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“Our Guys”: Endless Service at the Circle of Heroes

In the fall of 1984, composer and Hanna-Barbera musical director Hoyt Curtin posed a pair of provocations to American television audiences: “If you could breathe underwater, where would you go? If you had friends underwater, who would you know?” Awash with implications both practical and philosophical, he ended his lyrics with a promise: “So much to see waiting for you and me.” Awaiting us in the watery depths, the lyrics imply, is a world unlike the terrestrial one we humans know. But what if the world underwater is not so dissimilar to the world above? What if the expressions of authority in the world we already know are just the same as those that await us down below?

As protesters of racial injustice toppled statues this summer, a curious phenomenon could be observed on both sides of the waterline. The bronze and marble bodies (or sometimes just the heads) of once-lionized men of colonialism and white supremacy were not just brought down, but they were also dumped into bodies of water. On June 7, 2020, John Cassidy’s 1896 bronze statue of seventeenth-century Royal African Company slaver Edward Colston went headfirst into England’s Bristol Harbor. This event sparked numerous dislocations across the Atlantic: Mauro Bigarani’s 1984 marble Christopher Columbus was pulled from its pedestal and shattered into several pieces on the ground before tumbling into Baltimore’s Inner Harbor; in Richmond’s Byrd Park, protesters hauled Ferruccio Legnaioli’s 1927 bronze Christopher Columbus to Fountain Lake, where it remained partially submerged; and several men in New Orleans rolled Angela Gregory’s 1938 bronze bust of John McDonough, a shipping magnate and slave owner, into the Mississippi River. Many of these sculptures were quickly fished out of the water, in some cases within twenty-four hours. For those drowned in deeper water, teams of divers were sent in after the sculptures, identifying the location of anatomical fragments or entire bodies and lashing bands around them, while on land, crews of crane operators brought them back up to the surface.

Figural public sculptures are often erected to fortify power. These cast and carved bodies survey the landscaped grounds and urban plazas upon which they have been installed. Once tipped into the water, turned sideways or upside-down, they become differently dangerous. In their temporary sea burial, they intrude on a world in which they are not usually found. They are less like a great gyre of waste, compromising longer-term planetary survival, than a kind of enemy craft. They are monitored by local and national governing agencies that

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quickly act to remove them, lest they remain or are joined by other unsanctioned bodies in the water, weakening claims to safety, stability, and sovereignty. The retrieval of these figures and proposed reinstallation of them on dry land is a form of homeland security, a kind of Border Patrol Tactical Unit (BORTAC) operation, deployed to maintain the commemorative landscape.

With the attention given these displaced sculptures, it is surprising that more of these embodiments of national ideology have not been intentionally installed underwater in the first place. Above the waterline, these sculptures encode the desires of their commissioners to exert control over all that is “seen” by their stone and metal eyes. They also enact these desires. They are sentinels of the state, monitoring and maintaining while in place, as they are monitored and maintained by others when displaced. So where are the sculptures-as-US Border Patrol agents monitoring watery outposts? Why haven’t they been erected to assert dominance over the full expanse of a nation’s territory, extending miles from the shore and into the sea?



The first statues of the Circle of Heroes lowered into place, 2019. Photograph provided by Brighter Future Florida.

One exception can be found about ten miles off the coast of Clearwater, Florida. There, forty feet below the surface of the water on the sand-covered limestone shelf of the Gulf of Mexico, is a ring of a dozen cast concrete sculptures: the Circle of Heroes. Mostly standing at around six feet tall, these figures represent military service members from the US’s combat missions spanning the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Their uniforms do most of the work of differentiation and periodization. They include a Southeast Asia War soldier, a Korean War soldier, a Vietnam soldier, a Gulf War soldier, an Iraq War soldier, an Iraqi Freedom Fighter, a Navy sailor, a Marine, an Air Force pilot, an Army nurse, a pair of figures representing the concept of No Man Left Behind, and a soldier kneeling in front of a battle cross (a rifle jammed into boots with a helmet resting atop). Affixed to the base of each statue is an acrylic nameplate detailing the branch of the military represented and the financial sponsor of the specific sculpture. In the center of the arrangement is a four-foot-high, five-sided squat pillar weighing nearly six thousand pounds.[1] Attached to

