

## **Tomb Inscription Dedicated**

By Jim Garamone  
American Forces Press Service

ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY, Va. -- Eleven long-stem yellow roses provided exclamation points at the end of the phrase "Honoring and Keeping Faith with America's Missing Servicemen."

Those words are now inscribed on the empty crypt of the Vietnam Unknown at the Tomb of the Unknowns, here. Defense Secretary William S. Cohen presided over the ceremony that featured remarks by Georgia Senator and combat-wounded Vietnam Veteran Max Cleland. The ceremony also featured a flyover of Vietnam era "Huey" helicopters. The unique sound of the choppers brought a remote war, close.

For Cohen POW/MIA Day was the right time to dedicate the inscription on the now empty crypt. "The words that now grace the Vietnam Tomb, ... are carved in stone," he said. "Their permanence -- like our remembrance of America's fallen soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines -- will be a measure of this nation's profound reverence and respect. And those words will always remain, eloquent in the clarity of their purpose, enduring by the dignity of their provenance."

The ceremony culminated a chain of events that started in May 11, 1972. Air Force 1st Lt. Michael J. Blassie was flying a combat mission over South Vietnam when his A-37 was shot down. Days later, remains from a crash site were turned over to American representatives in the area. Officials listed the remains as "believed to be" Blassie, but there were no tests to prove conclusively they were his.

By the late 1970s, officials at the Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii determined they were unlikely to ever be able to identify the remains. They reclassified the remains as "unknown."

In 1983, officials selected the remains to be buried in the crypt reserved for the Vietnam Unknown. In a ceremony on Veterans' Day 1984, President Reagan officiated over the ceremony placing the remains in the crypt. At the time, it was thought the remains would be truly "known but to God."

But that wasn't the case. By the mid-1990s, a new technology called mitochondrial DNA could identify remains. DoD forensic scientists now routinely use the test to help determine identities of remains brought back from Southeast Asia and Korea. The test is not infallible, officials said, but a match lends credence to an identification because mitochondrial DNA is inherited only from mothers and doesn't change through the generations. The better-known genomic DNA is a random blend of millions of genes inherited from both parents. The family of Lieutenant Blassie, led by his sister Pat, petitioned DoD to disinter the remains and subject them to testing.

On May 14, 1998, DoD disinterred the remains in the crypt of the Vietnam Unknown and turned them over to the Central Identification Laboratory for tests. During the disinterment ceremony Cohen said he disturbed "this hallowed ground with deep reluctance." But, "if advances in technology can ease the lingering anguish of even one family, then our path is clear."

On June 30, 1998, DoD spokesman Ken Bacon announced the remains were indeed those of 1st Lt. Michael J. Blassie. They were turned over to the family for burial near St. Louis.

The successful identification of Lieutenant Blassie's remains raised the issue of what to do with the Vietnam Unknown crypt. Chances of having an unknown from Vietnam are small, officials said. Using mitochondrial DNA and other identification techniques, officials now fully expect to identify all remains from Vietnam.

In February 1998, DoD announced it would not place another body in the crypt. Instead, officials announced they would carve the inscription on the cover, thus highlighting America's commitment to account for all those missing in action.

Now, with service members placing blood into a DNA registry, the chances of having another unknown are extremely small. "Science helped ease the sorrow and suffering of a family and return their son to his rightful place, and science may one day help ease the weight of grief of those who wait and wonder," Cohen said during the inscription dedication. "But science cannot succeed without faith and without dedication."



Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Army Gen. Henry Shelton, the Army's Military District of Washington Commander Maj. Gen. Robert R. Ivany, Defense Secretary William S. Cohen and Georgia Sen. Max Cleland salute the flag during the POW/MIA recognition ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery, Va. They dedicated an inscription upon the cover of the crypt of the Vietnam Unknown. It says, "Honoring and Keeping Faith with America's Missing Servicemen." (Photo by Rudi Williams)