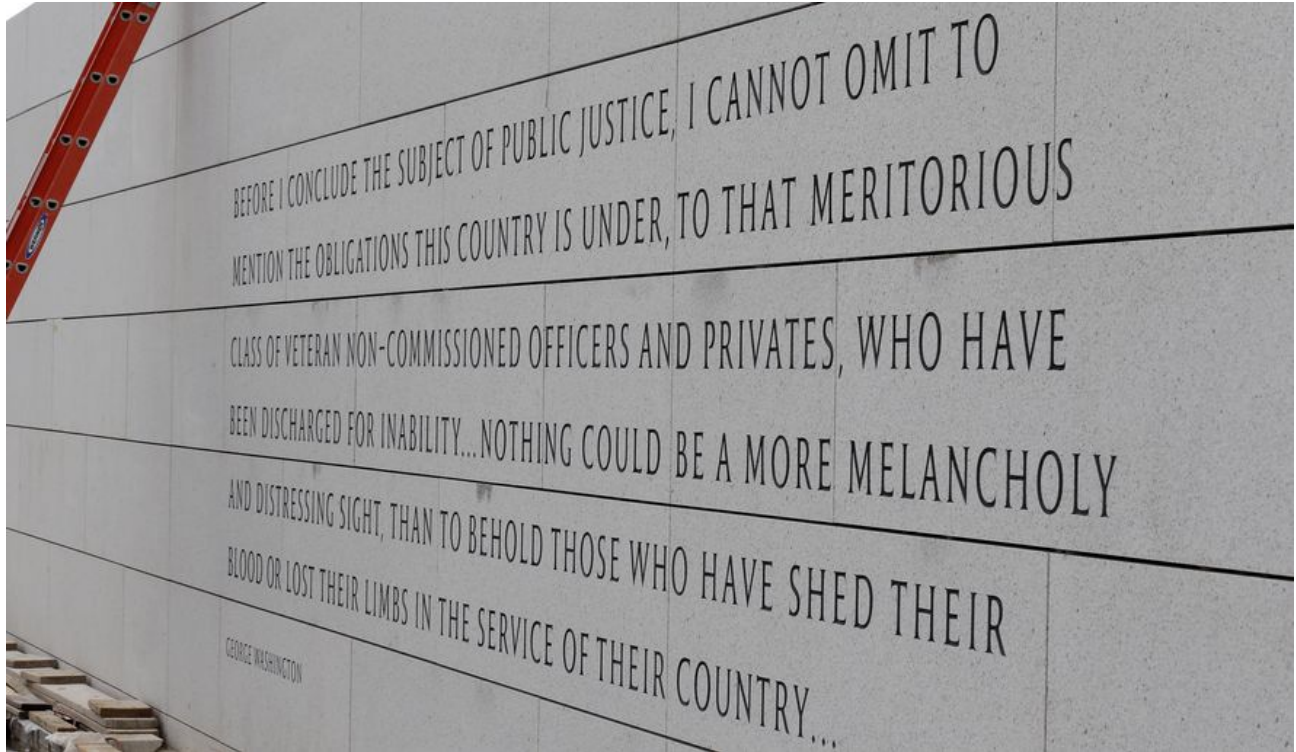


JOYNER: Finally, our disabled veterans get the memorial they deserve

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By Dennis Joyner



ANALYSIS/OPINION:

Every year, more than 25 million people from around the world visit the National Mall in Washington, DC. The Mall is lined with important memorials, each honoring some of America's greatest heroes. And yet, none of these monuments recognizes the millions of disabled American veterans who have selflessly fought for freedom throughout our nation's history.

This will soon change. On October 5, 2014, the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial (AVDLM), the first national memorial honoring disabled veterans, will be dedicated. It opens to the public the following day. Within sight of the U.S. Capitol, this new national landmark will serve as a constant reminder of the cost of human conflict.

My own connection to the new American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial is deeply personal. While on Patrol in June 1969 in Vietnam's Mekong Delta, my life changed forever—in an instant a land mine explosion made me a triple amputee. Though my life changed forever, my life was not over and I vowed to live my life as fully as I could and advocate for other disabled veterans in any way I could.

I became involved with DAV, Disabled American Veterans, and in 1983 served as the organization's National Commander. Now, as Secretary of the Disabled Veterans Life Memorial Foundation Board of Directors, I have been fortunate to work with a small group of men and women over the past sixteen years who dedicated themselves to turn the Memorial from an idea into a reality as a gathering place for veterans, their families, and loved ones.

The AVDLM honors veterans with both physical injuries and disabilities and "invisible" ones, such as post-traumatic stress disorder. It pays tribute to disabled heroes from all conflicts and each branch of the military, the first of the Washington monuments to honor such a broad and diverse group of Americans.

Physically, the memorial is designed to convey a combination of strength and vulnerability, loss and renewal. The story of America's disabled veterans is complex and multilayered, not easily told by a single statue or plaque. Not only does the Memorial cover more than two centuries of heroism and struggle, but also it includes the untold stories of the family and friends of our country's wounded warriors.

This Memorial is as much for me and my brothers and sisters who have returned from combat, as it is for those who have stood by us, like my wife Donna, and helped us carry on at home. The star-shaped fountain and reflecting pool, surrounded by glass walls with embedded words and images depicting personal journeys of courage and sacrifice, serves as its focal point, mirroring the flickering light of a ceremonial flame.

Combining solemn reflection and a celebration of bravery and sacrifice, the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial dedication will honor those men and women whose service and struggle, on and off the field of battle, remind us of the true price of the freedoms we enjoy every day.

Come October, for the first time, America will have place to pay tribute to some of our most courageous heroes – our disabled veterans. I encourage my neighbors here in Florida, veterans from around the country and all those who wish to honor them, to come to the dedication ceremony on October 5th. (The event is free and open to the public, but registration is required. For more information, please visit www.avdmlm.org)

Dennis Joyner, US Army (ret.) serves as Secretary of the Disabled Veterans Life Memorial Foundation Board of Director, he holds the Purple Heart and Bronze Star for his service.

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