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## A Monumental Task: Finding a Memorial to the PHS Commissioned Corps

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From State capitals to large and small municipalities, the American landscape is studded with thousands of monuments honoring uniformed men and women who defended our country in war. In paying tribute to those patriots killed, missing in action, or taken prisoner, our grateful Nation is reminded of the painful price we have paid—and continue to pay—to defend freedom.

But our national memory seems to fail us when it comes to one of the Nation's seven Uniformed Services—one that can trace its roots back to President John Adams. My research for this article revealed only one instance in which a community erected a monument recognizing the contributions of the U.S. Public Health Service (PHS) and its health 'militia'—the PHS Commissioned Corps officers.

Members of the PHS Commissioned Corps take the same oath of office as do their military counterparts. They may be mobilized and deployed anywhere they are needed; they work around the world and around the clock. In time of war, PHS Commissioned Corps officers can be militarized, and members of the Corps have served in every major modern armed conflict, from World Wars I and II, through Korea, Vietnam, and the Persian Gulf War. Several officers lost their lives in these conflicts.

During World War I, the Corps contributed to malaria control, and venereal disease prevention, control, and treatment. During World War II, in addition to these important roles, the Corps created the Cadet Nurse Corps to train an adequate supply of military and civilian nurses. During the Vietnam War, Corps person-

nel provided surgical teams and medical relief. More recently, members of the commissioned corps have played critical roles in response to acts of terrorism in New York City and the Pentagon, and PHS officers remain engaged in the war against terrorism (biological and chemical).

Where are the monuments to this monumental service to our country? I might have missed even the lone monument had it not been essentially in my own backyard, in the diminutive, historic, All-America City of Falls Church, Virginia, (pop. 10,377) located a few miles west of the Nation's capital. With the hard work of outspoken residents and the support of the Falls Church City Council, a one-of-a-kind monument was erected almost a decade ago on the Falls Church city government municipal complex to pay tribute to members of *all seven* Uniformed Services, thus bringing the Commissioned Corps of the PHS and the Commissioned Corps of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) alongside the five armed services—Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and Coast Guard.

The monument itself consists of seven light gray granite columns, each 31 inches high, 20 inches wide, and 14 inches deep. Atop each column rests a rectangular bronze plaque (17 inches across by 13 inches high) engraved with the official seal of each Service. The equally spaced granite columns form an arc nearly 20 feet in diameter with a flagpole in the center. Pavers form a walkway that invites residents and visitors to view the monument and its dedication plaque more closely. This monument is also distinctive because Memorial Day and Vet-

erans Day ceremonies are conducted to pay tribute to residents of Falls Church who lost their lives in battle, and to salute all men and women of all seven Uniformed Services who proudly served their country during war and peace. On these sacred days, flowers are laid at the base of each column; yet throughout the year it is not uncommon to see wreaths and bouquets surrounding the monument site.

But how did this big-hearted event happen in this small town? Why in this unlikely location does the PHS symbolically stand on equal footing with the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and Coast Guard? There is no simple answer, but I believe that a constellation of several special ingredients needed to be in place—and they were, whether by coincidence, divine intervention, or by purpose—to produce the Falls Church Veterans' Memorial.

Based on an interview with one of the prime movers of this memorial project, Mr. Harry Shovlin, the critical ingredients included: (1) a town with a rich political history and tradition that stressed inclusiveness; (2) the lack of a *public* veterans monument in the city; (3) a number of dynamic citizens with a reason to champion a worthy cause, willing to keep the flame alive until completion, and able to finance the project alone if necessary; and (4) an active and engaged City Council receptive to dedicating and maintaining a Memorial Park and ceremonial plaza to honor all its veterans.

Falls Church has been affected by nearly every war and conflict involving the United States. Yet, despite its 300-

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year rich history, the city never had a public monument honoring its war veterans. Several American Legion Posts and a Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) Post just outside the city limits displayed various war memorials or symbols, but they were on private property, not centrally located on public land in the historical section of the city's municipal complex. With the help of a well-educated citizenry, the city has developed an inclusionary mentality, which tends to benefit and involve as many residents as possible in its activities, events, and programs.

The champion and 'spiritual leader' of the Falls Church Veterans' Memorial was Ms. Janine Smail, a former French citizen who was liberated by American troops after suffering greatly during World War II. She wanted to show her respect for our men and women in uniform, and was extremely active in petitioning the City Council to dedicate a ceremonial plaza that would be the future home of a monument honoring American war veterans. As standard-bearer, she kept up the impetus for the project and helped to finance it personally beyond what other citizens contributed.

The project also had a dedicated implementer, Mr. Showlin, a career high school teacher who was also a Vietnam Era veteran. He became the spokesperson for the Falls Church Veterans' Memorial Committee, Inc., which was established to organize the project and receive donations. His chief responsibility was to get the concept approved by the local veterans groups and to move the monument plan through the city bureaucracy during the design, construction, and dedication phases. As a product of Falls Church's culture of 'inclusion' in its school system, his bias was toward defining 'veteran' as any American who honorably served on active duty, wore the uniform, and could be placed in harm's way. As an Army medic, he was vaguely aware of a link between the military medical corps and the PHS Commissioned Corps. His research confirmed that there were seven Uniformed Services, and that the PHS could be militarized in time of war. He was committed to honor those seven Services individually and collectively in Falls Church. When he shared the all-inclusive concept with the veterans' groups and the City Council, it met with no objections.

