

## National POW/MIA Recognition Day

*Remarks as Delivered by Deputy Secretary of Defense Rudy de Leon, The Pentagon, Washington, DC, Friday, September 15, 2000*

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[Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff] General [Richard] Myers, thank you for the introduction. Members of the Armed Forces who stand here today, Active, Guard and Reserve; the many brave veterans that are here, including our returned POWs; the families of our missing Americans; distinguished guests; ladies and gentlemen.

It is my honor to be here today for Secretary [of Defense William S.] Cohen, who is overseas. But I should like to acknowledge Janet Cohen, his faithful companion, who has been a great advocate on behalf of our military men and women and our veterans, and who has faithfully worn the bracelet of Major Bobby Jones. Janet, would you please stand. [Applause.]

We gather today to honor the unwilling captives and missing countrymen who fought for freedom with a lion's heart and who felt the worst of war. We gather to honor their families, who stand as proud memorials to loved ones who have yet to return. All of you who are here -- whose unwavering faith and undying love for liberty embody the highest virtues of this nation -- all of you are heroes. And so we join in this ceremony to reaffirm a sacred creed -- to never forget these brave warriors, to always remember those who returned and those who are missing still and to reaffirm our commitment to the fullest possible accounting of every warrior who has defended the freedoms we enjoy today. That is America's solemn pledge.

Just two days after Christmas in 1967, two young aviators were fulfilling their solemn pledge to America. On that day, 24-year-old Lieutenant Roger Innes of Chicago and 32-year-old Lieutenant Commander Leonard Lee, from Pulaski, Virginia, took off from the USS Kitty Hawk in the South China Sea. They set course for a target in North Vietnam. In treacherous weather, they radioed in to confirm their strike. Then they were silent.

This afternoon, in the rolling hills of Arlington National Cemetery, Roger Innes' family will finally lay him to rest. His sister, Gail Innes, is here today with family and friends. Like so many others, they have worked tirelessly to bring home a loved one. So Gail, please stand so that we can thank you for the sacrifice and service of all of the families that you represent today. [Applause.]

Lieutenant Commander Leonard Lee will also be laid to rest later this month in his native Virginia, at Arlington Cemetery. These two warriors are joined again. They are home again. And we think not of their passing but, rather, the glory of their spirit and their service.

These two brave companions have been recovered and returned to America by a team of U.S. specialists and Navy divers, working with a Vietnamese crew. When Secretary Cohen visited Vietnam last March, he stressed the importance of such cooperation and urged an increase in Vietnam's efforts to locate and return remains to our families. He told the country's highest military and civilian leaders that "in our recovery efforts our nations have found the seeds of future cooperation." And he stressed that the most important issue in the future will be the fullest possible accounting of our missing servicemen.

So, today we rededicate ourselves to this humanitarian mission, wherever our warriors have served or fallen in service to this nation—whether on the battlefields of the Second World War in Central Europe, whether in the jungles of New Guinea, or the waters off Vietnam.

In fact, at this very moment, the remains of Americans long unaccounted for are returning from North

Korea, a result of an unprecedented recovery mission. They are bound for Hawaii, to the Central Identification Laboratory [CILHI], led by Johnny Webb, who I believe is here today. At the CILHI lab, a dedicated team of scientists will begin the process of identifying each one of these Americans to once again help ease the pain of uncertainty of families. These once-missing Korean War heroes finally are returning home.

At the same time, the work and meaningful dialogue of the U.S.-Russian Commission on POW/MIAs and the Russian Defense Minister's recent pledge to Secretary Cohen to address US recommendations about the recovery of American remains both give us renewed hope that we may finally be able to account for many of those still missing from the Korean and Cold Wars.

Honoring and accounting for the heroes of yesterday demands our devotion today. That is why we are committed to maintaining the resources and high quality of the civilians and service members engaged in the accounting effort. That is why this department is increasing the manning and resources of the Central Identification Lab in Hawaii. That is why we will provide for other talented teams to work on our investigative, research and recovery operations, such as the Armed Forces DNA Laboratory in Maryland and the Joint Task Force at Camp Smith, Hawaii. That is why the interviewers from the Defense Intelligence Agency at Stony Beach will be provided permanent work facilities at Hickam Air Force Base in Hawaii. And that is why the Life Sciences Equipment Laboratory in San Antonio will be given the support and resources needed to meet their critical role in the accounting effort. We are ever mindful of our duty to our fellow countrymen, a solemn promise of Joshua, "We will not fail nor forsake thee."

We are truly honored to have with us as our keynote speaker today an American hero whose faith is as unwavering as that ancient promise -- a faith that led him to persevere and prevail over the cruelties of the Hanoi Hilton and yet never lose hope that he would once again return to live in the land of the free.

His son was only six years old when his dad left to go to Vietnam, but he still remembers the day his father walked out the door, got into the car, and drove away, only to disappear for five and a half years. In one tragic moment over Hanoi, Major Gene Smith and his F-105 were shot from the sky. Gene Smith survived his grievous injuries, the brutal interrogations, and the solitary confinement, and more than two thousand days of imprisonment. He survived as one who, in the words of a proud son, "believes in all the good the military stands for."

Gene Smith has served our nation as an officer in the United States Air Force, as an unbroken prisoner of war, as past President of the Air Force Association, and, to this day, as an advocate for military people everywhere. He has said that the 27 years since his release from the Hanoi Hilton have been "clearer, prettier and sharper" than any he remembers.

Please join me in welcoming a man who has traveled from his home in Mississippi to join us, an American hero who embodies the highest virtues of our nation, retired Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Gene Smith. [Applause.]