

Santa Monica Daily Press

CKSON: A LEGEND IN REMAKING
PEOPLE IN THE NEWS 16

A newspaper with issues

Memorial expands its reach

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SM BEACH — With each passing Memorial Day weekend, less and less of the beckoning sand just north of the Santa Monica Pier is made available for beachcombers. On Sunday, the path that winds west from the pier to the Pacific meandered around more than 2,400 crosses and nine coffins — grim reminders all of the War on Terror's casualties on an otherwise picturesque day.

Each Sunday for the past 120 weeks, volunteers have remade this patch of coastline adjacent to the city's family playground into a makeshift war memorial entitled "Arlington West."

The sheer scale of the ever-expanding commemoration now makes even the most casual observer do a double-take.

"Sometimes it just feels like a non-existent war. When I went away, there were about 1,000 crosses, and then I came back, saw this and was like, 'Oh, man,'" said Steve Kovalsky, who has been volunteering at the memorial



Fabian Lewkowicz/Daily Press

WAR AND REMEMBRANCE The Arlington West makeshift war memorial was on display throughout the weekend, and will be until sunset today. (Above) Attendees reflect amid some of the 2,400-plus crosses, entrenched in the Santa Monica beach to represent each of the soldiers killed in combat, and the nine flag-draped coffins that signify the number of soldiers who died within the past week. The coffins will be carried through downtown during a procession this afternoon.

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Fabian Lewkowicz/Daily Press

Luis Garcia, 21, a U.S. Marine Corporal from Twentynine Palms, pays his respects to fallen Sgt. Clay at the Arlington West memorial on Saturday.

Crosses have grown tenfold

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for three weeks, following his travels to such destinations as Africa and Thailand. “I just figured I had to do something. I remember Vietnam and we have to remember the past.”

What began with 540 crosses has nearly grown tenfold, with Sunday’s placard announcing that 2,464 U.S. soldiers have died in combat in the nation’s concurrent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The nine flag-draped coffins — representing the number of soldiers who lost their lives within the past week — are to be carried through the city’s downtown area in a procession this afternoon.

Volunteer Florence Rhodes, who makes her way to the Santa Monica site nearly every Sunday from her home in Beverly Hills, scanned the patch of cross-laden coastline with a wistful look Sunday.

“It’s terrible that it has to grow,” remarked Rhodes, who says she’s been politically active since the Franklin D. Roosevelt era. “Today’s times are very scary. We have such a war economy ... we’ve had so many wars.”

The placement of the memorial in close proximity to the pier — one of the region’s signature landmarks and most heavily toured areas — is no accident, reminding those making a pilgrimage and casual passersby alike that U.S. soldiers are facing very real threats overseas day in and day out.

The blend of purposeful attendees and impromptu adherents, of military garb and garish swimsuits — a typical crowd at Arlington West — was no different over the Memorial Day Weekend.

According to Tonia Young, volunteer and spokeswoman for Arlington West, the memorial stands each week as a stark reminder to the realities around the world.

“People kind of lose track of it (the war) as time goes by. People tend to get too busy with their daily lives,” remarked Young, who lives in Topanga and has taken an active role in the commemoration since its February 2004 beginnings. “Every Sunday, this reminds people that we have young men and women who are putting their lives on the line, for reasons that keep changing.”

Young explained that the site, in addition to raising consciousness about the war, also provides family and friends with a place in which to grieve.

She spoke of one man she met soon after he had returned from Iraq. He learned of the beach memorial while eating and watching TV in Mosul. Upon seeing the crosses entrenched in the Santa Monica sand, the soldier broke down.

“He started to cry because he just didn’t

think anyone cared,” Young said. “So last year, he came out to honor his friend who was killed in Iraq, and took a turn reading names.”

At the top of each hour, from morning until sunset throughout the weekend, volunteers took turns reading 30 or so names of soldiers who have been killed in combat. Gone are the days when all of the names can be read aloud in a timely fashion.

The mood at Arlington West is decidedly anti-war, and anti-Bush Administration, which is of little surprise given the political leanings of the region. Still, the crosses personalized with names and messages from family, friends and supporters from afar seem to bring those sentiments to the fore.

James Ream, in town from Las Vegas visiting friends, parked his bicycle and spent a considerable amount of time reading about the war wounded on poster boards at the Arlington West entrance.

“I regretted this war before it started and I regret it even more now,” Ream said. “But I get the feeling most of the people here have already made up their minds about the war. This is a blue state, and this is a blue site. It doesn’t get any bluer than this.”

Ream reasoned that, if he could, President Bush would wave a magic wand and make Arlington West disappear. He likened the coffins on the beach Sunday to those the president ordered not to be photographed returning to America from the war.

“Anything that reminds people of the war is a bad thing (to him),” he said.

According to a sign at the entrance, alluding to the growing number of crosses for U.S. servicemen, the number of markers it would take to represent Iraqis killed in the war “would fill the beach.”

Today, the extended three-day long memorial will commence at sundown. On both Saturday and Sunday nights, participants staged a candlelight vigil, setting a tiny tea light at each of the crosses that kept the commemoration site aglow well into the night. Dedicated volunteers were on hand throughout.

The special coffin procession is set to start at 1 p.m. today, beginning at the pier and proceeding north on Ocean Avenue, east on Wilshire Boulevard, south on the Third Street Promenade, and west back to the pier. The group will pause momentarily at the Veterans Monument in Palisades Park.

“When you see the coffins, it’s pretty devastating,” Young said. “Once you see the memorial and read the crosses and the messages people leave on the crosses, once you experience it, it moves your heart absolutely.

“It’s a visual way to see what’s happening, rather than just read about it, and it goes right to your heart.”