The Falls Church City Council had already designated a sizeable piece of land



*The Falls Church Veterans' Memorial consists of individual granite monuments depicting the seven Uniformed Services. The monuments form a ceremonial plaza with a flagpole at the center flying the National Colors and the POW/MIA flag. From left to right are the monuments with the official seals of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Commissioned Corps, U.S. Army, U.S. Navy, U.S. Marine Corps, U.S. Air Force, U.S. Coast Guard, and U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps.*

on the City Hall municipal complex for a Memorial Park. Some time later, American Legion Post 130 donated an American flagpole in a section of the Memorial Park site in front of the Falls Church Community Center, and the site became the prime location for configuring the type of monument that the Falls Church Veterans' Memorial Committee, Inc., was contemplating. The City Council wanted a tasteful memorial that would integrate the flagpole into a broader design, and to have the ceremonial plaza

accessible to the viewing public during Memorial Day and Veterans Day programs. Word also got out that the city leadership did not want the monument to feature a cannon or other military hardware. With these caveats, the Falls Church City Council designated the patch of land in Memorial Park as the future site of a veterans' monument, and approved a grant to the Falls Church Veterans' Memorial Committee, Inc., to begin the design of a ceremonial plaza.

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Even with all the special ingredients in place, it took 8 years before the Falls Church Veterans' Memorial was finally completed. As a member of the Falls Church community and an officer in the PHS Commissioned Corps, I proudly attended, in uniform, the formal ceremony to unveil and dedicate the monument on May 30, 1994.

Other than this one example, my search for PHS monuments bore little fruit. But, my hunt led to numerous conversations with other PHS commissioned officers, State officials, and caretakers of historical landmarks across the United States, and some intriguing historical tidbits surfaced.

For example, I learned that a cemetery near the former PHS Marine Hospital/USPHS Tuberculosis Sanatorium at Fort Stanton, New Mexico, has a plaque on a stone wall supporting the cemetery's front gate which reads "U.S. Public Health Service Hospital Cemetery Established 1899." The cemetery itself, is the final resting place for some 1,600 American merchant seamen who were treated at the Sanatorium. However, to this day, it is unclear whether the plaque was simply a historical marker, or if it was intended to be a tribute to the PHS staff that treated the seamen.

I also learned that the Hilton Head Area Chapter of MOAA (Military Officers Association of America) is exploring the establishment of a Veterans' Memorial in Hilton Head, South Carolina, that is expected to include all Uniformed Services comprising MOAA. Women in military service (including PHS uniformed women) are honored with a monument at the main entrance to Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia. I found a monument memorializing military war dogs at Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama, and a monument in Weymouth, Massachusetts, remembering Vietnam veterans who fell victim to Agent Orange, but I could not locate one expressly dedicated to the achievements of the PHS Commissioned Corps.

Since the 19th century PHS officers have dedicated themselves to a war on disease that is as vital to our national well being in peace as is their wartime contributions. In fact, it could be argued that Surgeon General C. Everett Koop is as great a public health hero in combating the evils of smoking and unsafe sex, as General George S. Patton was

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### AN INVITATION TO JOIN THE SEARCH FOR PHS MONUMENTS

I attempted—primarily through the Internet—to find and locate monuments dedicated to the PHS Commissioned Corps alone or to all seven Uniformed Services combined. Because contacting every municipality in every State was not feasible, I may have overlooked such a monument, or may have missed one (like the one described here) that has been erected but not yet documented on the Internet. I apologize to any community if that is the case, and encourage them to report their memorials or monuments to the author at—[gseidenb@mail.nih.gov](mailto:gseidenb@mail.nih.gov)—or to the PHS Historian at—[jparascandola@psc.gov](mailto:jparascandola@psc.gov).



Photo courtesy of Noah J. Seidenberg

*CAPT Seidenberg standing beside the U.S. Public Health Service monument which represents one of seven Uniformed Services comprising the Falls Church Veterans' Memorial dedicated by the citizens of Falls Church, Virginia, on May 30, 1994.*

in bringing victory during the Battle of the Bulge. Hopefully, one day, history will judge the contributions of a PHS Surgeon General or a PHS officer Nobel Laureate in the same light as Major Walter Reed, who has been rightfully and repeatedly honored by the U.S. Army.

If you are in the Washington, DC area, come visit the Falls Church Veterans' Memorial. While at the moment, Falls Church may have bragging rights for the only monument recognizing all *seven* Uniformed Services, one can only hope that this distinction will not be permanent. If

other communities follow suit, the public may become more aware of PHS' role in defending our country and its health, and PHS Commissioned Corps officers will gain greater recognition for their invaluable contributions to our Nation.

