

Crosses Politic Bay Area Veterans

California's controversial crosses evoke anger among many veterans, who believe the memory of Americans killed in Iraq and Afghanistan should not be sullied by peace activists.

BY LESLIE

Every time WWII Army Air Forces veteran Robert Tharratt drives to and from friends west of his retirement community, he sees 4,000 white crosses and the number of Iraq casualties sticking out on a hillside. And every time he looks up from the highway through the quiet, affluent San Francisco suburb of Lafayette, his blood boils.

"I don't see them a lot, but I know they are there," Tharratt said. "They are always in the back of my mind. They are using those dead soldiers as a political tool. This is not a cemetery. It's politicking."

Anti-War Message

As the cross display enters its second year and international press coverage about it spreads, veterans are increasingly speaking out about what they believe is an anti-war, anti-troop agenda being foisted onto the backs of fallen troops. It is visible to 167,000 drivers (according to the California Department of Transportation) who travel past them every day. Cross founders hope the display reminds people of the war.

"But throwing this picture into commuters' faces does it in the wrong way," said Sgt. Jeremy Christiansen, an Iraq veteran who completed his tour with the Army's 134th Military Police Company at Camp Anaconda in 2005 and is a member of VFW Post 6435 in Antioch, Calif.

It's an obvious anti-war statement advertising death, Christiansen believes, and the crosses are the cruelest reminder of the brothers he left behind. When he left Iraq on a C-17 transport after 15 months, he and his comrades were thrilled to be going home alive. Then they looked over their shoulders and just 100 feet away was another plane being loaded up with caskets.

"The cross founders want to express the fact that 4,000 soldiers have been killed. You can get that statement across in many different ways other than with crosses," he says.

The question of what exactly constitutes a memorial or if it's in good taste to paint a picture of one of the nearly 130 military cemeteries across the country is a

Right: Two veterans hold a banner during a demonstration on March 8, 2007, that expresses the anger felt by many about the display. The event was organized by Move America Forward and the local Lafayette Flag Brigade.

Above right: Scott Conover, whose stepson Lance Cpl. Brandon Dewey died in Iraq, wanted to know why his son's name appeared on a cross without the family's permission.



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question that doesn't seem to have a clear answer. Some won't even call it a memorial.

"I call it 'Weeds for Warriors,'" said Lisa Disbrow, mother of a West Point graduate, granddaughter of a World War I veteran, and member of a local patriotic group, the Lafayette Flag Brigade. As one of the first civilian critics of the display, Disbrow shudders at the vegetation and garbage strewn around the site and the crosses placed "cattywampus." It dishonors veterans, she argues.

"I've been to Arlington National Cemetery, and those crosses on that hill [in

WWII, is a registered conscientious objector and Vietnam War protestor. When the Clarks heard America had invaded Iraq in 2003, they agreed to let Heaton construct the wood crosses and put them on their property. It was formalized in 2006.

Heaton has vacillated over whether the site is in fact anti-war. While he's said it started as a statement against Iraq, he argues it's now neutral depending on who looks at it. Many veterans, he says, use the site to salute the crosses.

Some military reaction against it was swift. A Marine Corps veteran who

warm. And the crosses are reminding everybody that it's [the war] affecting someone," said Wallace Levin, who was a radio intercept operator during the Korean War. He holds several positions in Bay Area veterans groups, including president of the City and County of San Francisco's Veterans Affairs Commission, and is a member of VFW Post 1205 in San Francisco.

However, Levin doesn't like it when cross organizers use the site to bash pro-war politicians.

"Keep politics out of it," agrees Gene Maurice, a WWII Navy motor machin-

"Keep politics out of it. I don't want to hear arguments for and against the war. When I see those crosses, I think about the guys who have sacrificed their lives."

—Gene Maurice, a WWII Navy veteran

Lafayette] are just sticks in the ground," Disbrow said.

Disbrow wants Americans to be reminded of veterans sacrifices, but she'd also like veterans to have more input on how.

"No contact was made [by the cross founders] to any services of the military to say: 'We'd like to partner with you to honor our fallen' or 'How can we help you?'" she said.

'I am Anti-Iraq War'

Hillside owner Louise Clark says she consulted with many veterans in her family.

"This isn't a cemetery, and we don't have the means for marble [crosses]," Clark said. "I am not anti-war. I am anti this war. Troops were dying and they were mostly being ignored. No one was talking about it. I feel that when one goes to war, we all have to be involved. And when you drive by the crosses, you sure see them."

To those who say the site is politicking, she responds that it's a tribute to soldiers who have sacrificed their lives in a "mismanaged" and "dubious" war. Clark's and co-founder Jeffrey Heaton's motivations also are complicated by their own military ties. Clark trained to be a member of WWII's Women's Air Service Program before it was discontinued, and her father served in World War I.