[1] One planning report awkwardly describes the installation as “a compass rose with a central memorial,” perhaps unintentionally suggesting that the figures are somehow functionally distinct from the memorial. See Office of the County Administrator, Pinellas County, “FY20 Budget Message,” October 1, 2019, [link](#).

its sides are bronze military plaques bearing the emblems of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard, and Marines. Steel chains, resting on the ground and running through and around the formation, serve as guides that divers who visit the memorial can use to pull themselves between the figures.[2]

Developed and approved by the nonprofit Brighter Future Florida and managed by Pinellas County, the Circle of Heroes is conscripted into performing a trite idea of American imperial might.[3] The sculptures enact the role and image of “heroes” for their audience, both underwater and on dry land, locally and nationally. As a project soaked with patriotic associations, the Circle of Heroes taps into some essential qualities of contemporary American nationhood: a permanent state of service, civic obligations to provide care, and the mobilization of figural sculpture as sources and forces of ideological and economic boosterism. In design and use, the underwater grouping resists actual ecological conservation or restoration, despite being promoted as offering ecological benefit. This was but one strategy the Circle of Heroes’ supporters employed to ensure sources of public and private funding for a project intended to be not just a static object but an operative asset contributing to the local economy. In an era in which homeland security means protecting not just populations but investments, the project’s figures literalize a practice of “armoring capitalism.”[4] Built at a territorial margin, the memorial also finds consonance with C. J. Alvarez’s analysis of commercial, policing, and resource extraction border projects that blur the distinction between civil and military authority and give visible form to state power.[5]

In 2018, Ken Welch, Pinellas County Commission chairman, addressed the multiple ambitions of the project: “I can’t imagine a better way to share the beauty of our coastal waters and support our troops” than by constructing “an iconic attraction in the region, highlighting the service and sacrifices of those who have fought to protect the freedoms we all enjoy.”[6] This iconic attraction was and is envisioned as a kind of pilgrimage landmark in the making, an addition to the national constellation of veterans memorials and battlefield monuments. While the Circle of Heroes has been touted in the press as “the country’s first underwater veterans memorial,” David Jolly, former Republican congressional representative and public face of Brighter Future Florida, has been more precise in his description.[7] He has referred to the installation as “the nation’s very first underwater veterans memorial accessible to divers and the recreation community.”[8] This designation perhaps initially calls to mind less a site of contemplative reflection than a roadside or seaside novelty. Given the specialized training, transportation, and equipment required to see and navigate the underwater memorial firsthand, the site draws a fractional audience compared to similar above-water attractions.

Fixed in place, the sculptures embody a form of enduring American military service. They permanently mark a defense of American values by permanently occupying this underwater American territory. The Circle of Heroes reflects nearly a century of American military actions, a chronology of perpetual war that has been summarized by Ronak K. Kapadia, *pace* Sora Y. Han, as “not the US ‘at war’ but the US ‘as war.’”[9] Offering an alternative framework, Joseph Darda has addressed this lineage since WWII not as waging war but as waging defense.[10] A rhetoric of defending the freedom of certain lives, which initially emerged to safeguard against another Pearl Harbor, has been deployed

[2] John Tapley, “Clearwater UW Veterans Memorial Honors Service, Promotes Local Diving,” *Scuba & H2O Adventures* magazine, September 9, 2019, [link](#).

[3] For more about this sole project of Brighter Future Florida, see [link](#).

[4] Todd Miller, *Empire of Borders: The Expansion of the US Border Around the World* (London: Verso, 2019), 26, 167–192.

[5] C. J. Alvarez, *Border Land, Border Water: A History of Construction on the US-Mexico Divide* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019).

[6] TBN Staff, “County Rolls Out Plans for Underwater Vets Memorial,” *Largo Leader* 39, no. 19, February 8, 2018, 1A.

[7] Initial project funding for the Circle of Heroes came from money left over from Jolly’s final congressional campaign, which was converted into the Brighter Future Florida nonprofit. See Brian Todd, “Kellogg-made statues sunk as part of memorial,” *Post Bulletin*, August 12, 2019, [link](#). In addition to Matthews and Jolly, the project team for the Circle of Heroes included: Preston Rudie, former communications director for Jolly; John David White, another former staff member in Jolly’s congressional office; Paul Matthews, retired US Navy Commander, among others. “Circle of Heroes at Veterans Reef” presentation, May 16, 2018, *Visit St. Pete Clearwater*: [link](#).

