

By Ben van der Meer/Appeal Democrat

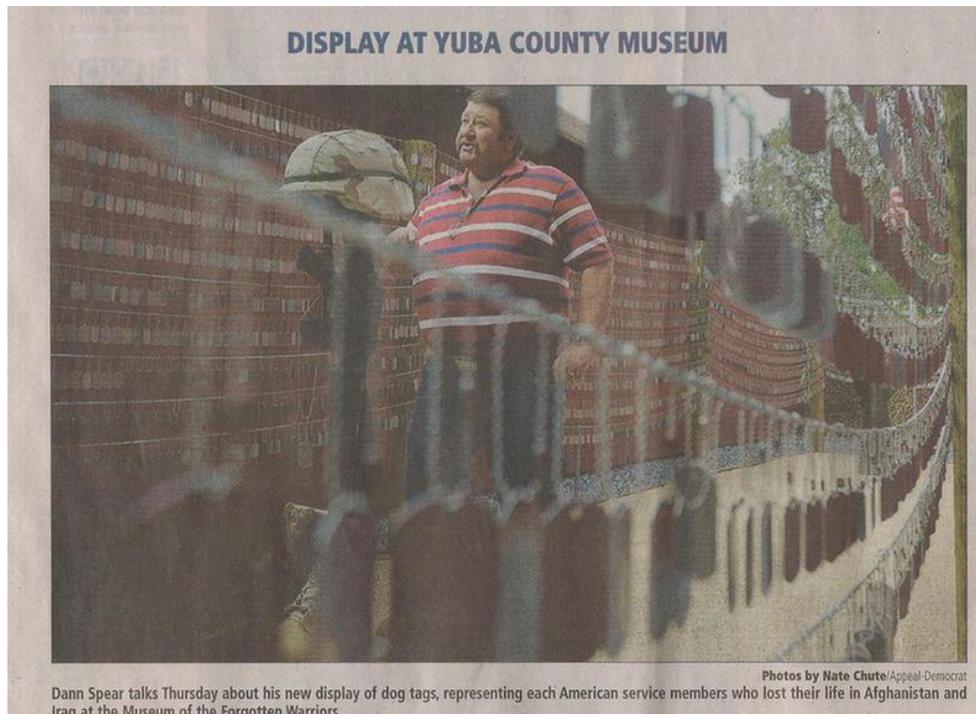
Iraq, Afgan war dead nor forgotten

Know & Go:

WHAT: Dedication of a memorial to fallen Iraq and Afghanistan soldiers.

WHERE: Museum of the Forgotten Warriors, 5865 A Road, off North Beale Road, east of Linda.

WHEN: 10:30 a.m. Thursday.



People passing between the two wings of the Museum of the Forgotten Warriors notice something to their left.

They stop and look on thousands of blank dog tags strung along chains and surrounding a simple display of a modern soldier's rifle, boots and helmet.

Some walk closer, others sit in chairs and reflect, some weep. When conditions are right, the sun creates tiny reflective dots on the ground, and the wind prompts a gentle jangle as the tags jostle off one another.

"Look at my arms. See the hair?" said the museum's founder, Dann Spear, as both his arms and the tags shivered under an overcast sky. "Guys who've seen it, they say, 'They're talking to each other.'" The "they" being referred to are the 6,296 soldiers who've died in Iraq and Afghanistan, and now being represented by those rows of tags at the museum in a memorial to be dedicated next Thursday. Spear said a memorial garden he'd seen on a trip back east inspired him nine months ago to create something at his museum to honor the fallen soldiers, in a unique way.

He wanted the tags blank, but all in one place, to represent the soldiers both collectively and individually, without having to segregate for rank, branch or other characteristics.

The ground at the memorial's center is a sandy, tan dirt similar to Iraq, while the broken gray rock around the edge is meant to evoke Afghanistan. An American flag, lit from below, will fly at all times, and he hopes to eventually mount a Humvee at an angle at the memorial's far edge.

But though the idea started with him, he wasn't the only one to bring it to life. Volunteers and members of the museum's board of directors contributed work and ideas.

With a towel rack, board member and Vietnam veteran Austin Webb helped string the tags along the chains at his Yuba City home.

"That was my passion," said Webb, whose wife is also a veteran and now serves as the museum's treasurer. "When you're stringing them up, you're thinking about each soldier they represent. It really gets to you."

Several airmen from nearby Beale Air Force Base helped mount the chains, taking care not to let a single tag hit the ground, Spear said.

The final step will come Thursday, when soldiers will pour dirt collected from both countries into small basins below the soldier display. A sheet of glass will cover them, and a Vietnam War veteran will play "Taps."

"I was worried someone would say, 'why choose to do it like this?'" Spear said, explaining why he didn't publicize the memorial until recently. "Dog tags are as personal as you get."

But he wants the memorial to be inspirational and thought provoking, as well as nonpolitical and properly reverential, he said.

The posts where the chains are affixed have marks on them for where more chains could be hung, if needed. But Spear said he hopes he's done.

"Our kids is what this country is all about," he said. "There's an old saying, the price of freedom is high. And you're looking at it here."

CONTACT reporter Ben van der Meer at 749-4786.

Read more: <http://www.appeal-democrat.com/articles/tags-111140-museum-forgotten.html#ixzz1cnvqdP8g>