

COMMENTS/TESTIMONY AND REQUEST OF:

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NCPC August 3 Meeting - Vietnam Veterans Memorial Visitor Center - File No. 6597

SENT TO:

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REQUEST TO PARTICIPATE AS A CONSULTING PARTY UNDER SECTION 106

I, Rimantas (Ray) Saikus, a Vietnam Veteran, request to participate as a Consulting Party under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act.

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

I am a Vietnam Veteran (1968-69 with the 173rd Airborne Brigade) who has been active in Veteran related activities since 1987. I am the Vice-President of the Memorial Day Association of Greater Cleveland (www.mdaogc.org) with the mission of documenting and decorating the gravesites of over 120,000 deceased veterans buried in over 150 cemeteries throughout Cuyahoga County and organizing the county wide Memorial Day ceremony. I am also the Secretary-Treasurer of the Joint Veterans Commission of Cuyahoga County (www.jvcooc.org) charged with the mission of conducting the Flag Day and U.S. Army Birthday commemoration event and the Veterans Day Ceremony as well as coordinating various veterans activities. I am a Lifetime Member of the Vietnam Veterans of America (Executive Board Member of Greater Cleveland Chapter 15). I am a Lifetime Member of the 82nd Airborne Division Association, John Towle Cleveland Chapter. I am an Executive Board member of the Cleveland Cultural Garden Federation (CCGF) and a delegate from the JVCOCC to the CCGF representing the interests of WWI Veterans Liberty Row Memorials (over 800 trees planted with medallions at their base to honor WWI soldiers killed in action). I am also the President of a civic organization, Citizens Vision (www.citizensvision.org). I have testified on May 16, 2006 before the US Senate Sub-Committee on National Parks in opposition to the Vietnam Veterans Visitor Center (VVMVC) legislation that would have excluded the families of those who made the ultimate sacrifice, the Vietnam Veterans and their families, as well as the public, from participating in the site selection and design. I have submitted comments to the National Park Service regarding the Environmental Assessment and have filed to participate as a consulting party with the NPS as it relates to the VVMVC. I was a plaintiff (Committee to Save Cleveland's Huletts et al vs. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers) in a successful lawsuit to enforce the National Historic Preservation Act. I have a Mechanical Engineering Degree as well as a MBA degree.

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INTRODUCTION TO POSITION ON SITE SELECTION AND DESIGN

Mr. Chairman and members of this commission, thank you for the opportunity to testify and I request that five minutes be allowed for my presentation since I echo the voices of many of my fellow Vietnam Veterans with whom I have shared the information and especially the family of my best friend from high school, Steve Mylant, who was killed in Vietnam in 1967.

I am grateful to Elizabeth Merritt of the National Trust for Historic Preservation for alerting me of this meeting and to your staff for keeping in touch and assuring me I will have the opportunity to speak regarding this project as I made arrangements to travel here at my own cost.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Visitor Center (VVMVC hereinafter) as proposed is objectionable to all of us because the legislation is directing the building of this site underground "a Bunker or Tunnel". It is an insensitive act towards Vietnam Veterans and especially to the families who lost a loved one in that war, in that something so relevant to honoring the sacrifice of our comrades and interpreting our own service as well as the sacrifice of countless families, is again being placed out of sight, hidden as if in shame. Our memorial, "The Wall", was buried into the soil while the Korean and WWII memorials were allowed to stand above ground in the line of sight on our National Mall and towering over the visitor.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (the Fund) has not been given or earned exclusive rights to represent us Vietnam Veterans in the VVMVC site selection and design, they are welcome to participate without the exclusion of other Vietnam Veterans and the public. The Fund and others involved in this project did not follow the letter of the law in that the project information was not disseminated across the country and consultation with other Vietnam Veterans was not implemented. Then came the attempt to bypass the rest of us Vietnam Veterans, the families and the public by legislation, it angered those of us who learned of it. Those who gave their lives, to bring freedom to the peoples of foreign lands and to defend our democracy, and their families as well as those who served and their families will be dishonored if we deprive our fellow veterans and citizens the rights to participate in our nation's deliberations. I bring notice that we are here to guarantee all of our voices are heard and our concerns are acted upon.

Our Congress needs to be contacted immediately by the leadership of the National Capitol Planning Commission as well as the Vietnam Veterans, the families whose loved ones are on "the Wall" and the public, to request that the legislation dictating an underground location be amended to allow further investigation as to the best alternative to present and interpret the Vietnam War and our experiences. I know that there are bills being considered and on hold to move this project and disregard public input and the review process, do not that hinder your judgment to bring about a project that future generations will credit those involved with vision and courage to do what is best for our veterans and our country.