[8] Circle of Heroes Veterans’ Memorial, “Former Congressman David Jolly joined Tampa Bay’s Morning Blend to discuss the various elements to the Circle of Heroes and what it will look like when the statues are submerged,” Facebook, June 7, 2019, [link](#). Jolly’s concluding phrase is an important qualifier, as the 1962 USS Arizona Memorial in Hawai’i’s Pearl Harbor is actually the nation’s first underwater veterans memorial.

[9] See Ronak K. Kapadia, *Insurgent Aesthetics: Security and the Queer Life of the Forever War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 5; and Sora Y. Han, *Letters of the Law: Race and the Fantasy of Colorblindness in American Law* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015). See also John W. Dower, *The Violent American Century: War and Terror Since World War II* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016) and Alfred W. McCoy, *In the Shadow of the American Century: The Rise and Decline of U.S. Global Power* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016). For an even longer survey of US war, see David Vine, *The United States of War: A Global History of America’s Endless Conflicts from Columbus to the Islamic State* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020).

in service of anticommunism, antiterrorism, and attacking illiberal beliefs wherever they may appear. New enemies are forever generated through cultural narratives and representations, and military engagements that are framed as anticolonial and antiracist in fact serve to expand the American empire and require non-white and non-Western populations to be cast as ideologically illegitimate. As Darda succinctly states, “Defense is not the end of war: it is the transformation of war from an event into a norm.”[11] Never moving from their place, modifying their pose, or removing their uniforms, the underwater figures will never not be on active duty. They are in an endless state of military service to a country that now expects endless military service.

At the same time, the figures expect acts of service to be performed by multiple, occasionally overlapping, publics, and to multiple beneficiaries. This includes donors who will help meet the project’s fundraising goals so that the memorial can be fully realized. It also includes those visiting the memorial, who will provide financial support to coastal businesses. Beyond acts of reverence at the memorial site, patronage of an economy responsible for the presence of these figures becomes part of civilian service, whether onetime visitors or those making repeat trips. Veterans, whom the Circle of Heroes is conceived to honor, enact another kind of service, providing ongoing maintenance of the memorial, even as societal obligations for their own care are dismantled or denied. In ways both subtle and not, the project reveals priorities that value the building and maintaining of commemorative infrastructure over the building and maintaining of infrastructures of care for the very people commemorated.[12]

[10] Joseph Darda, *Race and the Cultural Politics of Permanent War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

[11] Darda, *Race and the Cultural Politics of Permanent War*, 6.

[12] On infrastructures of care, see Shannon Mattern, “Maintenance and Care,” *Places Journal*, November 2018, [link](#).



Diver at the Circle of Heroes, 2019. Photograph provided by Brighter Future Florida.

While promoted as having grand patriotic, ecologic, and economic ambitions, the Circle of Heroes is only half-realized. Once complete, the underwater installation will be made up of twenty-four statues, ultimately forming a circle one hundred feet in diameter. In coordination with the US Coast Guard and Army Corps of Engineers, the first twelve figures were lowered into place from a barge in late June 2019, followed by a formal dedication ceremony on

August 5. Before the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic crash, the next twelve were anticipated to be installed on either Veterans Day 2020 or Memorial Day 2021.[13] This second set of sculptures remains to be fully financed.

Phase one of the project, concerning the first twelve sculptures, relied on contracting with companies across the country that were already known for producing military memorials from casts and thus creating generic, stock figures.[14] For many of the figures, their features code white. They conform to a centuries-long pattern of memorial construction in service of racialized nation-building and affirm a particular visual lexicon of the look of a national “hero” rather than reflecting the diversity of the American armed forces.[15] In contrast, phase two would see the creation of customized works with more individual likenesses for the second twelve sculptures, ideally made by local artists.[16] Phase one was treated as a proof of concept, used to demonstrate the viability of an underwater memorial in order to fundraise for phase two, which will be considerably more expensive.[17] Although some of the original twelve statues were sponsored by different military-affiliated groups, organizers positioned the second-phase statues as opportunities for personalized memorialization for Gold Star families, veterans groups, and businesses.[18] A May 2018 public presentation explained that phase two would see the creation of sculptures of Florida military luminaires, with figures like General Norman Schwarzkopf, leader of Operation Desert Storm in 1990, or even specific categories of service members, such as a hardhat diver, cited as likely candidates.[19] To date, only one of these customized figures has been made.[20]

