

## **THE HISTORY AND CONCEPT OF THE WACO VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL**

Manuel Sustaita, founder and president, placed an announcement in the Waco Tribune-Herald, and our first meeting was held at the Ramada Inn in November, 1987. Attending the meeting were a few Vietnam Veterans, Gold Star mothers, widows and children of those who died in Vietnam and other interested guests. The purpose of the meeting was to explore the idea of building a Vietnam Veterans Memorial here in Waco.

Manuel had visited the national Vietnam Veteran's Memorial during a hurried trip to Washington, D.C. During his brief visit to the Wall, he was overwhelmed with emotion and grief as he recalled his friends who did not come back alive from Vietnam. In particular, he remembered his good friend and fellow Marine, Lance Corporal Joseph R. Wynn, who on May 14, 1965 became the first member of D Company, 3rd Recon Battalion, 3rd Marine Division to be killed in action. The saying "the good die young" was a true life experience when Joe died. Manuel remembered the families of those who died, and he thought about those who came back, never to be the same again. He recalled the way many Vietnam veterans were treated upon their return. He, along with many others, still maintained a sense of bitterness. On Manuel's return flight to Waco, he felt a transformation from bitterness to feelings of understanding, acceptance and even honor for those who served and for those who died in Vietnam. The wall had influenced Manuel as it had countless other people. Many have described the Wall as a shrine and remarked about its ability to reach out and embrace with its healing power. Could it be possible for a memorial to be built in Waco for those families, veterans and other citizens who may never go to Washington to have the experience shared by so many others at the Wall? Shouldn't Central Texans be reminded that blood, sweat and tears have paid for the cost of freedom? Thus the effort to build a Waco Vietnam Veterans Memorial was born.

We are established in the State of Texas as Waco Citizens for A Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Inc. Incorporating trustees were Manuel Sustaita, Guy Cox and John Householder. The original organization structure had four officers and three board members. The board was subsequently expanded to nine members, including the officers.

We are formed as a citizens group to allow family members and others to be involved in this project, if they desired. It was also felt that we could reach out to existing veteran's organizations by not becoming another veterans group ourselves.

We have been designated as a Section 501(c) (3) not for profit corporation and in accordance with I.R.S. determination, donors may deduct contributions to our organization to the extent allowed by law.

The memorial is located at University Parks Drive and Washington Ave in downtown Waco. It is situated in a park-like setting adjacent to the beautiful Brazos River.

As one approaches the memorial, the first sight is a quarter circle concrete wall with the inscription VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL. Extended from one end of the quarter circle are six linear concrete wall sections. A plaza is located beyond the wall. It is designated Veterans Plaza and is dedicated to this country's veterans, past, present and future. The linear wall sections facing the plaza contain bronze seals of the five branches of military service. These seals recognize the contributions of servicemen and women during the Vietnam War.

A walkway leaves the plaza and leads through a grove of 64 trees. The trees are in memory of the 64 servicemen from Waco and McLennan County who died in Vietnam. One tree ring stands empty in recognition of those still missing in action. Three pavilions are located within the trees:

Pavilion I, The Beginning, represents our country, our families and us as individuals before the Vietnam War. Its granite markers states, "Before the Vietnam War, We Were Whole."

Pavilion II, The Conflict, is encountered further along the walkway. It is similar to Pavilion I, but it is broken and torn down. It symbolizes the war itself, the destruction and turmoil, the loss of life and the divisiveness within our country. Its marker states, "The Vietnam War Brought Destruction And Turmoil."

Pavilion III, The Honor, is the final pavilion. Its marker is inscribed, "The Sacrifices of Those We Honor Make This Hallowed Ground. Let us Strive to Reunite and Heal." First, it pays tribute to the Waco and McLennan County servicemen who gave their lives in the war. On another level it recognizes the efforts of all American servicemen and servicewomen (those who died as well as those who survived) who served during the Vietnam era.

Finally, it endeavors to heal, to reconcile and to reunite all of us now that the war is over. Pavilion III is Pavilion II reconstructed to look like Pavilion I. The pillars of Pavilion III have cracks to show where the broken pillars have been put back together. The axis of Pavilion III is at an angle as compared to I and II, showing that despite our intentions to heal and to reunite, things will never be the same as they were before the war (Pavilion I). A monument stands inside Pavilion III which memorializes, by name, the 64 Waco and McLennan County casualty deaths. The monument is also in remembrance of all who served.

The memorial concept and design are the work of Mr. Don Matthews, winner of the design contest which was held in 1988.

The engineering and architecture services are by the Wallace Group, Bob Wallace, President. Jed Walker is the engineer and George Jezek is the architect.

Source: <http://wacovvm.tripod.com/history.html>