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DISINTERMENT OF UNIDENTIFIED REMAINS BEGINS IN HAWAII

The disinterment of the remains of two Korean War servicemen previously classified as "unknown" begins Wednesday, Sept. 15 in Hawaii at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, commonly known as the Punch Bowl.

United States Pacific Command will conduct a Joint Services Disinterment Ceremony at 10 a.m. (Hawaii time), to honor the deceased servicemen. The ceremony will include a joint color guard and two joint Service casket bearer teams.

The Department of Defense announced in May a policy to apply mitochondrial DNA technology to identify Korean War and World War II remains previously classified as "unknown" and interred in national cemeteries. In 1995, DoD certified the use of mtDNA as a reliable forensic tool. Since then, further improvements and refinements in the use of mtDNA technology have occurred to enhance the possibility of positive identification.

"In applying the latest technology available to us, we hope to provide answers to family members who lost loved ones during the war -- some nearly 50 years ago," said Robert L. Jones, deputy assistant secretary of Defense for POW/Missing Personnel Affairs. "Our work in identifying the Vietnam Unknown from the Tomb of the Unknowns led us naturally to this work in the Punch Bowl cemetery," he added.

In 1998, the Department of Defense identified the Vietnam Unknown as U.S. Air Force 1st Lt. Michael Blassie using mtDNA from his remains and matching test results with those from his family. He was killed in Vietnam in 1972, classified as an unknown, and interred in the Tomb in 1984. Blassie's remains now rest at the Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery in St. Louis, Mo.

For the past five years, the Central Identification Laboratory, Hawaii, has applied the science of mtDNA to approximately 45 percent of its cases. The Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory in Rockville, Md., carries out the mtDNA laboratory work.

The cemetery with the greatest number of gravesites containing unknown remains is the Punch Bowl, which is part of the Department of Veterans Affairs, National Cemetery Administration. This cemetery contains 866 remains of unidentified soldiers from the Korean War. Following the cease-fire in 1953, most of these remains were turned over by the North Koreans.

The records associated with each of the unknown remains located in the Punch Bowl cemetery were subject to a rigorous evaluation before the decision was made to disinter. CILHI determines whether there is strong circumstantial evidence associating a serviceman's name with a set of remains. Since mtDNA is to be used to identify most of these remains, a comparison blood sample is needed. DoD continues to obtain mtDNA samples from family members from each serviceman's maternal bloodline. Scientists believe a total of 50-70 cases may be candidates for eventual disinterment.

The CILHI will direct the identification process and the actual disinterment action, which has been closely coordinated with the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific and the Department of Veterans Affairs.