

De Leon Renews POW/MIA Full Accounting Pledge

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WASHINGTON, June 29, 2000 -- Accounting for those missing from past wars is a matter affecting today's readiness not just payment of a debt come due, according to Deputy Defense Secretary Rudy de Leon.

Today's service members count on the nation's commitment to do all it can to find them and bring them home if they are captured, listed as missing in action or fall on the field of battle, he said. "Our men and women in uniform will only have faith in us, if we keep faith with those who went before," de Leon said in a [June 22 speech](#) to the National League of Families of POW/MIA in Southeast Asia.

De Leon reaffirmed DoD's pledge to account for veterans missing from World War II, the Korean War, the Cold War and the Vietnam War.

"... Behind each black slab on that wall of the Vietnam Memorial, stands the families that yearn for answers. ... And we will not waiver in our efforts to bring them home. We will continue our diplomatic efforts to discover the whole truth about those last seen alive and in captivity," he said.

He noted American teams arrived in North Korea, June 25, to conduct the first of five joint recovery operations slated to be completed by Veterans Day, Nov. 11.

This is the fifth consecutive year U.S. recovery teams have operated in North Korea, according to DoD officials. Since 1996, teams from the Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii, known as CILHI, have conducted 12 such operations and recovered remains believed to be 42 soldiers. Remains of another 10 soldiers are undergoing forensic review at CILHI's laboratory.

"I believe that with these efforts, augmented by the important work of the U.S.- Russian Commission on POW/MIAs, we can be more hopeful now than at any other time the last half century that we will finally be able to account for many of the over 8,000 still missing from the Korean conflict," de Leon said.

He saluted the teams who work on investigative, research and recovery operations. They include Joint Task Force Full Accounting based at Camp Smith, Hawaii, and Defense Intelligence Agency interviewers who now have a permanent space at Hickham Air Force Base, Hawaii. He also recognized scientists at the CILHI and the Armed Forces DNA Laboratory in Maryland, who do pioneering work with the latest state of the art technology for mitochondrial DNA testing.

"I know how important these personnel are," de Leon said. "I am committed to protecting the resources that are so essential to our mission."

DoD is sending a team to CILHI to review their mission requirements, get their concerns about their manning levels resolved, and ensure that their organizational structure and resources fit the mission, he said. The Life Sciences Equipment Laboratory in San Antonio will be provided the resources they need to meet their critical supporting role, he added.

The deputy secretary is well aware of the lack of closure surrounding the missing in action. His uncle, a staff sergeant from Colorado, was a Korean War POW. "After 20 years of searching, two weeks ago I read the file on him from the Army Archives," de Leon said. "Reading that file today and looking at how we work with our families 50 years later, there are so many dramatic changes.

A simple telegram sent to de Leon's aunt reported his uncle as missing. The years passed, the armistice signed, and there was still no word, he said. Finally, some prisoners released from North Korean camps

reported that they'd seen her husband and they witnessed his death. The Army records simply say the cause of death was malnutrition and dysentery.

"In the file, I read the letter that his mother wrote to the Army saying, 'I'll do anything possible to have my son returned to me.' As I read this file, ... I could understand the stories that my mother had been telling me about my aunt, about how there was nowhere for her to go, about why she was so bitter -- a wife with two children living with her mother, my grandmother, untouched by any support system, such as the League offers today."

The National League of Families of POW/MIA in Southeast Asia has helped change the landscape "so that people like my aunt will never be alone again," de Leon said. "No matter what happens. No matter how difficult it is to trace what happened."