Amateur photographs of the Circle of Heroes often show divers in wetsuits and breathing apparatuses bobbing amid the first set of sculptures. These images reveal something both kitschy and unnerving about the project. Divers hover in the murky blue-green sea, the sculptures appearing as remainders of a long-defeated empire that are yet to erode. The otherworldly unsettledness of such photographs is quite different from the crisply lit figures that appear in official promotional videos, which reveal the figures to a triumphant orchestral soundtrack using slow-panning camera movements.[21] These amateur photographs reveal a reality also markedly different from Brighter Future Florida’s digital rendering of the site, shown in a February 2018 public presentation of the first four statues held at Sand Key Park.[22] In this truly bizarre rendering, quasi-beatific spotlights cut through the water, less the effects of evenly dispersed sunlight or the beams of dive lights than the illuminations of a digital divine. They reveal artificially patinated bronze figures (rather than the actual cast concrete ones). Schools of yellow-and-black-striped fish, a digital layer of the same image file presented twice in mirror image, swim around the statues, which are framed by columns of bubbles that do not seem to emerge from any clear source. Yet, neither ruins nor active custodians of a law-and-order nation, the rendering portrays these figures as out-of-place curiosities, novelties at the bottom of the sea. The gulf between reality and representation is similar to that between reality and rhetoric, specifically the benefits that supporters promised and promoted the Circle of Heroes would offer.

[13] Todd, “Kellogg-Made Statues Sunk as Part of Memorial.”

[14] Dan Browning, “Minnesota Company’s Statuary Popping Up at Memorials, Backyards, Even Undersea,” *Star Tribune*, September 21, 2019, [link](#). An earlier plan to have ten “off the shelf” statues and two customized statues as part of this first phase was eventually abandoned. See “Circle of Heroes at Veterans Reef” presentation.

[15] See Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Cecilia Elizabeth O’Leary, *To Die For: The Paradox of American Patriotism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 110–128; and Kristin Ann Haas, *Sacrificing Soldiers on the National Mall* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 45–55.

[16] “Minnesota Company Builds Statues for Underwater Dive Memorial Honoring Our Veterans,” *Winona Daily News*, August 11, 2019, [link](#); and Todd, “Kellogg-made statues sunk as part of memorial.”

[17] In 2019, phase one was estimated to cost about \$200,000, with most of the funds raised in Florida and through in-kind donations; phase two was estimated to cost about \$350,000, a \$50,000 increase from the budget proposed the year prior. While some project expenses were consistent across the two phases—administrative expenses, deployments of a tugboat and crane for installation, and marketing—the difference was due to the anticipated customization. See “Circle of Heroes at Veterans Reef” presentation and Todd, “Kellogg-made statues sunk as part of memorial.”

[18] For example, for phase one, the Veterans of Foreign Wars are the “gold-level” sponsors of the No Man Left Behind sculpture, and its sponsorship is noted on the affixed plaque. The sculpture is the rare inclusion in the set that features two figures: one carries the other draped across his shoulders. Janie Dyhouse, “VFW’s Image ‘Shines’ Under the Sea,” *VFW Magazine*, December 19, 2019, 23. See also “Circle of Heroes at Veterans Reef” presentation and John Guerra, “‘Circle of Heroes’ Reef Memorial On Track, Seeks More Donations,” *Tampa Bay Times*, February 21, 2019, [link](#). As of 2019, a donation of \$1,000 buys a personalized plaque on one statue without the donor getting to select which statue, while \$5,000 buys the ability to select the specific statue on which the personalized plaque will be affixed. This donation strategy is illustrated by a slightly crass digital flyer in which a box hovering over a statue base declares, with peculiar punctuation, “Your name, or business name here.” “Circle of Heroes at Veterans Reef,” *Brighter Future Florida*, 2019, [link](#).

[19] Tapley, “Clearwater UW Veterans Memorial Honors Service, Promotes Local Diving.”

