

COLD WAR CRASH: Memorial to silent heroes

Pair see Mount Charleston site telling inspiring story

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The propeller of a C-54 transport plane that crashed in 1955 lies near a trail as hikers make their way in 2001 to the crash site on Mount Charleston. The crew was on a secret mission to spur development of the U-2 spy plane at the government's installation along the dry Groom Lake bed, known as Area 51. Steve Ririe and architect George Tate have submitted plans for a memorial to honor the 14 victims of the crash and others who served in secret Cold War operations.
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PHOTO

Someday, visitors to Mount Charleston will be able to gaze at the peak from the vantage point of a U-shaped, black granite structure symbolic of the long, narrow wings of the U-2 spy plane that was developed during the Cold War at a secret base behind the mountain.

That's the plan envisioned by Cold War history buff Steve Ririe and local architect George Tate, who on Thursday submitted a design for The Silent Heroes of the Cold War Memorial to the U.S. Forest Service for consideration.

The occasion was the 50th anniversary of the Nov. 17, 1955, crash on the mountain of a C-54 transport plane that was shuttling a team of engineers and security personnel on a secret mission to spur development of the U-2 spy plane at the government's installation along the dry Groom Lake bed, known as Area 51.

The team and crew, 14 in all, died in the fiery crash on the snowcapped mountain. But for decades, the details about their mission and what happened that day were shrouded in secrecy. The families, too, were kept in the dark.

Ririe, chairman of the nonprofit fundraising group Silent Heroes of the Cold War Corp., said he was inspired by the untold stories of the people who were behind the U-2 project and wanted to give them the recognition they never got.

"As I was going through the process of finding the families, I realized this is still an open wound with these people," he said Friday. "They never got the closure. They spent years not knowing what happened to their loved ones."

So far, the corporation has received \$11,000 in donations from a local consulting firm and a relative of one of the crash victims.

Ririe estimates it will take another \$80,000 to \$90,000 to complete the memorial, which is targeted for the gateway entrance to Forest Service land on the mountain, not far from where state Route 157 winds toward Kyle Canyon.

Ririe said he has the backing of Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., and Sen. John Ensign, R-Nev.

Reid, on the 50th anniversary of the crash, released a statement to Ririe that read: "There is a natural tendency to forget those who served the country in obscurity and in secret."

Reid quoted President John Kennedy, saying "a nation reveals itself not only by the individuals it produces but also by those it honors -- those it remembers."

Reid stated that the U-2 spy plane "continues to provide information vital to our national security. Their families were kept in the dark for over four decades. The time has come to honor these Cold War heroes, along with all those who navigated us safely through the Cold War."

Tate said he wanted to incorporate the feeling of flight into the memorial's design along with the secretive nature of the U-2, symbolized by the black granite wings pointing skyward.

He said he also wanted to tie in the crash of the C-54 transport plane by giving the memorial a spiritual quality so that family members and others would have a certain amount of reverence as they sit or stand on a 20-by-30-foot concrete slab surrounded by natural stone. A curved wall with information plaques will provide a backdrop.

Ririe said the memorial will also recognize two test pilots and two chase-plane pilots who were killed in crashes at Area 51. Plans call for a large, copper disc to be mounted on top of the wing structure.

On the back side of the memorial wall will be an inlaid, brass star dedicated to all those who died in covert efforts during the Cold War.