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Accident topples memorial in Veterans Park

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BY JOE RODRIGUEZ
The Wichita Eagle

When visitors to Veterans Memorial Park on Saturday discovered a memorial knocked down, some immediately thought it was a case of vandalism.

After all, the U.S. Submarines Veterans of World War II Memorial had a distinct sneaker print at the bottom, according to Phil Blake, who saw the damaged granite memorial Saturday.

But on Monday, the story of what happened became more clear, and it appears the memorial was not intentionally damaged, according to Wichita police. They said it was an accident.

Two women who were in town for a church convention were taking pictures at the park Thursday, when one leaned against the 6-foot tall memorial and tipped it over, according to Wichita police. The women called to report the incident Thursday, said Wichita police Lt. Barry Von Fange.

Officers who made the report Saturday didn't know about the earlier incident report, Von Fange said, and listed it as a vandalism.

Blake said it's possible that the condition of the memorial — which he said weighs about 1,000 pounds — could have deteriorated to the point where it could have tipped over with enough weight against it.

Blake is project manager for Operation Ensign, a project of Veterans Memorial Park of Wichita Inc.

He said the memorial was set in place atop a concrete pedestal with grout.

"In cemeteries, you find old stone where the grout underneath it has rotted out," he said. "That's what I think happened here. It's a clear case of the grout aged and decayed."

Von Fange, of the police department, agreed.

"It was basically just standing there, and could've been pushed over...like (the women) described," he said.

Even when the case was thought to be a vandalism, Blake said he did not believe it had anything to do with the recent emotional debate involving Veterans Memorial Park.

The Wichita City Council last week voted that a memorial proposed by the Vietnamese Community of Wichita would be placed on city-owned land near the park, not in it.

The memorial, meant to honor the sacrifices of Americans and South Vietnamese who fought the communist North Vietnamese, will be separated from the park by an earthen berm at least 6 feet tall.

The memorial that was damaged last week pays tribute to the men who were lost aboard the USS Dorado on Oct. 12, 1943.

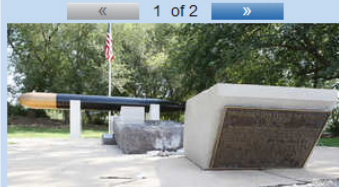
Blake said that it is owned by the Dry Docked Dolphins, the Kansas chapter of the U.S. Submarine Veterans of World War II. On Monday, he continued to try to contact members of the Kansas chapter to let them know about the damage.

He estimated the damage at about \$10,000.

Blake said people who want to help with repairs may send donations to: Veterans Memorial Park of Wichita Inc.; P.O. Box 4754, Wichita, KS 67204. He said donations should be marked for: "Dry Docked Dolphins repair."

Reach Joe Rodriguez at 316-268-6644 or jrodriguez@wichitaeagle.com.

PHOTOS



Bo Rader/The Wichita Eagle
Vandals toppled the U.S. Submarine Veterans of World War II Memorial, at Wichita's Veterans Memorial Park over the weekend 07/26/09.



Bo Rader/The Wichita Eagle
What was first thought to be vandalism the U.S. Submarine Veterans of World War II Memorial, at Wichita's Veterans Memorial Park over the weekend 07/26/09 turns out to have been an accident. A report was filed that two women were taking a photo when one leaned on the monument, knocking the 1000 lb. slab of granite from its base.

▪ Veterans park houses a variety of memorials

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