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The three soldiers, surrounded by a low chain-link fence, stand well back from the black granite wall on the Washington Mall.

They seem to have just emerged from the small grove of trees behind them, their eyes open wide in the wild stare of stunned survivors astonished to be alive.

Alive! Their gaze arcs across the grassy knoll toward the sad archipelago of names engraved in stone on the distant memorial. Alive, when so many already have perished! Alive, when so many are yet to perish!

The artist who sculpted these soldiers, Frederick Hart, knew how to make mute stone and bronze speak. Hart, a Virginia-based artist who died at age 56 in Baltimore Aug. 13, was a prodigy and a self-taught genius who quixotically chose to apprentice himself to a master stonecarver in Washington and defied the fashionable modernism of art schools and museums and galleries that had decreed his kind of 19th-century romantic realism utterly passe.

"I would have been a far more compatible personality if I'd been born in that age," he once said in answer to such critics. "I envied that world, which adhered to the values I believe in -- beauty, decorum, elegance and classicism."

While "Three Soldiers," part of the Vietnam Memorial, may be his best-known work, Hart's masterpiece can be seen across town above the west doors of Washington's National Cathedral. Here Hart spent 10 years executing his Creation sculptures -- three life-size statues of Adam, Peter and Paul, plus three massive bas-reliefs -- the centerpiece for which is "Ex Nihilo," a 21-foot-high by 15-foot-wide mural depicting eight life-size male and female nudes emerging from the swirling tumult of Chaos.

Born in Atlanta and raised in South Carolina, Hart won the commission at the cathedral -- where he had done his stonecarving apprenticeship -- when he was just 31 years old and completely unknown. It was probably the most important American sculptural commission of the 20th century, yet the official art world took virtually no notice of it upon its completion in 1983.

It took the controversy over the Vietnam Memorial to bring Hart to wider public attention. He had been one of three finalists among the 1,400 entries in the original memorial competition in 1981. But the judges ultimately awarded the prize to Maya Lin, a young Chinese-American undergraduate student in the architecture department at Yale University, for her simple design of two V-shaped black slabs of highly polished granite.

It soon became apparent, however, that a faction of veterans and their supporters in Congress bitterly opposed Lin's modernistic design, which they condemned as a "wall of shame" and a "degrading ditch."

In an effort to compromise, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund agreed to add a realistic figurative piece, in the manner of the Iwo Jima Memorial, to the planned site on the Mall.

Hart's entry -- three battle-fatigued GIs, one white, one black and one Hispanic -- won the competition for the sculpture. The finished work was dedicated in 1984, two years after the wall was completed.

By then most of the controversy over the Vietnam Memorial had died down, and Hart had been careful to ensure that his statue was situated some 300 feet away from the wall rather than near its apex so that it complemented, rather than competed with, Lin's design. One cannot consider Hart's bronze figures, their taut bodies straining under the weight of their weapons and gear, except in relation to the dark polished wall that memorializes the human toll taken by the country's longest war.

These two parts of the Vietnam Memorial, one abstract and allusive, the other vividly concrete, could not be more different.

Hart's death prompted me to visit the site again last week, where a steady stream of people filed past both the wall and Hart's statue all day despite the stifling midsummer heat. It seemed to me that where the wall evoked intensely private contemplation, Hart's figures invited a very public identification with individuals caught up in the pathos and cruelty of war.

For example, dozens of people, from small children to middle-aged men and women and elderly survivors of earlier wars, took turns posing for snapshots in front of Hart's sculpture. But I rarely saw a camera being used among the people standing in front of the wall. It was as though the wall's very abstractness provoked an indelible mental image, while the statue's visceral realism sprang from a hundred minutely observed details that visitors felt compelled to record.

Hart's desperate, dogged soldiers are a testament to human endurance amid indescribable brutality and horror. They are impossible to contemplate outside the context of the great black wall's majestic unfurling of departed names.

But the wall and its names are equally indebted to Hart's three nameless figures, piteous in their vulnerability and shell-shocked confusion, frozen in time and a nation's collective memory, who forever after will give this war's suffering a human face and a human form.