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After 15 years, Air Force gets memorial over capital

Monument to service opens this month. 'It's long, long overdue.'

By Alan Gomez
USA TODAY

The Navy has one. The Army has several. The Marines have one, too.

And Oct. 14, after 15 years of red tape and \$30 million raised in private funds, the military's youngest branch will finally get its memorial.

Sitting on a promontory high above the Pentagon, the U.S. Air Force Memorial will introduce a new landmark to the Washington skyline. Three curved, stainless steel spires will arc up to 270 feet in the air to honor a branch of the service on the verge of commemorating its 60th year in existence.

"It's long, long overdue," said Command Chief Master Sgt. Lew Monroe with the Air Force District of Washington.

From the start, designing a monument for the Air Force has been a challenge of abstracts no monument has faced before. Though architects have long struggled to capture the concepts of sacrifice and death, the architect of the Air Force memorial faced an additional challenge — giving form to air and space while honoring the Air Force's past, present and future.

Architect James Ingo Freed, who designed the Holocaust Museum and the Ronald Reagan Building before winning the Air Force memorial competi-



U.S. Air Force handout

Taking flight: The stainless steel spires of the U.S. Air Force Memorial soar into the night sky in Arlington, Va. The memorial pays honors the patriotic men and women of the U.S. Air Force and its predecessor organizations.

tion, wrote about that struggle before he died of Parkinson's disease last year.

"The Navy has the medium of water, which can always be shown in fountains, and the Army has the medium of land, which can be referenced with mountains and plains; the Air Force has the medium of air, which is very difficult to show," he wrote.

What he came up with were three slender, stainless steel spires, each a different height, rising and curving away from each other. The image will remind anyone who's been to an air show of the "bomb burst" maneuver carried

out by the Air Force Thunderbirds and other flight teams.

"The arcane shape certainly has a feeling of soaring in the air. The stainless steel has a certain recall of the advanced technology of airplanes," Project Manager Kyle Johnson said.

The sheer height of the memorial also has a purpose.

"When you walk up to this memorial, you have to look up. Your eyes are drawn to the sky," said Ross Perot Jr., an eight-year Air Force veteran who chairs the memorial's foundation board.

The Marine Corps War Memorial is just north of Arlington National Cemetery and depicts the hoisting of the American flag on Iwo Jima during World War II. The U.S. Navy Memorial in downtown Washington consists of a map of the world in granite, surrounded by sculptural depictions of historic events in naval history. Although there is no single monument to the Army, its generals, battles and units are memorialized in scores of sculptures and statues all over Washington.

The foundation board has been working on the Air Force memorial for 15 years, first trying to secure a plot of land next to the Iwo Jima Memorial. That effort failed, resulting in the memorial's current spot.

Visitors will have a sweeping view of Washington. If the expansion of nearby Arlington National Cemetery goes as planned, the memorial will one day be surrounded by tombstones of servicemembers.

"It takes its place among the landscape of all those things," Johnson said. "It's a conversation between all the memorials and the Capitol dome."

Turning Freed's vision into reality took complex engineering.

The architects pushed for slenderness in the spires to evoke a feeling of weightlessness. Engineers balked, saying the height required girth. The compromise was triangular, hollow spires wrapped in sheets of stainless steel. The bottom third of each spire is filled with concrete, and the top portions are equipped with a unique weight-distribution system.

"There's an unbelievable elegance in the simplicity of it," Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Michael Moseley said.

The memorial also will feature a sculpture of a four-man Honor Guard, a glass contemplation wall picturing a "Missing Man" formation (an aerial salute performed at funerals in which one plane splits off from a group) and two black, granite walls that pay homage to the history of the Air Force.

Walter "Bud" Mahurin is part of that history. The nation's leading living Air Force "ace," Mahurin recorded more than 25 kills in World War II and the Korean War. The distinction of ace (at least five kills) will be a rarity in the Air Force of the future as technology renders man-to-man combat obsolete.

Honoring high-flying spirit

The Air Force Memorial is scheduled to open Oct. 14. The site features a trio of stainless steel spires that overlook the Pentagon and the Potomac River. The memorial's design is intended to evoke the flying spirit.

The contemplation wall

A 10-foot-tall, 9-foot-wide wall honors servicemembers who have died. The wall is made of five layers of glass and is engraved with Air Force planes performing the "Missing Man" formation.

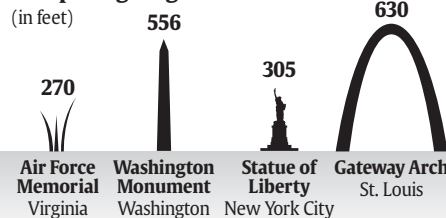
The inscription walls

A 56-foot-long, 10-foot-tall granite wall at each end of a central lawn. The walls include panels made of black granite from Africa.

