millions of U.S. soldiers have made dating back to the American Revolution. Veterans groups say there are as many as 4 million living today with the scars of war.

Now Halfaker will be among those pictured in a new memorial rising near the National Mall within view of the U.S. Capitol. The American Veterans Disabled For Life Memorial will be the first memorial in Washington dedicated to veterans who come home with life-changing injuries. It's a project 16 years in the making and is set to be dedicated Oct. 5.

Glass walls will carry inscriptions and photographs telling veterans' stories from different eras. Bronze silhouette sculptures will represent their service. A ceremonial flame will burn on the water's surface in a star-shaped fountain representing the five branches of military service, surrounded by a grove of trees. The idea was inspired by the camaraderie of soldiers' campfires and the flame as a symbol of renewal, designer Michael Vergason said.

"I think it will bring it home for visitors. I think it will give people a better understanding of how somebody's life is forever changed and really help them understand the sacrifice a little bit more," Halfaker said. "It's hard to explain to somebody what being in combat is like."

Halfaker created a consulting business after leaving the military and serves as chairwoman of the Wounded Warrior Project. The only thing she doesn't like about the memorial, she said, is the term disabled. She doesn't think of herself that way.

Construction has been underway for nearly a year and the memorial plaza was taking shape as The Associated Press had a look at its progress. Workers have been installing black stone elements for a fountain and reflecting pool. A Rhode Island stone carver is working to hand-carve inscriptions from George Washington and Dwight Eisenhower, in the site's marble Wall of Gratitude.

Those who planned the memorial near the Capitol wanted to ensure lawmakers and their staffs see the memorial each day "and realize there's a human cost when you send our troops into harm's way," said project executive W. Barry Owenby, who is also a veteran.

While controversies have arisen over other memorials honoring Eisenhower, Martin Luther King Jr. and World War II veterans, this project has not drawn the same scrutiny or criticism. But it has gone through the same oversight reviews as any other memorial project.

"Who could take issue with honoring those who have given a life sacrifice?" said Arthur Wilson, a disabled Vietnam veteran and co-founder of the Disabled Veterans' Life Memorial Foundation that is building the memorial. "It's a reminder that needs to be there every day."

The project is even more timely now, he said, considering the revelations of health care problems in the Department of Veterans Affairs.

The idea began in 1998 with Florida philanthropist Lois Pope, former Veterans Affairs Secretary Jesse Brown and Wilson, and it quickly drew support in Congress. By 2000, the authorizing legislation was signed by President Bill Clinton.

While some memorial projects rely on federal dollars, this memorial has been funded almost entirely with privately raised funds. Organizers raised about \$80 million from more than a million donors. The Disabled American Veterans organization contributed about \$10 million. Pope and her foundation also contributed about \$10 million. A federal grant of about \$6 million was secured to remove a road that crossed the site. The memorial will eventually be operated by the National Park Service.

Once it's finished, Vergason, the site's designer, said the fall will be a perfect time to visit. The memorial includes a grove of ginkgo trees that turn yellow in early November, just in time for Veterans Day.

American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial: <http://www.avdlm.org/>