

No. 332-98
(703)697-5131(media)
(703)697-5737(public/industry)

IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 30, 1998

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE WILLIAM S. COHEN'S STATEMENT CONCERNING THE IDENTIFICATION OF THE VIETNAM UNKNOWN

Less than seven weeks ago, with profound reluctance we disturbed the hallowed ground of the Tomb of the Unknowns in an effort to identify the Vietnam Unknown and ease the lingering anguish of one American family. We took that somber step only because of our abiding commitment to the fullest possible accounting for every warrior who fought and died for our nation. After successful mitochondrial DNA comparison and forensic examination using state-of-the-art technology not available in 1984, the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory has determined that the remains interred in 1984 as the Vietnam Unknown are those of U.S. Air Force 1st Lt. Michael Joseph Blassie.

This morning, I conveyed that information to his mother, Mrs. George C. Blassie. The report documenting the work of the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory, the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory, and the Defense Prisoner of War Missing Personnel Office and the resulting identification is now being reviewed independently by three outside consultants with acknowledged expertise in forensic science. Once those consultants complete their work, the report will be conveyed to her for her review. Afterwards, the report will be forwarded to the Armed Forces Identification Review Board for the final determination.

Since the end of the war in Vietnam, the Department of Defense has identified the remains of 496 Americans. Some 2,087 Americans who died in that conflict remain unaccounted for. As we share with the Blassie family the knowledge that the remains of their loved one have been identified, I want to renew the pledge to those whose loved ones are still missing that the U. S. government and the Department of Defense will continue to search for each of the American warriors who died in foreign lands defending our nation, and whose remains have not yet been located and brought home. On behalf of the Department of Defense, I also want especially to express my appreciation to the other families whose selfless cooperation made the identification of the former Vietnam Unknown possible.

The question now before us as a nation is how best to honor the soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines and the one Coast Guardsman who served and died in the conflict in Vietnam and have not yet been accounted for. Our commitment to the fullest possible accounting and advances in modern forensic technology have reached the point that we can now identify remains once believed to be unidentifiable. In the weeks ahead, I and other Defense Department officials will consult with the Congress, the military Services, the leadership of veterans organizations, and with the family associations in an effort to determine how best to honor our missing Vietnam veterans in the absence of a Vietnam Unknown.