

Remarks by Secretary Mattis at the Department of Defense's National POW/MIA Recognition Day Ceremony

Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis

MODERATOR: Ladies and gentlemen, the Honorable James N. Mattis, secretary of defense.

(APPLAUSE)

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE JAMES N. MATTIS: Well, ladies and gentlemen, I thank all of you for being here. I turn my back on the troops, but I think the first thing we can do is show a round of applause in our appreciation and respect for the fine, sharp troops we have here today.

(APPLAUSE)

But to all of you are here, including young (inaudible), you with your great grandfather here, and all the young people, especially, to whom we'd pass on this legacy of valor, to all of our devoted veteran's advocates that we have here, our honored veterans, sir, our former prisoners of war, all of you, and the courageous families of the missing, welcome.

To our international guests, we are honored to have each of you here, and we are grateful for your support as we work to bring our missing home.

To the Junior ROTC and ROTC cadets and midshipmen here, thank you for looking past some of today's hot political rhetoric and singing that blank check to the American people, payable with your lives.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote that, "The true test of a civilization is not the census, nor the size of its cities, nor the amount of its crops, but the kind of man the country turns out." Those who don the uniform, in particular, those who suffered in captivity or have gone missing in distant lands serve as enduring proof that America still turns out wares of true character and grit.

We admire them all, but we pause at this moment to recognize two special

categories of warriors. Today, we honor those prisoners of war who deserve our deepest respect. We recognize the crucible that they went through, and we will never let their sacrifices wither in the compost of history.

They returned home to us as role models of honor and courage, and we remember their uniquely tested heroism every day. Heroism like that of Chief Master Sergeant William Tippins, who, after 18 months in German captivity as a soldier during World War II, returned home, only to eagerly reenlist as an airman.

Chief Master Sergeant Tippins, we are privileged to welcome you and your family here today.

(APPLAUSE)

We look up to heroism, like that of the late Senator John McCain, who did not let the torture he endured define his lasting service to America. Just like Chief Master Sergeant Tippins, Senator McCain returned home, this time, from Vietnam, ready, without reservation, to serve once again, dedicating his life to public service with what his daughter, Meghan, called ferocity and faith.

As we honored those who returned after enduring our enemy's worst, we also remember those still missing in action, those still awaiting their return. And we thank their families for their unrelenting courage and faith, as we strive to bring them home -- some of these families honoring us by their presence here today.

We are grateful to the men and women of the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, Veteran Service Organizations and other advocates, for their fierce resolve and tireless commitment to realize this mission. You give today's warriors great courage and confidence as they launch into harm's way knowing that no matter what destiny has in store for them, they will never be forgotten and that their fellow citizens will go to the ends of the earth to bring them home.

In our unrelenting devotion to do just that, this past year DPAA conducted 45 recovery missions and 36 investigative missions around the world. And in so doing, they identified 172 individuals from World War II, the Korean War and Vietnam War, bringing hope, answers and I hope closure to 172 families. Including the family of Army -- excuse me, Army Private Reynold -- excuse me, Raymond Sinowitz, who, in 1942 survived the Bataan Death March before succumbing to illness in a POW camp.

And the family of Army Sergeant Edward Saunders, a soldier in the 2nd Infantry

Division who was killed following his capture in Korea by Chinese forces in 1951. Also, the family of Commander James B. Mills, a radar intercept officer shot down over the Gulf of Tonkin in Vietnam in 1966. His sister, Ann Mills-Griffiths has carried his memory in her advocacy for this community ever since. And we are so grateful that he's home now.

From the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier here in Washington, to the Punchbowl in Hawaii, to the Wall of the Missing in Manila and so many other locations, we will never forget our duty to keep searching for those still awaiting their homecoming.

In August, your community and our entire military family received an infusion of hope in the repatriation and homecoming to Hawaii of 55 cases of remains from the Korean War. President Trump made this a priority in his meetings with Chairman Kim. Because of it, we can welcome home two long lost heroes, Army Private First Class William H. Jones of Nash County, North Carolina and Army Master Sergeant Charles H. McDaniel of Vernon, Indiana. Two beloved sons of America, finally home on our soil.

As Vice President Pence said in August, this is tangible progress in our efforts to achieve peace. For it has helped bring peace to our military family and to those PFC Jones and Master Sergeant McDaniel.

Ladies and gentlemen, as the ancient Greek Pericles noted, "The man who can most truly be accounted brave is he who best knows the meaning of what is sweet in life and what is terrible, and then goes out undeterred to meet what is to come."

Our POWs, our missing in action, their families, they have met the most terrible challenges undeterred, with the highest fortitude, honoring a nation that loves them for what they call out in each of us. And for that, we owe an irredeemable debt of gratitude. Thank you.

(APPLAUSE)