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## Crosses continue to grace hillside; Memorial Day event planned

By John T. Miller



Volunteers help clean up symbols at the hillside memorial during a recent work party. Photo provided

With the war in Afghanistan winding down - at least in terms of the United States involvement - the Lafayette Hillside Memorial, erected in 2006 to honor the American war dead, will continue to serve as a reminder of the costs of war.

Although the original intent was to take down the display when U.S. troops came home from Iraq and Afghanistan, a nonprofit organization, Lafayette Hillside Memorial, was formed to keep the site maintained, with hopes to create a permanent memorial at the hillside. Lynn MacMichael, a LHM board member and one of the original founders said, "This is a national historic site that has a life of its own. A lot depends on what happens with the land. We do not own the land. The current owner hasn't let us know what his plans are."

The current owner is Charles Clark, whose parents, Louise and Johnson Clark, gave the founding group permission to use the land for the memorial.

The group's vision for the site was to create an "impactful and inclusive memorial which recognizes and honors national service contributions and encourages individual and public reflection on the unintended, unseen and unexamined costs of war."

The Memorial has endured controversy, yet public sentiment is of acceptance and gratitude. The site has gained worldwide recognition, having an impact that far exceeded the original members' vision.

MacMichael points out that veterans from all wars have come to visit, and related many heartwarming stories, including mothers who bring their sons' hat or dog tags to hang on the crosses. Gold and Blue Star families pay tribute to loved ones and veterans pay respect to fallen comrades. Travelers on BART and Highway 24 can be moved by the display of war dead.

"This Memorial has changed lives. We hope it opens the hearts of people, showing the cost of war at a personal level," MacMichael said. "We should never forget the cost of war."

The Memorial has evolved into an undeniable cultural asset for Lafayette and has become a place of reflection, community pride and an internationally known landmark.

In addition to the figures in the timeline, Brown University's Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs found "over 8,000 contractors have died in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. A high percentage of young veterans have died since returning home, many because of drug overdoses, vehicle crashes, or suicide. Coalition partners have also died in large numbers: approximately 110,000 uniformed Afghans, Iraqis and other allies died as of November 2018." These numbers don't include Iraqi and Afghani civilian casualties.

A virtual observation will be held this Memorial Day at 5 p.m. After some welcoming remarks, speakers will include Pastor Dan Senter from Our Savior's Lutheran Church, Congressman Mark DeSaulnier, and Andrew Kodama, executive director of the Mt. Diablo Peace and Justice Center.

Board member and one of the original founders, Janet Thomas, will give an update on the memorial site, followed by a poem from Fred Norman. Music will be provided by Laura Zucker, a country and folk artist whose Memorial Day song can be found on YouTube. For those who would like to receive a Zoom link to the meeting, they can send an email to [lafayettehillsidememorial@gmail.com](mailto:lafayettehillsidememorial@gmail.com). A contact for donations and support can also be found on the website.

### A Brief History

Fall, 2006: The monument was conceived of and erected by longtime war protestor Jeffrey Heaton and hillside landowner Louise Clark. Shortly afterward vandals took down their first 19 crosses. In November, they started over with 300 crosses and a large sign that read: "In Memory of 2,839 Troops Killed in Iraq."

February 2007: The number of crosses increased to over 2,500, with Stars of David and Islamic Crescents,

and other religious symbols added.

March 2007: Over 200 demonstrators gather at the site to protest the display in support of the Bush administration handling of the war.

April, 2007: Johnson Clark, 85, passes away. Louise Clark passed away approximately four years later.

October, 2017: The Clark family proposes donating the 2.7-acre memorial site to the city of Lafayette, but they are turned down. Council members say that the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment prohibits religious symbols and displays on public property.

February 2018: The Lafayette City Council once again considers the fate of the property after the Planning Commission allows Charles Clark to reconfigure the property lines on his two parcels.

April, 2019: A nonprofit organization is created to maintain the Crosses of Lafayette, which is now called the Lafayette Hillside Memorial.

May, 2021: The current count on the hillside is approximately 3,400 symbols, and according to various news sources, 7,975 soldiers killed in the two wars.

Reach the reporter at: [john@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:john@lamorindaweekly.com)

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