[20] A sculpture of Coast Guard Seaman Apprentice William Ray Flores was unveiled on January 27, 2020. This was one day shy of the fortieth anniversary of the 1980 collision of the oil tanker *Capricorn* with the USCGC *Blackthorn* near Tampa Bay, an accident during which Flores died while saving the lives of twenty-three shipmates. Rather than a Florida sculptor, the Kellogg, Minnesota, commercial sculpture company SVJ Creative Designs worked with Flores’s family to produce a likeness of Flores, a nearly six-month process. See Todd, “Kellogg-Made Statues Sunk as Part of Memorial;” Victoria Carra, “MN Artists Work on New Sculpture for Underwater Memorial,” *KTTC*, September 17, 2019, [link](#); Kirby Wilson, “A



1980 Coast Guard Disaster Killed 23 in Tampa Bay. Here's One Hero's Story," *Tampa Bay Times*, January 27, 2020, 3; and Aaron Krassraie, "Statue Unveiled for Underwater Vets Memorial in Florida," *AARP*, January 28, 2020, [link](#).

[21] *Scuba Diving* magazine, "Circle of Heroes Dive Site Officially Open to Divers," YouTube video, 1:06, August 6, 2019, [link](#).

[22] For the digital rendering, see "Circle of Heroes at Veterans Reef" presentation.

Diver at the Circle of Heroes, 2019. Photograph provided by Brighter Future Florida.

This rendering also nods to the underwater project's potential ecological dimension. The Circle of Heroes is an elaboration of an earlier project of Heyward Matthews, professor emeritus of oceanography at St. Petersburg College, and David Jolly's uncle. In 1999, Matthews started work on Veterans Reef, an artificial reef located about ten miles off the coast of Dunedin, Florida, which is just north of Clearwater.[23] Matthews received \$277,000 from the Florida Boating Improvement Program to create this underwater environment, which eventually included a Lockheed Neptune P2V-3 bomber, four barges, and groupings of limestone boulders and concrete materials. Punctured with holes and stacked to create craggy ledges and pockets of space, this installation formed a habitat to draw fish as well as anglers and divers.[24] Months after the reef's dedication, a storm damaged an underwater plaque and several of the underwater craft.[25] The demonstrated fragility and impermanence of this arrangement informed Matthews's decision a decade later to create a more permanent site for veterans, located about a quarter of a mile to the southeast. [26]

Although visually similar in some respects to artist Jason deCaires Taylor's underwater ecological restoration "museums" or "sculpture parks" of the past two decades, the Circle of Heroes was not designed as the same kind of artificial reef as Veterans Reef.[27] The figures are relatively compact. Their slab bases rest firmly on the seabed. They lack the small-framed pockets of space found in Veterans Reef's agglomerations. In an interview with the *Tampa Bay Times*, Matthews was explicit that the project was "not designed to provide habitat for food or game fish." [28] Yet, as part of the campaign to secure public funding, the site's contribution to "education and marine science" through "water, fish, and reef monitoring" was touted as a project benefit.[29] Without explaining specifically how the memorial would do so, Jolly extolled that the project would "help sustain marine life in our precious gulf waters as an artificial reef" without occluding the service uniforms of the figures.[30] These greenwashing efforts were successful. The first four statues were ultimately paid for as part of \$50,000 in seed money from the county's solid waste budget. This funds the county's artificial reef program, which is itself partially funded by

[23] Veterans Reef is one of thirteen artificial reefs overseen by Pinellas County. "Pinellas County Artificial Reef GPS Coordinates Summary," *Pinellas County Artificial Reef Program*, March 4, 2014, [link](#).

[24] John Guerra, "'Circle of Heroes' Reef Memorial on Track, Seeks More Donations" and "Veterans Reef," *Pinellas County Artificial Reef Program*, undated, [link](#).

[25] "Clearwater UW Veterans Memorial Honors Service, Promotes Local Diving."

[26] One of Matthews's early formulation of Circle of Heroes called for including actual tanks. Realizing that the metal would soon rust and "start to look bad," he decided to substitute the war machines with something more durable. See Ashley Yore, "New Underwater Military Statues Will Honor Veterans and Create Scuba Destination," *ABC Action News*, February 2, 2018, [link](#); and "Clearwater UW Veterans Memorial Honors Service, Promotes Local Diving."

[27] Sited away from already healthy reefs, deCaires Taylor's pH-neutral concrete figures form an armature encouraging coral growth, fish aggregation, and the creation of new ecosystems. See "Threats," *Jason deCaires Taylor*, [link](#).

