

OPENING REMARKS – AS DELIVERED

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NATIONAL LEAGUE OF POW/MIA FAMILIES  
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Thank you, Ann. As a veteran, I know the importance of this mission to service members, their families, and everyone here today. Because of this, I appreciate and thank you for this opportunity to speak with you.

The Secretary of Defense charged me with two important missions in addition to my daily duties as Assistant Secretary of Defense and Under Secretary of Defense that I want to talk with you about today. One, get Sergeant Bergdahl home. Two, transform how the Department of Defense conducts personnel accounting activities.

The Department of Defense and this Administration are committed to bringing our POWs and MIAs home. This commitment does not differentiate between a loss in Europe, Southeast Asia, Southwest Asia or the Pacific. Our service members' lives are valued and their families are our focus.

As the President said, we are pleased to welcome home Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl, held captive for nearly five years. His return was a priority for the United States and we are grateful that our coordinated efforts have brought him home to his family. Sergeant Bergdahl's recovery is a result of America's unwavering commitment to leave no man or woman behind on the battlefield.

You understand the pain of uncertainty and how maligning captives and families in the press is unacceptable. Sergeant Bergdahl was never declared absent without leave or a deserter." His status was always "missing – captured." I am very glad to say today, that Sergeant Bergdahl is "present for duty."

We have ended one of the longest wars in our history and are about to end another. We are at the end of a long period of growth in military budgets. More importantly, we must adapt to a changing world where global security threats are taking new forms; emerging faster and with less predictability. So, just as we are adapting our operations, we are reorganizing the personnel accounting mission.

The President and Secretary Hagel have been very clear with me about their commitment to returning our missing service members and that they expect more for you – for families. As recently as Memorial Day, President Obama stated, "... our nation will never stop searching for those who've gone missing or are held as prisoners of war." In order to do more, a few months ago, Secretary Hagel directed sweeping changes to how the Department of Defense executes this critical mission. He directed the establishment of a new defense agency that combines the

functions of many of the offices you will hear from today. He directed that an Armed Force Medical Examiner will be the single identification authority— making the process for past and current identifications the same.

We are also working with Congress to realign funding for this mission into a single budget, allowing greater flexibility to respond more effectively. To improve the search, recovery, and identification process, the Department will implement a centralized database and case management system containing all missing service members' information. We are also exploring options to make this data more easily and readily available to families. Secretary Hagel also directed the Department to develop proposals for expanding public-private partnerships to leverage the capabilities of organizations outside of government whose credible work can assist us in our accounting efforts.

There has been a lot of attention paid to creating this new defense agency. Creating the new agency is important, but it in itself is not enough. We are working to change the culture and processes that guide our workforce. For example, on process changes, just this week, I signed a letter to the Director of National Intelligence requesting an increase in the speed of declassification and release of documents related to POW/MIA cases. Along with a balanced and more family-centric approach, improved access to information will be the bedrock of the process and culture changes for this new agency.

With you, other families, and veterans service organizations, I look forward to developing a new way of working that is realistic, dynamic, and responsive. Today, I want to address two important cultural changes for us to improve this important mission: building a family of families, and building on the strengths of the current accounting process.

The National League of POW/MIA Families continues to be a persuasive advocate for finding answers to what happened to your loved one and those of other families. You're a model organization, not to just other family groups, but to civic leaders and advocates across the board. It is important for us to build on your successes to develop our own "family of families."

We are responsible for accounting for personnel missing from past conflicts, and while World War II is the oldest of the conflicts, these cases are the newest for us to account for. The focus on World War II is often one of gathering the data and rebuilding information. In contrast, many of the cases from Vietnam have mature research. The challenges in Southeast Asia are often due to weather or terrain. While the situations are different, the legacy, the responsibility, and our commitment are the same – don't ever doubt that.

Because of this shared equality among those we serve, balancing resources is one of the most challenging efforts the Department of Defense faces in past conflict personnel accounting. One conflict is not more important than another – they are equally important. There will be one clear process for everyone; one that is easy to understand and access. My goal is for you and other families to always have access to accurate and timely information about your loved ones. It sounds simple, but the more I hear from families and veterans, the more I understand how we need to improve your access to information, and explain what our limits are, what we know, and what we do with the information that citizens give us. It is key for us to set and manage expectations, and that is something we have not done well in the past.

