

CONTINUED: But notions of funeral propriety may be slowly changing: Two weeks ago, gay rights supporters in Sacramento, Calif., unveiled a controversial state-sanctioned memorial to "Gay, Lesbian, Transgender and Bisexual Veterans Killed in Action," and a similar site has been built in Phoenix, Ariz. According to Thomas, the idea of a national memorial at Congressional Cemetery has come to symbolize a dream of acceptance for a generation of aging gay veterans.

"Nowhere else can we acknowledge that we were among those gays and lesbians who served our country, honestly and openly," said retired Lt. Col. Nancy Russell, 65, who heads American Veterans for Equal Rights, a national association of gay veterans that is planning a design contest for the memorial. "It is a place where we would be accepted," said Russell, a former Army company commander.

The cemetery, named for the hundreds of members of Congress buried there, is owned by the Episcopal Church and administered by a nonprofit preservationist group that receives some public funds for upkeep. The board of directors is largely in favor of allowing the memorial to be built in the next few years, according to several members.

To Patrick Crowley, vice chairman of the cemetery's board, a memorial would give official meaning to what is already an important site for the gay community.



Marvin Joseph / Washington Post

Striking epitaph: Vietnam veteran Leonard Matlovich, who sued the U.S. military over its ban on gays, is buried at Congressional Cemetery in Washington, where his message began a movement.

Gay war veterans seek memorial at cemetery

■ D.C. graveyard is preferred by those who say it's where they're fully accepted.

By Garance Burke
The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — On late summer evenings, a rose-blue light falls over Congressional Cemetery's 60,000 gravestones, illuminating the dog walkers who move along its brick paths. A lot of history is buried in the country's first national cemetery — Elbridge Gerry, a vice president who signed the Declaration of Independence, lies near the FBI's stark memorial to its first director, J. Edgar Hoover.

Also interred here is a gay Vietnam veteran named Leonard Matlovich, whose black granite headstone is adorned with two pink triangles and the inscription: "When I was in the military, they gave me a medal for killing two men and a discharge for loving one."

Matlovich, the first soldier to take the U.S. military to court over the gay ban, died of AIDS in 1988. Since his funeral, a dozen new graves bearing similarly striking epitaphs have gone up on that corner plot. One implores

visitors to never "give into discrimination," while another warns against accepting "liberty and justice for SOME."

In the past 10 years, the graveyard, at 16th and E streets SE, has become an important touchstone for gay veterans who see it as a final resting place where they will be fully accepted. It also has become a destination for gay walking tours of Capitol Hill.

Now, after a summer of landmark decisions and debates about homosexuality in American society, a former high-ranking official in the Reagan administration is leading a movement to build a national monument there to honor gay soldiers.

"We need some kind of marker to show our society that gays have always been on the front lines," said Henry Thomas, 62, a former assistant secretary of energy for international affairs. "We, as a group, are still denied such recognition by the federal law that says we cannot even say that we are gay or lesbian, not even at our own funerals."

After a successful career in the Marine Corps, where he earned a Purple Heart while serving as a company commander in Vietnam, Thomas worked in several top-level government positions. A few years ago, he and his part-

ner moved to Rehoboth Beach, Del., where he says he can live more freely.

"After I came out, it took me a year before I could walk down Connecticut Avenue or K Street, because I was worried that someone from that life would know I was gay," Thomas said. "Finally being able to be open about who I am now is wonderful, and I don't want to die feeling like I'm still in a prison."

Although gay people have served in the armed forces since the country's founding, little is known about the lives of gay veterans. According to a study by the Urban Institute released this summer, 1.3 million of the 25.1 million living veterans of U.S. wars are gay men or lesbians.

Yet one of the least-known effects of "don't ask, don't tell," the current military policy under which gays must keep quiet about their sexual orientation or risk losing their jobs, is that the soldiers must remain closeted at their own funerals if they desire full graveside honors.

Arlington National Cemetery's policy, for instance, follows the strict guidelines of the Department of Veterans Affairs, prohibiting any expression of homosexual unions on headstones.