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Hagel: Nation Will Do 'Whatever it Takes' in POW/MIA Effort

By Nick Simeone
DoD News, Defense Media Activity

WASHINGTON, Sept. 19, 2014 – A solemn ceremony was held today on the Pentagon's River Parade Field to mark POW/MIA Recognition Day, an annual event that Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel called a reminder that the nation will do whatever it takes to recover every service member and identify the remains of all those still missing from past conflicts.

"Today, we are thankful that there are no U.S. troops being held anywhere in captivity," Hagel told an invited audience in the warmth of a late summer morning that included the families of former prisoners of war and those still listed as missing in action. "We know that there are still tens of thousands of fallen Americans who remain missing from many wars. We must continue to work hard to bring all of our missing Americans home."

Some 83,000 Americans still are missing from past conflicts, and Navy Adm. James A. Winnefeld Jr., the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the audience that no military mission is considered complete until all of the fallen are home.

Sacred obligation

"Today, as we fly the familiar black and white flag across our country, it's not only a symbol to honor the POW/MIA community," he said, "it's a reminder of our sacred obligation to the men and women we place in harm's way to never leave our fallen behind."

Today's ceremony took place four months after the last American war prisoner, Army Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl, was handed over to the U.S. military after being held for nearly five years by the Haqqani network while deployed to Afghanistan, and as the Pentagon continues an overhaul of the agencies responsible for recovering and identifying the remains of America's war dead.

"We've made progress in this transformation, and the new Defense Personnel Accounting Agency will achieve initial operating capability this January," Hagel said, six months after he announced a reorganization of the Defense Prisoner of War Missing Personnel Office and the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command in an overhaul that he said is aimed at reducing inefficiency and making the effort "stronger, more effective, more transparent and more responsive."

"We will do better not only in more effectively accounting for our missing personnel, but also ensuring that their families receive timely and accurate information," Hagel pledged.

Over the past year, he said, the department has been able to account for 71 service members from World War II, Korea and Vietnam. He said Vietnam has been providing an increasing number of archival documents to help in locating Americans missing from the war there.

Special recognition

Max Cleland, an Army veteran who lost both legs and his right arm in combat -- and, like Hagel, served both in the Senate and in Vietnam -- received special recognition at today's event. The defense secretary said Cleland represents the nation's finest qualities and has continued to serve the nation with great distinction. He led the Veterans Administration from 1977 to 1981, and most recently has chaired the American Battle Monuments Commission.

On a day that he said helps the nation establish a sense of meaning out of loss, Cleland sought to give hope to those who continue to wait for recovery of their loved ones, and recalled the words of a soldier after the Battle of Waterloo: "God and the soldier men adore in time of war, but not before, and in time of peace, with all things righted, God is forgotten and the soldier slighted."

"I'm honored to be in a country and with a government that forgets neither God nor the soldier," he added.

(Follow Nick Simeone on Twitter: @simeoneDoDNews)

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