The name as used throughout the legislation and Environmental Assessment was not thoroughly thought out since its acronym VVMVC has an objectionable ending to most of us Vietnam Veterans in that incorporates our enemy's acronym VC (Viet Cong) into something that is to memorialize our comrades in arms and interpret our service to our country. After sharing the information about the underground plans, an older non-veteran friend of mine also found it objectionable and stated "are they going to have workers in black pajamas welcoming the visitors?". Placing the Visitor Center underground will be more a tribute to the Viet Cong since "the Tunnel" reflects the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese way of life during the Vietnam War and it will be seen as another victory for our enemies.

Going forth with this project without a thorough consideration for interpretive venues for the WWII, Korea and other veterans' related memorials will be a disservice to all our Veterans,

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the families and our country. It does not allow the opportunity for finding a way for completing the healing process for the emotional scars that the treatment of Vietnam Veterans by the veterans of WWI and especially WWII and the public had inflicted on the Vietnam Veterans and their families and our nation. The motto of the Vietnam Veterans of America, "Never again will one generation of veterans abandon another" was born for that reason and being a Vietnam Veteran I subscribe to that conviction. Not only we, Vietnam Veterans, have pledged to support our fellow veterans for wars and conflicts since our war but we have also taken the leadership role to guarantee that veterans from all eras, past and future, are not forgotten, especially those who cannot come to their own defense. Korean Veterans have readily identified with our agonies and have supported us.

It is time that the ultimate sacrifice and the service to our country by countless of generations is valued the same, for doing otherwise we shame our country and we do a disservice to those who have given all and those who have placed and are currently placing their lives in harms way, and to their families. Let there be no mistake, there is no single great generation, but there are those who are the greatest citizens in each generation, those being the ones who gave their lives for our country and their families as well as those who served and their families.

In Cleveland, Ohio, I was one of the founders of an organization, Greater Cleveland Veterans Memorial Inc. (GCVM) lead by Vietnam Veterans. GCVM went ahead and unified the honoring of those killed during our various wars by rededicating a Memorial, Marshall Fredericks "Fountain of Eternal Life", originally dedicated to those killed during the WWII and Korean Wars to one honoring those killed since the Spanish American War to the current Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. This symbol of unity and equal respect for all who made the ultimate sacrifice for us and our country, gave the Greater Cleveland community a very lasting peace and healing tool, especially to the families of those who gave their all and the Vietnam Veterans and their families. This rededicated Memorial with over 5500 names was complemented by a website www.clevelandvetmemorial.org.

The only relationship in experience that we can have from this project as it is being considered and "the Wall" is that we will be going into a hole in the ground. "The Wall" embraces you and your spirit can look to the heavens for relief of the pain and sorrow that one might be experiencing. The "Bunker/Tunnel" will take us Vietnam Veterans, our families and this nation into hell with no escape, failing to deliver on its intended purpose - to be inspirational, educational, and uplifting, a place for healing and reflection.

Now that I know that a money making National Park Service Kiosk is being put up above ground at the same site where the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Visitor Center is being forced totally underground, it angers me even more. My fellow veterans anger will be even greater knowing that families and visitors, who come to give their respects to those who gave their lives for their country during the Vietnam War, are going to be exploited by having a profiteering National Park Service Kiosk blocking the views that they claim the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Visitor Center cannot block.

The VVMVC has to be distant enough from "the Wall" to motivate those who find the story of the soldier or soldiers which moves their heart and soul to walk that extra distance, to let "The Wall" be a separate experience, embrace the visitor and speak to their heart and soul, and then invite the visitor to reach for those names whose stories are now imbedded in the visitors minds. Or for the visitor who chooses to visit "The Wall" first, to allow him/her to clear their emotions before they engage them again when they experience the roller coaster of emotions that the story of the Vietnam War will take them through. And once engaged to give them the space and distance to build up their strength so they can handle the embrace of "The Wall" again.

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The proposed site being in a flood plain and especially being underground requires a Development Permit from FEMA. See the FEMA map attached. We are experiencing more severe weather in regards to storms and hurricanes, a more updated analysis of this site and any other site as to potentially being a Special Flood Hazard Area (SFHA) is a must.

Most reasonable people can see that the underground option is not viable for the intended purposes. Please help deliver that message to Congress and urge to open up for other options.

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