[28] John Guerra, "'Circle of Heroes' Reef Memorial On Track, Seeks More Donations."

[29] "Circle of Heroes at Veterans Reef" presentation.

[30] TBN Staff, "County Rolls Out Plans for Underwater Vets Memorial," 4A. See also Pinellas County Tourist Development Council, minutes, May 16, 2018, 5, [link](#).

the financial settlement from the 2010 British Petroleum Deepwater Horizon oil spill.[31] The project was classified alongside sewer system studies, affordable housing, and new speed feedback signage as programs to “foster continual economic growth and vitality.”[32]

The memorial, promoters believed, could be a major tourist attraction. As such, it could increase the county’s already close to \$60 million annual revenue from tourist development taxes alone.[33] Jolly projected the economic impact of the memorial as yielding \$7 million annually, driven by a national and international media campaign. It would draw a new community of divers, create eighty-four new jobs tied to the recreational boating and tourist diving industries, and continue to bolster business in local dive shops, restaurants, and hotels.[34] The economic boon the Circle of Heroes was projected to offer seemed too great for the county to pass up.[35]



[31] Office of the County Administrator, Pinellas County, “FY18 Budget Message,” October 1, 2017, A-24, [link](#); “Coming to Pinellas County: A New Underwater Veterans Memorial,” *St. Petersburg Downtown Newsletter*, no. 50 (May 2018): 15, and Pinellas County Tourist Development Council, minutes, May 16, 2018, 4, [link](#).

[32] Office of the County Administrator, Pinellas County, “FY18 Budget Message,” A-24.

[33] Suzette Porter, “Pinellas Remains On Track to Collect \$60 Million in Tourist Taxes This Year,” *Tampa Bay newspapers*, August 27, 2019, link.

[34] Yore, “New Underwater Military Statues Will Honor Veterans and Create Scuba Destination”; “Circle of Heroes at Veterans Reef” presentation; and TBN Staff, “County Rolls Out Plans for underwater vets memorial,” 4A.

[35] Pinellas County Board of County Commissioners, “Minutes-Final,” May 8, 2017, 13, and Pinellas County Board of County Commissioners, “Minutes-Final,” May 23, 2017, 14, [link](#).

The first statues of the Circle of Heroes lowered into place, 2019. Photograph provided by Brighter Future Florida.

This intermingling of memorial and tourist economies seen in the Circle of Heroes both reflects and furthers a regional priority. Members of the county’s Tourist Development Council positioned the Circle of Heroes as contributing to a regional identity, given the project’s proximity to MacDill Air Force Base, headquarters of the US Central Command and US Operations Command, about an hour’s drive from Clearwater.[36] It is also near other veterans memorial sites, such as the War Veterans Memorial Park in nearby St. Petersburg, Florida, situated on onetime federal land donated to the county in 1963.[37] In recent years, the county has also prioritized wounded veteran commemorative namings, such as in 2006, when the city of Dunedin was named a Purple Heart City (the first such city in the nation), and in 2017, when county commissioners designated all of Pinellas County a Purple Heart County.[38]

The proliferation of such veterans designations, particularly those emphasizing forms of sacrifice, constitutes what Erika Doss has termed the “memorial mania” that has taken over the American landscape in the last several decades. But beyond this, the Circle of Heroes also actively participates

[36] Pinellas County Tourist Development Council, minutes, May 16, 2018, 5. See also Pinellas County Board of County Commissioners, “Minutes-Final,” August 7, 2019, 9–10, [link](#).

[37] Across the 122-acre park are: five emblem plaques, one for each branch of the military; the Battlefield Cross Monument (2015), commemorating the eighteen service-members from Pinellas County who died during the Gulf War; a Korean War-era tank (acquired in 1970); the new Purple Heart Memorial (2019); and other landmark features.

[38] Suzette Porter, “Pinellas designated as Purple Heart County,” *Tampa Bay newspapers*, August 13, 2017, [link](#). The county also designated a section of State Road 580 as Purple Heart Highway. That same year, the Board of County Commissioners supported legislation establishing the county as a “High Impact Veteran County,” a designation that would lead to the increased allocation of state funds for veteran services and benefits. The Board of County Commissioners also included securing state funding for the “construction of a Veterans Memorial Reef” as a priority. As Veterans Reef already existed for close to the two decades, this item likely is in reference to the Circle of Heroes. Pinellas County Board of County Commissioners, “2018 Legislative Program,” November 8, 2017, 1–2, [link](#).

in a culture that touts concern for active and veteran service members even as it struggles to allocate needed economic and medical resources to them.

