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### **POW/MIA Recognition Day Ceremony**

*As Delivered by Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta, The Pentagon, Friday, September 16, 2011*

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Thank you very much, Admiral Winnefeld, for that introduction. Distinguished guests, veterans, wounded warriors, senior leaders of the Department, let me express to you how I honored I am to be here on this solemn day. This is my first opportunity as the new Secretary of Defense to pay tribute to the POW/MIA community.

I'd like to especially recognize the representatives of that community, former prisoners of war, and the families of the missing in action, all of whom have joined us here this morning. Today as we honor those who have been imprisoned and those missing while defending our nation, we also honor their family members, the brave men and women who have kept those memories of their loved ones burning bright and who have never stopped, never stopped, pushing this nation and its leaders for the closure that they deserve.

Forty years ago, during the Vietnam War, it was the wife of a missing service member, a young woman named Mary Hoff, who realized that a symbol was needed to remind us of his plight; to remind us of all our service members who were missing or suffering at the hands of foreign captors. She developed the idea of a flag, with a haunting image designed by a World War II pilot, that would eventually become a national emblem.

It is the only flag, aside from Old Glory, that has flown above the White House. In 1989, it was installed in the Capitol rotunda as a symbol of this nation's commitment to fully account for those that are still missing. I was a member of Congress at that time, and was so inspired by the flag and by what it stood for that I introduced legislation to require that it be flown at U.S. diplomatic posts and military installations worldwide.

What moved me and so many others about this flag was not only the stark design, but the message inscribed across the bottom of that flag: "You are Not Forgotten." Today, we reaffirm that sacred pledge: "You are Not Forgotten." We voice an entire nation's unending support and our undying promise that, no matter how long it takes, no matter what it takes, we will not stop until we have brought every American home. We pledge that we leave no one behind.

Over the years, slowly, methodically, we have been making progress in this effort. Six hundred men and women of this Department – military and civilian, investigators and scientists – work tirelessly around the world to fully account for the more than 80,000 American service members who remain unaccounted for from last century's conflicts. This is painstaking work, carried out in the field and in laboratories here at home.

Because of these efforts, the remains of 98 missing American service members have been identified in the past year – 25 from the Vietnam War, 36 from the Korean War, 36 from World War II, and one from World War I. That's 98 more families who now have closure, and the knowledge that their nation did not forget them, did not let the passage of time dampen our resolve to locate and identify their loved ones.

No other country, no other country, has devoted so much energy and so many resources to account for our fallen. We do this because we believe that every life is precious, and because those who put their lives on the line for this country need to know that we will spare no effort to bring them home. Today I make to you the promise, as Secretary of Defense, we will do everything we can to bring them home. A promise I make not only to the families of the missing and captured, but to all of our men and women serving in harms' way around the world.

In the wars of this century, we are blessed by the fact that fewer Americans are missing, fewer have been taken as prisoners, and fewer families have had to wait for their return. Still, as we gather here, three DoD contractors are

missing and two soldiers are being held captive in Iraq and Afghanistan – Staff Sergeant Ahmed Altaie, captured in Iraq in October 2006, and Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl, captured in Afghanistan in June of 2009.

This morning, we gather here and again call for their release and reiterate our commitment to bring all missing Americans home. That commitment, simple yet sacred, is fundamental to the values of our nation and, in turn, to our military. And as we raise the POW/MIA flag in communities across America, we pledge to live by its creed, “You are Not Forgotten,” not only today, but every day.

Around the time that flag came into existence so did POW/MIA bracelets, each bearing the name of a soldier being held as prisoner or missing in action in the Vietnam War. In 1972, a 12 year-old from California named Kathy Strong got one of those bracelets in her Christmas stocking. On it was the name of Sergeant James Moreland, an Army Green Beret who had gone missing four years earlier. And on that Christmas morning, that 12 year-old girl decided she would wear that bracelet until James Moreland came home, until she could hand it to him in person.

Kathy Strong wore that bracelet for 38 years, unsure if she would ever take it off. Then, early this year, 43 years after he went missing, James Moreland’s sisters got word that their brother’s remains had been found and that, at long last – through the tireless efforts of DoD personnel – he had been identified. Sergeant Moreland’s sisters invited Kathy to the funeral in May. And there she took off her bracelet and put it on Sergeant Moreland’s uniform.

Kathy Strong should inspire us all. For it should not just be a few among us that help families carry the torch year after year, decade after decade for those who are missing; it needs to be all of us. It should be all of us who as one family, and one nation pledge on this day, and every day, that for as long as it takes to bring every American home, we will never stop working, we will never stop searching, and we will never stop thinking of those lost warriors. We will never forget those who have sacrificed for our freedoms and our values. That is why this country is the greatest country on earth.

May God bless those who have lost their dear ones, may God bless their families, and may God bless this great nation of ours. Thank you.