



GUEST OPINION – September 18, 2013 – Craig H. Mandeville

Auburn should support a proposed joint war memorial

First, let me introduce myself. I am Craig H. Mandeville, Lt. Col., U.S. Army (retired). Not that it matters in this discussion, but I have two Silver Stars and four purple hearts, etc.

I hold the position as president of the Vietnam War Memorial in Westminster, Calif. I was just elected after our founder and president, Frank Fry, passed away. Frank was a former mayor and was serving on the Westminster City Council during the approval phase and just shy of 10 years after it was dedicated on April 30, 2003.

I mention Frank, a World War II veteran, because of his position on the council and because his reputation within the Vietnamese–American community made our efforts considerably easier. The memorial was Frank's dream to help welcome the South Vietnamese to our country and show the pride for those Americans who had fought side by side for a free Vietnam.

I have listened to the tapes of your City Council and read the articles. It is *deja vu* for me. I have heard all the arguments for and against the memorial. However, I have heard nothing that we didn't hear 10 years ago.

I might mention that the strongest arguments came from the VFW and American Legion. I was startled. They turned their backs on the returning Vietnam veterans as well as scoffed at the South Vietnamese veteran, and here they were doing it again. Those residents who presented their arguments were persons in the community who were against the war when it was going on and had not changed.

In my opinion and supported by facts, many used the flag issue to cover up their prejudice against the Vietnamese. Others had a patriotic stance that no other flag should be on our soil or fly next to the U.S. flag. In fact, the former mayor felt that way in the beginning and now she is our strongest supporter.

After four years of discussions and five years of fundraising the city/county gave us 1½ acres. Those same arguments about taxpayer land, legal rights, upkeep, etc., all had been heard. The City Council and the committee made a contract about construction timelines, ownership and maintenance. Thank goodness we had lawyers working pro-bono on our behalf.

The flag issue surfaced many times when veterans groups and well-meaning patriotic Americans questioned why the flags would be at the same height. I had to research the regulations to show them that were correct. Also, we decided to put one taller American flag over the whole park that helped squelch that issue.

The flag of Free Vietnam (yellow with three red stripes) seems to conjure up, for many, bad feeling/memories and whether it should be in a park with other memorials. Our park is called the Sid Goldstein Park in memory of a local resident who won the Distinguished Service Cross in Korea. I know it is not quite the same as yours.

Important to Vietnamese-Americans

I wish I could speak before you on the importance of the flag of free Vietnam, its meaning in history and how important it is to Vietnamese-Americans – especially veterans and their families – as well as to those advisors like myself who fought side by side with the South Vietnamese.

Please try to put yourself in the place of the South Vietnamese who not only lost their struggle for a free Vietnam, but came here with nothing and lost everything to include their home. We cannot understand how they feel, but the one thing that reminds them of their home and a hope for a free Vietnam is their flag. I can attest that thousands of Vietnamese and their families visit the memorial and they feel uplifted by the sight of their flag flying proudly next to the U.S. flag. It somewhat lessens the terrible memory of losing their country and allows history to stay alive with their families.

For those American veterans who have bad feelings and memories about the South Vietnamese, I can assure you I know the feeling. On my first tour in 1967-68, I was with the 101st Airborne and my battery was overrun. It turns out that the RVNs (ships of the Republic of Vietnam Navy) that were providing us security let the bad guys in. For sure, I left Vietnam on my first tour with a bitter taste. However, I was sent back to Vietnam in 1972 and was assigned as an advisor to a South Vietnamese infantry regiment. Needless to say, I was not happy and did not trust them. I quickly learned that I could.

One or two bad memories should not be a judge of all.

In communist Vietnam today there is no sign of the flag of South Vietnam. They want to blank out the one symbol they fear the most. That flag is why we, as a country, went to war and why we, as Vietnam veterans, are proud of what we did to help keep that a free country.

It is appropriate to see the two flags together. When we approach such a memorial you are reminded of the over 58,000 Americans, over 250,000 South Vietnamese and allies who died fighting for a free Vietnam. For those who opposed the memorial here initially, they are now our biggest supporters. It has caused healing and for many helped their issues with PTSD.

When we started this, I had veterans at the Boeing plant where I worked who wouldn't even talk to me. But after one trip to see the memorial and talk about it, their adverse feelings dissipated.

To me, it is imperative that such a memorial welcomes the South Vietnamese to our shores who are now Vietnamese Americans and show our respect for their homeland, their ancestry and the hardships they have endured. But also, that flag gives them hope for a free Vietnam one day.

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