Her husband was a radar technician in the Navy. Heaton, whose father served in

thought the crosses were on public property pulled her car over upon seeing them and kicked one of the crosses down within weeks of their appearance. More than 200 Iraq War supporters converged on the crosses last year when Move America Forward, a Sacramento group that supports the war, led a caravan there to argue against them.

"We are working with symbols that have a powerful effect on those who know about the hillside—whether they see it as a direct or indirect anti-war statement," Heaton said.

Mixed Opinions

The use of crosses has been both vilified and praised by veterans on different sides of the argument. Some Bay Area veterans like the crosses because they think they bring war and sacrifice to the forefront.

"Regardless of the motivation for creating this site, I believe it now stands as a reminder to passersby that there's a war in progress and lives are being lost," said William Hoenig, who served with the Army's 40th Infantry Division in Korea and lives a few miles from the crosses. "The only sacrifice in this conflict has been that of the military, their families and loved ones. We, the general public, need to be reminded of this."

Another Korean War veteran echoes this sentiment.

"People are more worried about paying the mortgage and keeping the house

ist mate who sailed on the *USS Saginaw Bay*. "I don't want to hear arguments for and against the war. When I see those crosses, I think about the guys who have sacrificed their lives."

Dennis Kyne is a 1991 Persian Gulf War veteran who served with the 24th Infantry Division and later the Army Reserve and National Guard. The VFW Post 3982 (Santa Clara, Calif.) member also thinks anti-war and pro-war people should be able to put their differences aside at the site.

Deception by Pacifists?

Yet the question of whether the site can be neutral in the largely liberal, anti-war Bay Area persists, along with suggestions that the Lafayette City Council were fooled by peace activists disingenuously characterizing the site as a memorial.

Moreover, some events at the site—billed as vigils—more closely resemble political rallies. At last year's Veterans Day gathering, the first three speakers were anti-Iraq War politicians, some of whom had served in the military themselves.

Pete Laurence, a Vietnam War Green Beret and Korean War military police veteran, past president of Northern California Chapter of the Special Forces Association and VFW Post 1525 (Clayton, Calif.) member, says he believes advertising the number of dead on the large sign spotlights America's divisive-

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ness over the war.

"It is aiding the enemy in the war," Laurence says. "It does nothing for parents, family members or the soldiers serving there."

Some military families have chafed at the crosses, especially when they were personalized with names. Oakley resident Scott Conover's stepson, Lance Cpl. Brandon Dewey, was killed in Iraq in 2006. Conover stripped Brandon's name off a cross at a pro-troop rally where Heaton told him they were protesting the war. Conover said he doesn't mind Clark and Heaton expressing their opinions, "but stand on your own two feet, not on the graves of service people."

Some wonder how the city could allow such an incendiary site to exist. Under a 30-year-old ordinance, signs under four square feet in Lafayette had no regulation at the time planners were notified about the display.

After a loud public outcry and input from land use, freedom of speech and civil liberties attorneys, the city allowed

the signs to stay.

However, the sign ordinance now limits the number of four-square-foot signs allowed on one site. The 32-foot sign with numbers for each casualty conforms to current rules regarding realty signs.

Lafayette City Manager Steven Falk says the city treated the display "fairly and agnostically."

"We treated it as a technical issue and not a political one, despite the temptation to do otherwise," he says. Laurence, a former mayor and city councilman in a neighboring city, thinks Falk "is on the liberal left side of the situation."

At a dozen or so hearings on the issue, some said the crosses stand for the very thing soldiers are fighting for: the right to live in a democracy where free expression is supported.

Tharratt doesn't buy this.

"People don't understand what it was like," he says while recalling the day when his aircraft was shot down over Nuremberg, and he was captured by Hitler's youth and detained until freed on April 26, 1945.

"I understand what freedom is, because

for nine months I lost mine," he said.

"Peace Memorial"

Supporters will keep hammering crosses into the hill until land runs out or the war ends.

Talks of Clark donating her hillside to a local peace center and eliciting artist renderings for what would be a permanent "peace" memorial are just starting. Until the war ends, Clark won't get into specifics about it, but there will be more public input than the crosses were afforded.

Tharratt sat on a memorial committee in nearby Walnut Creek to install five tall limestone columns in honor of those who've served in each military service. Planning a memorial should be done with reverence and forethought, he says.

"It's a delicate thing. We are talking about lives of individuals and each individual had his or her own idea of what service meant." ★

LESLIE MLADINICH is a Bay Area-based free-lance writer.

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