

January 23, 2005

Vietnam Era Influenced Creator of Soldier Banner

Byline Sandy Wells

Sandy on Sunday

[\[print as .pdf\]](#)

They had to do something to stop the Bush administration's race toward war with Iraq. They started West Virginia Patriots for Peace. They tried signs and slogans, letters, forums and courthouse vigils. It didn't work.

So the war started. The death toll mounted. John Doyle couldn't give up. "I was trying to think about ways I could communicate with local people, ways to directly engage them without being offensive."

He created a banner called the "Wall of Remembrance."

With help from Patriots for Peace, he unfurls it every Friday at noon on Brawley Walkway. It's 4 feet high and 140 feet long and bears the names of American soldiers killed in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The noon-to-1 p.m. vigil goes on regardless of weather, he said. "Blizzards or scorching sandstorms, we're not going anywhere."

He gets the names from military Web sites. Too many names. The original banner he made in 2003 couldn't hold them all. Sadly, he realized he was going to need something larger, something that would last.

"The pace of death is accelerating big time," he said, "and there's no end in sight. Considering the situation, the material needed to be something stronger to withstand long use."

So Patriots for Peace paid for supplies and sturdier banner material and volunteered as banner bearers. During the noon vigils at Brawley Walkway, and at other locations on special occasions, members hold up sections of the 17-panel "wall" and pass out anti-war literature.

"The idea happened to be mine," Doyle said, "but I couldn't do this without Patriots for Peace. I couldn't even hold it up without them."

Handouts explain the group's opposition to the war and encourage people to ask state congressional representatives to support a phased withdrawal of troops beginning the end of June.

"We feel there are better ways to deal with the world than using up the lives of our young people in a pursuit that is ridiculous on both practical and moral levels," Doyle said.

Names of the used-up lives appear in 5-by-10-inch blocks, along with the soldier's hometown, age, rank, service branch and date of birth. Blue and gold ribbons identify most of the dead West Virginians. The organization plans to compile an index so names can be easily located.

They believe the wall may be the only one of its kind in the country.

Inspired by the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C., Doyle's banner makes no political statement, he said. In the beginning, it did. "On the original banner, after the title, 'U.S. Military Personnel Killed in the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq,' I put 'Because Bush Lied.'"

"A friend said it was stronger without that. I appreciate that little slap on the wrist. I'm glad my friends had more restraint than I did. Now, it simply states that these are the names of folks who gave their lives in this war."

What worries him, he said, is why they had to give their lives. "I've heard no believable answer to that question. They've finally admitted that the weapons of mass destruction aren't there."

Troops on duty at the start of the war "were exploited in the most foul way," he said. "They were being sent out basically to enforce a lie."

He respects their devotion to duty and how they trusted in the judgment of leaders who sent them to war, he said. The intent behind the banner is to honor them and call attention to their sacrifice, he said, not to bash the military.

"I come from a military family. My grandfather died in World War I. My uncle was a battle commander in World War II. My older brother served in Korea. My stepbrother served in Vietnam. I have 100 percent respect for the decision those folks made.

"I'm very emphatic in saying that a person can't depend on my opinion. They have to form their own. But I hope they do that with some energy and think deeply about it and research it."

His son, Daniel, joined the Navy in November. "He's at sea on the USS Cole, the ship that was bombed in Yemen harbor a few years ago. I have always told him that a person's personal opinion is a lot more important than what I think they ought to do."

A conscientious objector, Doyle said he is a product of his times. "Martin Luther King was a big inspiration to me. My teeth were cut on the Vietnam experience. But I don't think any war in my lifetime has been justified."

He registered for the draft when he turned 18 in 1970, the height of the Vietnam War. "I was never called up, so the conscientious objector issue never came to trial," he said, "but I was always vocal about that commitment. My son heard me talk about it from the time he was a kid."

In 1979, black-lung legislation brought Doyle to West Virginia as a claims representative for Social Security. He worked in Montgomery. "Thirteen of us, all from big Eastern cities, were in a training class. I was the only one left in West Virginia after two years."

In 1989, he moved to Maryland with his wife, Laura Mahony, a nurse midwife who lost her job here when the Women's Health Center closed its birthing center. "The idea was for me to get closer to my kids," he said. "My two kids were growing up in Baltimore with their mother. It was very difficult to do justice to being a dad."

In Baltimore, he volunteered to help the Quakers with anti-war literature, an experience that strengthened his commitment, he said.

Illness in the spring of 1991 cost him his job. "I was very sick for a couple of years, and Laura wasn't happy in her job. We both missed West Virginia. I was miserable the whole time I was gone," he said. "I love it here."

He contacted friends at the New River Health Center in Fayetteville and his wife joined the staff there as director. Eight years later, in 2000, they moved to Charleston, where she works for Family Care. A semi-professional potter, Doyle works part time as a vocational counselor.

For information on Patriots for Peace, call 346-3303 or visit www.wvpatriotsforpeace.com.

To contact staff writer Sandy Wells, call 348-5173 or e-mail sandyw@wvgazette.com.

© Copyright 1996-2005 [The Charleston Gazette](#)