[39] This struggle extends to keeping up with a demand for funerary sites, and the Circle of Heroes was developed as veteran cemeteries were running out of space.[40] The nationwide Urban Initiative and Rural Initiative, both launched by Veterans Affairs in the last decade (and more recently evaluated as having made “limited progress” and running behind schedule), were intended to address the lack of available resources for casket interment, a form of necessary long-term care. With the accompanying shift toward concrete columbarium construction nationwide, these initiatives also endeavored to provide access to new funerary memorial locations for living veterans for whom traveling longer distances is not a feasible option.[41]

Ensuring the endurance and consistent maintenance of gravesites and other memorials are often practical and material enactments of obligations to service members. As the Circle of Heroes was being developed, supporters asserted that concrete had an indefinite underwater lifetime.[42] The decision to mark the site with four mooring buoys was also made with material rather than ecological conservation in mind. The buoys relieve boats from needing to drop anchors, diminishing the chances of damaging the sculptures below. As Matthews explained, “I’m not looking to have a whole bunch of fishermen come in; or spear fishermen bouncing a spear off a \$20,000 statue.”[43] A nylon brush is secured to each sculpture, allowing divers to clear away any sand or silt that builds up on the figures or plaques. A recent coordinated cleanup by a dive team that removed marine growth on the sculptures’ surfaces was framed by the local press as a “mission to preserve patriotism.”[44] Care for statuary becomes equated if not conflated with care for actual bodies. This replacement of flesh and bone with cast concrete and then back again comes through in Vietnam Air Force Veteran David A. Thomas’s remark to a local reporter in early 2018. Thomas, who also built the memorial’s center marker, explained, “These are our guys, these are the people that we served with, that we knew, that we don’t know, we’ll never know, but they’re our people.”[45]

The Circle of Heroes facilitates a form of care not provided by Veterans Affairs. Beyond its other purposes, the memorial was developed as a therapeutic site for disabled veterans, in line with research advocating veterans use the partial sensory deprivation and weightlessness that comes with being underwater to work through PTSD, depression, joint pain, and other effects of trauma.[46] Dive therapy organizations have formed across the country, including the Deep Sea Valkyries in Phoenix, Arizona, who were on hand for the Circle of Heroes ribbon cutting in the summer of 2019.[47] David Miller, the representative for the National American Legion at the Bay Pines VA Hospital, was also present at the ribbon cutting.[48] In his remarks to one local newspaper, he extended the value of dive therapy to alleviating psychological and physical ailments, including pain management. Diving to see the figures and the central marker would “keep [veterans] from thinking about their own problems” and “keep [veterans] off their opiates and all the medication they are given these days.”[49]

[39] Erika Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). See Steve Contorno and Howard Altman, “Florida Military Bases Could Lose Up to \$177 Million to Trump’s Border Wall,” *Tampa Bay Times*, February 18, 2019, [link](#); Leo Shane III, “Trump Wants a Huge Increase in VA Spending but Vet Groups are Still Unhappy. Here’s Why,” *Military Times*, March 11, 2019, [link](#); Jennifer Steinhauer, “Early Problems as Trump’s Signature Veterans Health Plan Rolls Out,” *New York Times*, November 6, 2019, [link](#); and Brian W. Everstine, “DOD Closing Dozens of Military Clinics to Retirees, Families,” *Airforce Magazine*, February 19, 2020, [link](#).

[40] St. Petersburg, Florida, hosts the Bay Pines National Cemetery, which opened in 1933 but has been under the administration of the Department of Veterans Affairs since 1984. For space reasons, it currently inters cremated remains or casketed remains only if at the same gravesite as a previously interred family member. See “Bay Pines National Cemetery,” US Department of Veterans Affairs (June 12, 2019), [link](#).

