A PLACE OF HONOR IN D.C.

The site chosen for WWI memorial couldn’t be more perfect: A park named after Gen. Pershing. A lone among the four great wars of the 20th century — the “American century” — World War I has no national memorial in the nation’s capital. More American servicemen — 116,516 — gave their lives in that war than in the Korean and Vietnam wars combined, and 200,000 more came home wounded. Yet while those who died in World War II, Korea and Vietnam are honored and remembered with memorials on the National Mall, no such recognition was given to the veterans of World War I.

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Supporters of such a memorial see the centennial commemoration of the U.S. entry into the war as a great time to change that. They hope to have a new memorial fully funded in time for the celebrations marking the centennial of the end of the war in late 2018.

Chris Isely, director of public relations for the U.S. World War I Centennial Commission, says $9 million of the $97 million needed to build the new memorial has been raised. "We hope to hold a dedication ceremony on the anniversary of the Armistice, Nov. 11th, 2018," he says.

It’s all in the works.

In 2016 — one hundred years after the war broke out in Europe — Congress authorized the centennial commission to establish a new memorial on Pennsylvania Avenue, a block from the White House and with a commanding view of the Capitol.

The designated site couldn’t be more appropriate: Pershing Park, named for Gen. John J. Pershing, the supreme U.S. commander in the war, whose statue is a high-light of the park. It’s also within walking distance of the national memorials to the three other great wars of the 20th century, on the National Mall.

(Pershing does have a World War I memorial, but it is not a national memorial. The District of Columbia War Memorial, located south of the Reflecting Pool, pays tribute to Washington residents who fought in the war. The small, domed marble structure was erected in 1933. Early efforts to repurpose it as a national WWI memorial were scrapped.)

At Pershing Park, Congress authorized the centennial commission to enhance the existing memorial to Pershing with "appropriate sculptural and other commemorative elements, including sculpting." The objective is to transform the site from a park that happens to have a memorial in it to a site that is primarily a memorial, with sufficient scale and gravity, within a revitalized urban park setting.

Pershing Park was dedicated in 1979, just three years before the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The Pershing memorial, also known as the American Expeditionary Forces Memorial, could be seen as the last of the "great war" war memorials. The central feature is a bronze statue of Gen. Pershing flanked by two stone walls. One bears a statement by Pershing commending the valor of his troops. The other sets forth a short history of U.S. participation in World War I, along with maps of the Western Front and the Meuse-Argonne Offensive.

In January 2016, the World War I Centennial Commission selected a design for the memorial from a pool of more than 300 submissions. Titled "The Weight of Sacrifice," it will feature a 75-foot-long bas relief wall, quotations from soldiers and a freestanding sculpture.

A TALK WITH MEMORIAL SCULPTOR SABIN HOWARD

The project isn’t yet finalized, as reviews and updates continue along with fundraising. The project’s lead sculptor, Sabin

The Pershing memorial includes historical information and battle-field maps.
Howard, is developing the design for the 76-foot relief, which will depict the emotional story of a soldier traveling from home to the war and then returning.

Following are excerpts from an interview Howard did with the commission, explaining the ideas behind the massive artwork and how he executed it.

"After about nine months of iteration, the commission put their seal of approval on the design for the National World War I Memorial. It's a 40-figure composition that will be the initial idea presented to the government agencies. It's a visual narrative called A Soldier's Journey.

"The one soldier's journey through the Great War has him travel from his homeland and family, through the battlefield, to return home to his family. This also represents the voyage that America took through the war... This is a memorial that has to give a visual narrative of what World War I looked like to a general public... Public art represents us on a global scale, both artistically and culturally, and so has to be understood on those terms.

"I began bringing more drama and movement to the studio... Rather than posing the models on the dias and then having them hold the pose, I asked the actors and models to act out the specific scene that we were illustrating. As they moved through slow motion to illustrate the story line, I took pictures of their movement... Suddenly the poses showed a lot more force. The center of gravity had shifted to show movement... The art expressed more about the human life force energy.

"The action and drama has to have an immediacy, as if it is happening directly in front of the viewer. In this way, the relief will transport the viewer's mind to a war that happened a 100 years ago.

"When the models would come to the studio, I would dress them with actual uniforms that saw the battlefield... There was a transformational element to these young men and women who put on these outfits. When they stepped up onto the modeling platform under the lights and I directed them into the stories that we were re-creating, a seriousness and sacredness permeated the studio.

"The actors and models were inspired. They watched historical data on film. The longer hair was shed as a few of them got military haircuts... The emotional energy of what transpired is real and tangible.

"In the final sections of A Soldier's Journey, soldiers are wounded, recovered and then return home to their families.

The emotional energy of what transpired is real and tangible.

Seth Howard, sculptor, describing the effect of the role on the models who posed for A Soldier's Journey.