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'It's not just a name but a life' (video)

Kevin Solari Jun 13, 2016



MARSEILLES — Fifteen black granite blocks stand along the north shore of the Illinois River at Marseilles, thousands of gray names etched into the mirrored surfaces.

High above the blocks, flags representing the United States, Illinois, prisoners of war and the different armed services snap in the wind. The river rushes behind, downstream from the Marseilles Dam. It's not quiet, but it is peaceful.

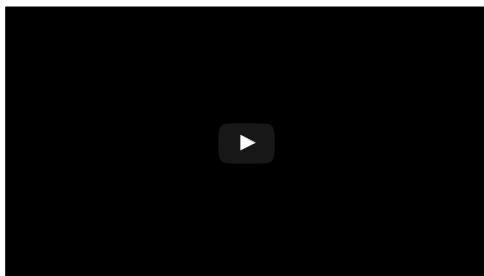
On the ground in front of the blocks are small items: children's drawings, keepsakes, stones brought from someplace else, empty beer cans and bottles.

Combat boots.

The Middle East Conflicts Wall Memorial holds the names of every American service member killed in action in that region since 1979, including the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, the Beirut bombing, the USS Cole and USS Stark.

The wall resulted from efforts from the Illinois Motorcycle Freedom Run to erect a monument for the soldiers who have died in America's Middle East conflicts.

Linda Rose, secretary for the Illinois Motorcycle Freedom Run, said keepsakes started appearing at the wall almost immediately. She said the pictures left behind stand out to her.



"You look at the picture that someone left behind and that's a loved one," Rose said. "That's someone that's gone."

The land for the wall was donated by IV Cellular, whose offices are nearby. Employees at the company have since become involved in helping preserve the memorial. Bobby Kaminski, director of product development at IV Cellular, also serves on the committee that oversees the upkeep of the wall. He said they would bring items into the offices when they were first left to get them out of the elements.

"People left shoes, boots, clothing," he said.

"Some of the things were even vandalized and tossed into the river," said JC Heerd, another IV Cellular employee who does work for the memorial. "So what we started doing was after they left them there we started bringing them inside."

About six years ago, Kaminski said the office underwent a remodeling and was left with some extra space in the front of the building in what was formerly the tech center. The company donated the space to house the keepsakes and it now serves as a museum to preserve what was left behind at the memorial.

Everything is there.

"We never toss out anything," Kaminski said.

The museum keeps the same hours as the office building and is open to the public.

Inside is everything that's ever been left at the walls in memory of the fallen: stuffed animals, drawings, photographs – both personal and in uniform.

"The thing that stands out is the clippings or the boots," Heerd said. "The newspaper clippings tell the story about one of the warriors. When you can read a little bit more about them than just the name on the wall, you realize it's not just a name but a life."

Several displays in the museum are dedicated to just one of the names on the wall and go beyond just the name and rank displayed on the wall outside.

"Some of these displays start to tell stories," Heerd said. "As people came by, left things, some of them were all from the same warrior that lost their life. We started building those stories on some of the displays that you see."

The museum has attracted attention from far outside the Illinois Valley region. The guest book includes names from Chicago, Wisconsin, Arizona and as far away as St. Petersburg, Russia.

The international curiosity makes sense to Rose.

"They want to honor their fallen as we honor our fallen," she said.

Personal displays are also outside by the walls.

A small wooden cross with "RIP Spc. Russell S. Hercules Jr." written on it sits near one granite block.

"He was my husband's best friend," said Dawn Putnam of Marseilles. "We named our son after him."

Putnam said her family had placed the cross in the dirt next to the wall. Her husband, Joseph Putnam, is a veteran of the Iraq War. She said he suffers from PTSD and the memorial is helping him.

"This place is really good for him to come and grieve the loss of his friend," she said. "It's so special that it's here."

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The wall is currently operated privately by committee. It was built with donated labor and its upkeep is done by volunteers and donations. But it is nationally known.

"It's definitely a national wall," said Rose. "It's a wall that was built for everyone, same as the Vietnam Wall."

Rose said the Illinois Motorcycle Freedom Run was in the process of trying to make the memorial the official national memorial for soldiers lost in Middle East conflicts.

"It's a long process to go through," she said.

It is also the destination of the group's annual motorcycle ride, taking place always the third Saturday in June. A ceremony reveals the names of those killed in action over the previous year added to the wall. This year the run is June 18, and Rose said they were expecting 6,000 participants.

Even without Federal designation, it attracts visitors from across the country. On their ride back from Memorial Day ceremonies in Washington, D.C., a group of Vietnam War veterans stopped to pay their respects at the wall.

Ralph "Sidewinder" Sorenson of San Dimas, California said he first read about the memorial online.

"It's nationally known that this is the wall for Mideast conflicts," he said.

The week before, as part of the National Veterans Awareness Ride, the group had left a wreath during a ceremony at the wall.

Putnam recalled a ceremony she and her family had attended, that included someone playing "Taps" on the bagpipes.

"It was so perfect for such an important place," she said.

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