[41] Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs, “VA Expanding Burial Options in Rural Areas,” US Department of Veterans Affairs, August 1, 2012, [link](#); Richelle Taylor, “VA Increases Burial Options for Veterans in Urban Areas,” *VANtage Point*, June 3, 2015, [link](#); United States Government Accountability Office, GAO-19-121 “Veterans Affairs: Additional Actions Needed to Increase Veterans’ Burial Access,” September 2019, [link](#); Libby Denkmann, “As Veterans’ Cemeteries Run Out of Space, the VA Is Providing an Alternative,” *WUSF News*, October 25, 2019, [link](#); and United States Government Accountability Office, “Veterans Affairs: Additional Actions Needed to Increase Veterans’ Burial Access,” September 2019, [link](#).

[42] Pinellas County Tourist Development Council, minutes, May 16, 2018, 5.

[43] “Clearwater UW Veterans Memorial Honors Service, Promotes Local Diving.”

[44] Bobby Lewis, “Veterans from Arizona Travel to Clear Clearwater’s Circle of Heroes Dive Memorial,” *WTSP-TV*, June 18, 2020, [link](#).

[45] Yore, “New Underwater Military statues will honor veterans and create scuba destination.”

[46] For example, see Carly M. Rogers, Trudy Mallinson, and Dominique Peppers, “High-Intensity Sports for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Depression: Feasibility Study of Ocean Therapy with Veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom,” *American Journal of Occupational Therapy* 68, no. 4 (July–August, 2014): 395–404; Alice Morgan, Harriet Sinclair, Alexander Tan, Ellen Thomas, and Richard Castle, “Can SCUBA Diving Offer Therapeutic Benefit to Military Veterans Experiencing Physical and Psychological Injuries as a Result of Combat? A Service Evaluation of Deeptherapy UK,” *Disability and Rehabilitation* 41, no. 23 (May 2018): 2,832–2,840; and Dragana Krpalek, Naomi Achondo, Noha Daher, and Heather Javaherian, “Reducing Veterans’ Symptoms of Depression, Anxiety, Stress, and Posttraumatic Stress, and Enhancing Engagement in Occupations with SCUBA Diving and Occupational Therapy,” *Journal of Veterans Studies* 6, no. 1 (2020): 98–106.

[47] John Guerra, “Veterans, Divers Christen New Underwater Memorial,” *Largo Leader*, August 8, 2019, 4A. See also Sean Kimmons, “Army Veterans Find Healing in New Underwater Memorial,” *Fort Hood Herald*, August 21, 2019, [link](#).

There are of course some obstacles to this kind of therapy. Although promoted by Veterans Affairs, the VA and some health insurance companies do not cover the full cost of dive therapy in all cases, requiring families or secondary support networks to step in.[50] Fulfillment of an obligation for care transfers from the government to the private sector and individual citizens.

As social safety nets fail and community and national traumas compound, tiers of government and private businesses continue to invest, literally, in conventional totems of performative reverence rather than in the actual obligations owed to citizens. The seemingly novel location of the Circle of Heroes does not signal a real shift in the traditional practice of public figural sculpture. The deployment of generic military figures for the memorial's first phase, and the anticipated more-particular cohort of service members of the second phase, offer another iteration of the oft-revived impulse to create "open-air museum[s] of national history as seen through great men." [51] Each announcement affirming dedication to these inert objects of territorial occupation calls into relief the emptiness of such gestures.[52] Looking on its constructed scenography of patriotism masquerading as care, which also shuttles the obligation for monument maintenance to citizens, the question resurfaces: after toppling the statues of oppressive ideology, what forms of real care do we want or expect to see?

[48] On August 5, 2019, local, state, and federal officials, the Sand Key Coast Guard unit, veterans, scuba divers, residents from Pinellas County, and television news camera crews gathered for the ribbon cutting. The national anthem was sung. A thirty-foot-long red ribbon strung between two powerboats was cut by a diver. Guerra, "Veterans, divers christen new underwater memorial," 4A.

[49] Guerra, "Veterans, Divers Christen New Underwater Memorial," 4A.

[50] Stephanie Colombini, "Veterans Turn to Scuba Diving to Help with PTSD," *WLRN*, September 27, 2019, [link](#).

[51] Eric Hobsbawm, "Foreword" in *Art and Power: Europe under the dictators 1930–45*, edited by David Britt (London: Hayward Gallery, 1995), 12.

[52] Donald J. Trump, "Executive Order on Building and Rebuilding Monuments to American Heroes," July 3, 2020, [link](#).