The Marine Corp Memorial Essay, Research Paper

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On February 19, 1945 five Marines and one Sailor participated in an event that would forever change the course of events for the Marine Corps. Undoubtedly one of the most powerful images of the 20th century is the flag raising atop Mount Suribachi on Iwo Jima. The flag raising captured the courage, commitment and honor that these Marines held as they reached the top. These individuals were only doing what they were instructed to do, but it was the Pulitzer Prize winning photograph that was taken by Joe Rosenthal that turned this war time event into a world wide historical event. Behind the eagle, globe and anchor, the flag raising has taken the form of a second emblem for the Marine Corps.

Felix de Weldon was at the time of the flag raising in the United States Navy. Felix was already a world-renounced sculptor. At the age of seventeen he won a sculptor contest in his native Austria. He studied in France, Italy and Spain and eventually studied archeology at Oxford. Upon arriving in the United States he fell in love with this country and its culture. He joined the U.S. Navy as a Seabee. Felix de Weldon has been referred to as the artist to the presidents and kings. Felix was so moved by the photograph that he constructed a scale model and then later a life size model of it. Gagnon, Hayes, and Bradley, the three survivors of the flag raising posed for the sculptor. The original statue which was cast in plaster went on display in front of the Old Navy Building in Washington D.C. from 1945-1946. It was used to promote war bonds around the country. In 1946 General Vandegrift was so moved by the statue that he had Felix de Weldon transferred from the Navy to the Marine Corps and commissioned him to produce the memorial we see today.

The memorial like any other in Washington was met with controversy. The primary dispute came from the National Sculpture Society. This society had done all of the big memorials in Washington and did not what to be left out on this one. The Government’s Commission of Fine Arts also joined in the attempt to stop the memorial. The commission appointed by the president, was a body of aesthetic consultants that had jurisdiction over art placed on federal property in the capital. The battle was not between the Marines and the post war modernist but a struggle among the advocates of traditional representational art. The commission wanted the Marine Corp league to drop de Weldon and go with an artist through open competition. The Marines knew de Weldon’s version of the statue and that was the statue they wanted. Ten professors from American University collectively dismissed de Weldon’s sculpture as mediocrity and called it “ordinary,” “ineffective,” and “unsculpturesque.” Donald De Lu president of the National Sculpture Society stated that:

“Instead of immortalizing the brave Marines who have given their lives for their country, the proposed design, if permitted to be carried out would be only a source of bitter resentment, violent criticism, and ridicule.”

William Wheeler, later to become the President of the Sculpture Society, submitted as letter to Secretary of State Forrestal claiming numerous wrong doings by de Weldon. These charges ranged from shady business practices, expired visa, misrepresenting art, and shipping busts that were still wet and the suing for damages when they arrived damaged. In late 1947 the monument received another setback. The Commission of Fine Art, which has the aesthetic approval of all monuments placed in the Washington area, rejected the memorial because of its size and the location that was selected. Later that same year the Marine Corps War Memorial Foundation was formed with General Denig as president and Harry Dash as head of finance. It was later discovered that Harry Dash was embezzling funds amounting to over $100,000 of the contributions. This setback almost put an end to the memorial but though the tenacity of a Marine General almost all of the funds were recovered and construction on the memorial resumed. On the 176th birthday of the Marine Corps November 10th, 1954 the memorial was unveiled and for those who witnessed the unveiling this was a new kind of monument, which was stuck in accuracy and realism. On the base of the Memorial is inscribed all the battles that were fought in which Marines gave their lives. Another inscription read Uncommon Valor was a Common Virtue also inscribed was the names of the six individuals who the memorial depicts. Three of the six would never know that they were immortalized for all time; they died before the end of the war. A forth died shortly after the dedication. A simple act of pride transformed these individuals into national heroes, immortalized for all time in bronze.

As in any sculpture, painting, or work of art, line is important, lines determine the beginning and the end, and it allows various objects to be separated. The lines in this sculpture are used with such realism that it is easy to see the individual pieces of the sculpture but to remove any of the pieces would remove the true meaning of the sculpture. Felix de Weldon reproduced a true, beyond realistic copy of the original photo thereby allowing the viewer to asses there own feelings or ideas as what went on the morning of February 19, 1945. There are many hundreds of drawings, statues and copies of the original photograph and you will find that many of them have small but insignificant differences. It is not the difficulty of the process of reproduction that causes the differences. The differences lie in the reproduction of the idea on which the photo represents.

The memorial is immense in size; each figure alone is 33 feet high and is sculptured in true 3 dimensional form. With its size and its unbelievable detail, this renders the memorial as a true inspirational event. The mere size alone leads to the magnanimous importance of this historical event.

The memorial is located outdoors on the eastern edge of the Arlington National Cemetery in an open field of about 4 acres. To be truly inspired by this memorial it should be viewed at night. The lighting was designed with such precession that mere words cannot express the magnitude of the event.

The memorial is a frozen moment in time, a time when the world was at war in almost every corner. The photograph by Joe Rosenthal immortalized this event so that all posterity could see and hopefully feel the same as he did on that day. The only part of the monument that is not frozen in bronze is the American Flag. The real flag adds to the surrealism of the moment.

If you were to remove the outer skin of the memorial all you would find is a functional frame made up of latter’s, cranes, trusses and winches, wires and cables. The memorial was a triumph of organization as much as a work of art. Through the use of projective images de Weldon was able to turn a photo into a masterful work of art. The only change that was made from the original photo was one of the Marines at the base of the flag was rotated inward to add a more aesthetic appearance.

The interview was with a Marine housewife who has several members of her family that were or are in the military. She perceived the memorial as a symbol of unity for our nation. To her the memorial is pride in our nation and our way of life. The memorial symbolized a victorious nation. She also commented on the fact that the memorial was designed in such a way as to bring out different emotions from each individual who views it. The memorial not only symbolizes a wartime nation but a peacetime nation as well with the outreaching hands striving for unity and teamwork in a nation that was once on the brink of disaster.

Felix de Weldon is presently working on The Colossus of Rhodes a monument measuring 378 feet tall, a full 12 feet higher than the Statue Of Liberty in New York. This will be the largest bronze in the entire world.

The Marine Corps War memorial was born from a hard fought struggle to preserve the identity and the integrity of the United States Marine Corps. In the public eye the image identified the Marines with an epic moment in history. A monument would make that moment eternal. It would remind Americans that the Marines remain inseparable from Americanism.

Notes

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