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POW/MIA and Purple Heart Luncheon
LIEUTENANT GENERAL JAMES M. KOWALSKI
17 June 2011

Thanks Col DePyssler for that kind introduction and for bringing us together. Coming together like this is like a tribal ritual, and like all tribes we have an elder Chieftain-- clearly Col DePyssler's our Elder Chieftain. You and Gloria have been a powerful influence on our community and have touched thousands of lives. Thanks to both of you for your service in uniform, and out. To our former POWs, our Purple Heart recipients, our veterans, those representing our MIA, and all family members, I am humbled to be here with you today. Mayor Walker, Gen and Mrs Wooley, commanders, civic leaders, and members of Air Force Global Strike Command, your presence reflects the bonds we share as a community of warriors and warrior-families, and in the symbolism of breaking bread together today, we refresh those bonds of duty and honor. We gather to pay tribute to those who served our nation, those who faced our enemies in combat, those who bear the scars of wounds—physical and emotional, those who paid a price as POWs, and those who never returned.



Our families also shared in the sacrifice. From World War II to our conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, thousands of Americans have been held as prisoners of war,. To the former POWs in this room, and to their families and loved ones who supported them, I and every current and past service member thank you for your sacrifice and commitment to your country.

Today, our nation still has nearly 10,000 of her finest missing in action. To the families of those missing, they are remembered. As President Obama said last month, talking about Medal of Honor recipient Henry Svehla, [SUH vay luh] whose body was never recovered from the Korean War. “There’s a wound in the heart of his family that has never fully healed. It’s a reminder, that as a nation, we must never forget those who didn’t come home – and we must never stop trying to bring them back to their families”.

I commend you for your courage, for continuing to have hope, and for continuing to trust they will not be forgotten. So far in 2011, twenty of our missing have been accounted for. Our government is committed to



bringing closure to our families, and MIA recovery has the attention of high level government officials.

The Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Prisoner of War and Missing Personnel Affairs, Mr. Bob Newberry, frequently meets with senior government officials to discuss POW/MIA recovery efforts in the People's Republic of China, Lao People's Democratic Republic, and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command just announced they will be conducting their 118th joint field activity in Laos. This is just part of a grateful nation's promise that we will not rest until we have brought home every last soldier, sailor, airman, and marine.

Now there is media in the room today and I expect they'll want to ask me some questions after this lunch. But the real story clearly isn't mine—the real stories are sitting at the tables throughout this Hall. Stories like that of Gen Robbie Risner who was a POW in North Vietnam for more than seven years . On his 55th Vietnam combat mission his aircraft was struck by heavy ground fire and he ejected, was captured and tortured by the North Vietnamese. He spent more than three years in solitary confinement, all the while maintaining order and



bolstering others with faith and optimism; doing things such as setting up church services and encouraging hymns, hymns written on the only thing available--toilet paper, all of which were that much more powerful because they were acts of indifference to Vietnamese POW rules.

The Air Force has a trophy named after Gen Risner—the outstanding weapon school graduate of the year. But there more stories untold than told...there are enough stories in this room today to fill a book. Stories from heroes like Major William Adair, Staff Sergeant Robert Burns, Sergeant James Bollich, and Corporal Wilfred Matheny, the four Bataan Death March survivors here with us today, who endured incomprehensible hardships and atrocities. (applause).

It's not only the courage of those who were prisoners or missing, but also the sacrifices of the families that provide the most searing, yet inspiring of our stories.

Captain Carl Jackson enlisted in our Air Force in 1957. In 1965 he was an Instructor Pilot at Chanute Air Force Base and volunteered to go to Vietnam. His skills as a C-123 pilot were immediately noticed, and he was chosen to become part of an elite group that worked with the highly classified joint Special Operations Forces unit. These missions were



secret--the aircraft had no standard markings or tail numbers, and they were painted in a camouflage of black, green, and brown, and were flown *only* at night. On the evening of 27 June 1965 Captain Jackson flew his aircraft to Ton Son Nhut Air Base, near Saigon. On final approach his aircraft was hit by ground fire and crashed. There were no survivors, and the US was unable to identify any of the bodies as that of Captain Jackson. Despite thorough searches of several sites, the US has been unable to recover Captain Jackson's body. To his children, Alan and Sherry, who are here today, and Linda who was unable to make it – you were six, eight, and ten years old when your dad left for Vietnam 46 years ago and didn't return--thank you for your sacrifice, and for being here with us today. (applause)

With us are also those who bear the wounds of battle. The Purple Heart dates back to the revolutionary War, when General George Washington wanted to recognize the merit of his people. He created the Badge of Military Merit – the figure of a heart on a purple cloth signifying the meritorious action of being wounded by an instrument of war in the hands of the enemy. Today the Purple Heart is awarded to military personnel wounded or killed in any action against an enemy.



As a tribute to honor the courage and bravery of our military personnel, past and present, United States Postal Service announced last month it will be recirculating the Purple Heart postage stamp, and is classifying it as a “Forever” stamp – guaranteeing that the Purple Heart stamp will remain in circulation, and will be a reminder of our military heroes who have made, in some cases, the ultimate sacrifice.

Again, the inspiring stories are from those at your tables--we have a gentleman with us here today by the name of Ed Fedrick. In September 1966, Mr. Fedrick was in Vietnam serving in Bravo Company, 2nd Battalion, 18th Infantry of the 1st Infantry Division...the famed “Big Red One.” One night on patrol his Company made contact with the enemy and he took a bullet wound to the thigh. Just a few months later, Bravo Company was sent to relieve Charlie Company who had been ambushed and taken serious casualties. Mr. Fedrick and Bravo Company were able to bring out Charlie Company’s dead and wounded, but not before Mr. Fedrick had taken some shrapnel to the head. When the Tet Offensive began on 31 January 1968, Mr. Fedrick was, as he tells it, “bored” back at Fort Benning, GA. As he watched events unfold during the Tet Offensive he went back for a second combat tour. In October



and November of 1968, additional contact with the enemy resulted in his 3rd and 4th Purple Hearts. Where would we be as a nation without Americans like Ed Fedrick? Without warriors still willing to march into the breach, despite having already paid the price of battle? Ed—thank you. (applause)

Within just the past week we know of more stories of the sacrifice our young men and women.

Last Monday, the US identified the remains of Army Corporal A.V. Scott, who reportedly died in a Korean POW camp in April 1951, however, his remains were never returned. Today, Corporal Scott will be laid to rest with full military honors.

On Sunday, the Army promoted Sgt. Bowe R. Bergdahl to the rank of Sergeant. Sgt Bergdahl is the only serviceman missing today in Afghanistan, he was captured by the Taliban on June 30, 2009.

And last week we had one of our own Global Strike Airmen become the latest recipient in the command of the Purple Heart for wounds she suffered in a rocket-propelled grenade attack on her vehicle.



President Kennedy once said that a nation reveals itself not only by the men it produces, but also by the men it honors, the men it remembers.

At today's lunch, we honor and remember. Thank you for your service and your commitment to our nation. May God continue to bless this great nation, and may we continue to be worthy of that blessing.