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Visitors drawn to 'Faces of the Fallen' exhibit

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Tucked beneath the portrait of Army Reserve Maj. Charles R. Soltes, Jr. is a note from his Aunt Nancy. "Dear Rob: Your third son was born on December 6."

Soltes was killed Oct. 13, 2004, in Iraq and is among the 1,327 service men and women killed in Afghanistan and Iraq who are commemorated in the "Faces of the Fallen" exhibit at the gateway to Arlington National Cemetery.



Photos by Heidi Heimsal/ASNE Reporter

Bonnie Soltis, 50, from Knoxville, Tenn., carries her dog Pablo as she views the Faces of the Fallen exhibit at Arlington National Cemetery. The exhibit features more than 1,300 portraits of service members who have died in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Below, a note from family members is visible alongside one of the portraits.

The exhibit of portraits, representing those who died between Oct. 10, 2001, and Nov. 11, 2004, is on display inside the small museum at the entrance to the Women in Military Service for America Memorial.

The free exhibit, through Veterans Day, Nov. 11, 2005, is open daily from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Visitors are drawn to the portraits by the personal notes and snapshots. Flowers and miniature American flags adorn the portraits of some soldiers.

Annette Polan, organizer of the exhibit and a Washington portrait painter, was inspired to produce the exhibit after seeing a four-page spread in The Washington Post.

Polan, who was struggling with the death of her mother, turned her grief into art. She enlisted more than 200 artists nationwide to create the exhibit, including a father who painted a portrait of his son.

The artists worked from photos to create 6-by-8 inch works in metal, clay, wood, fiber and glass, in addition to paintings and drawings. Each painting is mounted on steel rods that include a label with the soldier's name, hometown and date of death. In the absence of a photograph, men and women are represented by a black-and-white silhouette.

Through the power of art, visitors come together to share the common grief and gratitude for those who died. Some of those visitors are soldiers who are home on leave, said Polan. "We had a private opening for the families on March 22, in which over 2,000 family members attended. Some families still come in by the busload," said Polan. The principal address at the opening was given by Gen. Richard B. Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The exhibit is supported entirely by private funds and may continue on a national tour upon the close in November. Portraits of over 300 killed since November may be added.