

National POW/MIA Recognition Day Ceremony

As Delivered by Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, Pentagon River Terrace Parade Field, Friday, September 19, 2014

Admiral Winnefeld, thank you.

And to our former POWs, families of former POWs, families our missing-in-action, we welcome you. We honor you. We thank you. And we are grateful that you are here to share a special day of recognition with us, with our country.

Yesterday afternoon, at Arlington National Cemetery, a soldier from the Korean War who for decades was listed as missing-in-action finally received the full honors he so richly deserved. His burial fulfilled a solemn pact – a solemn pact America makes with its each of its defenders and their families – that we will take care of them, and that however much time has passed, they will make it back home.

For the Department of Defense, this is a responsibility and an obligation that we are proud to shoulder. We do whatever it takes to recover every U.S. servicemember held in captivity; and do whatever it takes to find and recover and identify the remains of America's missing from past conflicts.

Today, we are thankful that there are no U.S. troops being anywhere held in captivity. We know that there are still tens of thousands of fallen Americans who remain missing from many wars. We must continue to work hard – work hard to bring all of our missing Americans home. And we will.

The United States appreciates the ongoing support of many allies and partners across the globe – many represented here today – and on behalf of the men and women of our military, I thank you. You have helped us in recovering our missing. A good example of many of these efforts is Vietnam. Vietnam has been providing an increasing amount of archival documents to support our pursuit of our missing Americans. We appreciate these efforts and will continue to build on this partnership going forward.

Since we gathered on these parade grounds last September, DoD has been able to account for 71 servicemembers from World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. A year ago, that number was 61. While this improvement is good, we must do better – 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.

As many of you know, earlier this year I directed the Defense Department to organize this effort into a single, accountable operation that has the responsibility for personnel accounting resources, research, and operations... resolving issues of duplication and inefficiency, while also making that organization stronger, more effective, more transparent, and more responsive.

DoD has been working closely with everyone who has a stake in this mission – including families, the veterans' service organizations that are represented here today, and I thank them, Congress, and the agencies' workforce. We've made progress in this transformation, and the new Defense Personnel Accounting Agency will achieve initial operating capability this January.

Fifteen years ago this week, a Vietnam veteran said that "for those of us who were soldiers, that's our one fear: that somehow we'll be forgotten. But let it be known far and wide, around this great nation and around this great world that this nation," the United States of America, "does not forget. ... [It] does not forget its POWs, and for certain, does not forget its MIAs and the families they represent."

Those words still ring true today, and we are privileged today to be joined by the man who spoke them... a man who despite the wounds of war has continued to serve our country with great distinction, commitment, and honor – from the jungles of Vietnam, to lead the Veterans Administration, to the Georgia Statehouse, to the United States Senate, to the American Battle Monuments Commission... a man who I am privileged to now introduce, and am proud to call my longtime friend, former Senate colleague, and fellow Vietnam veteran... a man whose humility, his good grace, his decency, and humanity represent this nation's finest qualities.

Ladies and gentlemen, help me in welcoming Max Cleland.