

Dual POW/MIA Ceremony Slated Sept. 17 at Tomb of Unknowns

By Rudi Williams
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WASHINGTON -- A combined ceremony will be held Sept. 17 at the Tomb of the Unknowns in Arlington (Va.) National Cemetery to honor former POWs and missing servicemen and to dedicate an inscription on the crypt of the Vietnam Unknown.

The inscription, "Honoring and Keeping Faith with America's Missing Servicemen," is etched on the crypt cover above the existing dates, "1958-1975." The dedication was composed after the remains of the Vietnam Unknown were disinterred and identified as those of Air Force 1st Lt. Michael J. Blassie.

The identification of all remains from Southeast Asia -- and even other wars -- is a possibility today because of advances in forensic medicine since Blassie was interred as the Vietnam Unknown in 1984. Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen decided not to inter a new Vietnam Unknown unless the remains would be unidentifiable for all time -- no remains in current U.S. custody meet that absolute standard.

Charles L. Cragin, acting assistant secretary of defense for reserve affairs, said Cohen's decision led to the question: "How do we honor those still missing?" To find an answer, DoD queried Congress, the Cabinet and veterans and family service organizations. The inscription is based on the responses.

Cragin called the dedication ceremony and the inscription are vital parts of ensuring the nation's continued recognition of former POWs and its commitment to the fullest possible accounting of missing personnel. "What could be a better day to bring that together than POW/MIA Recognition Day, Sept. 17?" he asked.

The ceremonies don't relate solely to men missing in action in Vietnam, Cragin emphasized. "We continue to bring home remains of men killed in Korea and World War II to be identified and returned to their families," he said. "I want to ensure that POW/MIA Recognition Day is a day that is used to recognize all who were prisoners of war or missing in action."

Georgia Sen. Max Cleland, holder of the Silver Star for gallantry in Vietnam, will be the keynote speaker. "I can't think of an individual who has more insight, empathy, understanding and appreciation of the contributions made by all of the men and women who served in Southeast Asia," Cragin said.

A grenade explosion on April 8, 1968, cost Cleland both legs and his right arm. At age 28 in 1970, he became the youngest person ever elected to the Georgia State Senate. In 1977, he became the youngest ever head of the Veterans Administration [now Department of Veterans Affairs].

"As administrator of Veterans Affairs, he played a significant and meaningful role in concern and representation for America's servicemen and women and veterans, particularly POW/MIAs," Cragin noted.

The ceremony is open to the public. "We've sent personal invitations to more than 2,000 families of missing personnel. We've heard back from many who plan to attend," said Air Force Col. Beth Unklesbay of DoD's POW/Missing Personnel Office. "We've also contacted all the large veterans' and family groups and encouraged them to get word out to their membership."

Unklesbay said about 125,000 of the more than 142,000 American POWs in the 20th century returned home, and 52,000 are still alive. Nearly half of the 30,000 Americans held prisoner in the Pacific Theater during World War II died in captivity, she said, and many thousands more were POWs in Europe. She said fewer than half the 7,000 POWs of the Korean War returned home, and more than 8,000 Americans

are still listed as missing in action. Of the more than 800 U.S. servicemen held prisoner in Vietnam, 144 died in captivity.