And as we move forward, creating this new agency, helping us define this process is one area where we need your help. We'd like the voice of our missing personnel families to shape and inform our process for the future. For example, you can assist other family groups organize and inform us in defining what families need. One of the National League's strengths is that while each of you care individually about your missing loved one, when you come together, you talk about all missing personnel. You discuss the government's responsibility to all families, not just yours. Working with other families makes you stronger, and it will help us build better systems for all families to use. Understanding your shared needs will help us identify where we need to improve and strengthen the services that we provide families like your own.

Many times when we hear the word "change," we commonly fall into two groups: one believing that the subject "change" is just for the sake of "change," and those who believe an organization is too resistant to "change" for any change to be effective. As both a former Commanding Officer and Chief Executive Officer, I am acutely aware that whenever I'm associated with a "course correction" or "intentional reorganization," I want to ensure every stakeholder is aware of our intent, and an active participant in this change-process, and feels empowered to provide feedback.

Time and time again, I hear from people inside and outside government about the confidence they have in the Department of Defense's identifications, and the researchers we have in the United States and in the field. Last month, I attended a family update meeting in Minneapolis, and saw the pride the DOD personnel take in their work, the determination they bring to this mission, and the devotion they have to you. I bet many of you can name analysts you've met with and would tell me about the dedication they've shown to finding your missing family member; the caring and compassion you've seen from the service casualty officers and others. Since your meeting in 2013, we've identified 58 service members, conducted 43 recoveries, and updated over 3,100 families around the country through meetings and correspondence.

An important part of Secretary Hagel's direction is improving how we partner with private groups. We have successes here to build on. In World War II cases, for example, the Department has worked with private organizations to conduct recovery operations. In another example, I've heard from a Vietnam veteran who wants to build a network of Vietnam veterans to help with research, interviews, and finding sites in Southeast Asia. Private citizens and groups have just as strong a passion for this work as those of us in government here today, and many have unique resources and talents to bring to the table.

Just as you can't exercise a muscle the same way every day and see different results, we cannot keep doing what we do well in the same way and expect to see improvement. We cannot allow ourselves to become comfortable or complacent. When it is time to ultimately implement changes, I fully expect there will be disagreements within the government and, perhaps, with some of you in this room. I welcome it. To clearly understand our limits, and how to push those limits, we need to be innovative and resourceful.

I think we can agree on why we are making changes. It is to fulfill our commitment to our missing personnel through service to their families. This mission exists because of the individual missing personnel and their sacrifice for our country. This obligation is the strength the new agency will be built upon.

In conclusion, as we improve our personnel accounting mission, we cannot let current operations

falter. The Secretary directed me, and everyone else from the Department of Defense you'll hear from today, to keep current operations going and demonstrate improvement. There will be a lot of people involved in making changes to the organizations, processes, and workforce cultures inside the Department of Defense. Throughout these changes, ongoing operations and case work – and most importantly, service to families – will continue.

Our commitment to you is unchanging. As I continue working on this reorganization, I've gotten to know the stories of many of our missing service members. I've heard from family members with loved ones missing from nearly every past conflict. They've told me about their losses, and what we as a government need to do better. Your stories are important to understanding our history, our culture, and our freedoms as Americans. We have to continue to tell the stories of our missing personnel.

The media focus on government infighting and unresponsiveness, however, have threatened to crowd out your stories; and threatened to crowd out the stories of the strengths and successes we are committed to building upon. The Secretary's goal, my goal, the goal of all the officials you'll hear from today is to bring an end to talk about the government being unresponsive. We want to clear the way of barriers, so our workforce can give you the fullest possible accounting of what happened to your missing loved one. We believe that by doing this, we fulfill a promise made to them when they gave their lives in the service to our great nation.

If not for the National League of POW/MIA Families and groups like it, the Department of Defense would not be taking the actions we are to reform our personnel accounting mission. Your efforts are instrumental in shaping what the Department of Defense does in this area, and I appreciate your dedication and unwavering commitment to this noble cause.

Thank you for your time this morning. I hope that you have a productive conference and I look forward to continuing to work with you.