The designer

Architect James Ingo Freed, who died last year, also designed the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington and the Jacob K. Javitz Convention Center in New York City.

Comparing heights



Sources: Air Force Memorial Foundation, National Park Service, The Gateway Arch

Mahurin, 87, recalled being thrust into a P-47 Thunderbolt at age 23 and sent to fight the highly-experienced German Luftwaffe.

"I was scared to death, of course," Mahurin said from his home in Newport Beach, Calif. "I wasn't sure I'd make it, but neither was anyone else."

Mahurin was shot down over France in March 1942. He escaped capture with the help of the French underground

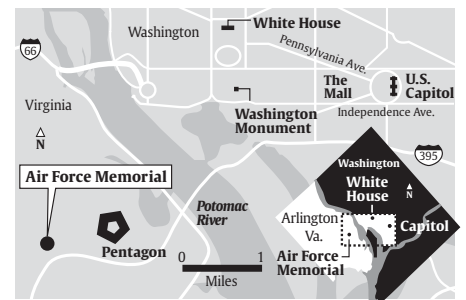
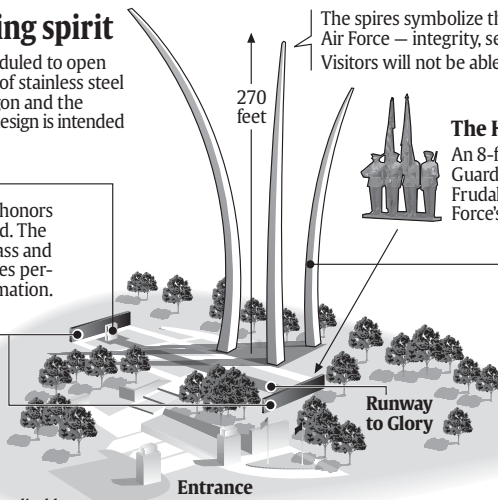
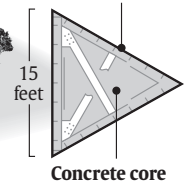
The spires symbolize three core values of the Air Force — integrity, service and excellence. Visitors will not be able to enter the spires.

The Honor Guard Statue

An 8-foot-tall bronze Honor Guard sculpture by Zenos Frudakis reflects the Air Force's diversity.

Spire cross-section

3/4 inch stainless steel plates



By Karl Gelles, USA TODAY

only to be shot down again after downing three Japanese fighters over the Pacific.

In Korea, he was shot down again, captured and held prisoner for 16 months. He says he was one of the lucky ones. He hopes the new memorial will honor the ones who weren't.

"It's just an honor to have been some part of that," he said.

DISCUSSION

- ▶ List at least four ways that the new Air Force memorial captures the spirit of the Air Force. If you need help, refer to the article and the "Honoring high-flying spirit" graphic.
- ▶ What challenges did architect James Ingo Freed face when designing the monument? What feelings do you think Freed wanted the monument to inspire? Imagine that he had used wood in the design of the memorial, instead of stainless steel. How might the feel of the structure have been different?
- ▶ How is the Air Force memorial, as Project Manager Kyle Johnson expressed, "a conversation between all the memorials and the Capitol dome"? What are these landmarks saying to each other?
- ▶ Why do you think the graphic includes a "Comparing heights" section? In your opinion, should the Air Force memorial be taller? Would increasing its height have been possible?

VOCABULARY

promontory
abstracts
medium
spires
sheer
depictions
scores
evoke
balked
girth

Activity: The article discusses the difficulty of conveying abstract concepts such as sacrifice, air, space, past, present and future. Imagine that you are designing a sculpture for an Air Force recruitment center. The purpose of the artwork is to convey the characteristics that all Air Force personnel should have. First, in small groups, brainstorm a list of the qualities that make a person a good candidate for the Air Force (e.g., adventurous, brave, etc.). Next, choose and circle the three qualities that you think are most important. Then, decide how you would depict these characteristics in one, fluent abstract sculpture. (Abstract works of art do not use concrete pictures to convey meaning. Like the Air Force memorial, they use color, texture, material and form to produce an emotional and/or intellectual response in viewers.) Finally, sketch the sculpture on a separate sheet of paper and ask peers for their interpretations of it. Based on classmates' feedback, what changes, if any, would you make to your design?

Brainstorm a list of the qualities that make a person a good candidate for the Air Force.

Choose the three characteristics that are most important to success in the Air Force. Discuss and list different ways that you could represent each in an abstract sculpture.

Characteristic 1:

Ideas:

Characteristic 2:

Ideas:

Characteristic 3:

Ideas:

Peers' comments:

What improvements or changes could we make to the sculpture?