

PRISONERS OF WAR MEMORIAL

GEORGIA MEMORIAL

Andersonville, Georgia

by William J. Thompson, Sculptor

The motivating force behind this memorial was my desire to portray the universal suffering and courage of prisoners of all American wars, and their determination to survive individually and as a group. At the time I was thinking about how I would do this, it was 1972, and prisoners of war from Viet Nam were returning. I was affected by the solidarity, the courage, and the brotherhood they exhibited in their suffering, to help not only themselves but each other, to survive.

My challenge was to make a sculpture that would portray these qualities in a direct, graphic way, so that the viewer would be affected and know, just by looking, that here was courage and suffering. Even a child, without any explanation, should sense what the sculpture was trying to say.

My aim was to make a vital, moving sculpture that would speak directly to the senses without a lot of unnecessary detail, and through form, to get into the essence of the experience.

I chose three figures because of the dynamic quality of the interaction of the almost mystical number three. There was a great opportunity here to devise forms that would be compelling in themselves, as well as tell the story of prisoners of war.

After the commission was awarded to me as a result of the drawings and photos of the original small model (Insert photo made from slide #1), I began a 1/3 scale model which was submitted to the committee (Insert photo made from slide #2). After approval of that model, I moved into the full-scale model stage in my studio in Athens, Georgia.

The first step in this process was the welded armature (skeletal support) (Insert photo made from slide #3) The clay was applied over the armature and modeled (insert photo made from slide #4). After the modeling was finished, a plaster mold was made over the clay, from which a plaster positive is taken - a duplicate of the original clay. The details were sharpened and the plaster was sent to the foundry for casting into bronze. The whole process from the original small model and drawings to the plaster casting, for the three-figure piece, took about sixteen months to complete. The foundry process took another six months.

See Page 2 for explanation of the figures.

The symbolism of the monument is open to interpretation. However, my thoughts as I made them were to show the support these men gave to each other, helping the injured, combining strength and compassion, and calling upon their inner spiritual strength to survive. The exaggeration of heads and limbs seen in this sculpture was done to emphasize again through form, the often tortured lives and experiences of prisoners of war.

The figure with the crutch represents suffering, struggling man. The center figure is the God-like figure, offering support and assistance while himself sharing the same trials as the one he's supporting. The large figure, with the other two but slightly separate, could be blind or ill and led by the other two. He could also be interpreted as the angel of death with his hand on the shoulder of the middle, stronger, figure.

Also, the slanted base suggests that prisoners of war have an uphill struggle to survive their ordeal; and the inscription was chosen as a testimonial to the spirit of these prisoners.