

# Welcome Home

## Journey Home of the Vietnam Unknown Soldier May 1984



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Written for the Society of the Honor Guard Tomb of the Unknown Soldier

*“To honor the Fallen who died at war is a sacred duty. To remember that they died to defend our Freedom is a solemn obligation”.*

- Thierry Chaunu, President American Chapter Le Souvenir Francais



Vietnam

## Welcome Home

There is a hill in Northern Virginia where you can stand and view the magnificence of the Nation's Capital. From this elevated spot the stone white obelisk of the Washington Monument and the distant gleaming dome of the Capital building beautifully dominate the buildings of government and the bridges across the gently bending Potomac River. Behind you are fields of stone markers that stretch in neat rows to the horizon. This is the final resting place of America's warriors from every war. It is Arlington National Cemetery the most visited military cemetery in our country where more than 400,000 have been buried since May 13, 1864.



*Arlington National Cemetery U.S. Army photo by Elizabeth Fraser*

On the east plaza of the Memorial Amphitheatre stands a polished white marble tomb that holds the remains of the Unknown Soldier from World War I. Three engraved markers lie flush to the ground on the west front of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. On the south side of the rectangular red marble enclosure is the crypt of the World War II Unknown Soldier and in line with that grave is the crypt of the Korean War Unknown Soldier on the north side, both ceremoniously interred on May 30, 1958. The center and last crypt honors the Unknown Soldier of the Vietnam War. However, this crypt is now empty.

In the early morning of April 29, 1975, a North Vietnamese rocket made a direct hit on guard post one near Tan Son Nhut Airport killing two members of the Marine Corps Security Guard Battalion for the Saigon American Embassy.

Marine Corps Corporal Charles McMahon was 21 and had arrived in country 11 days earlier. Lance Corporal Darwin Lee Judge was 19. They died 24 hours before the fall of Saigon and were the last two American military killed in the Vietnam War<sup>1</sup>.



*LCPL Charles McMahon and LCPL Darwin Judge*

One of the last acts that Lance Corporal Judge performed was running across the airfield with the three-year-old daughter of fellow Marine Doug Potratz in his arms as one of the final passenger planes to leave Saigon waited with engines running<sup>2</sup>. Lance Corporal Judge's mother wrote of her son: *"It's not too late to thank them and show your appreciation that they were over there to do what they were supposed to do."* Ken Locke, Judge's boyhood pal, said *"I love my country but I'm not so sure we have done what we should do to say thank you."*

There were no parades or welcome home ceremonies for returning veterans of the Vietnam war. The war ended bitterly and divided the country deeply. Many veterans refused to wear their uniform in public for fear of being spit on or called "baby killer". Veterans returned to an America of blazing tie dye shirts and turkey foot peace symbols. They felt left behind by a "me orientated" society that had no idea of what Vietnam Veterans had seen and experienced in the steaming jungles of Southeast Asia. In 1984, President Reagan was overly anxious to close the wound and seek recognition for those who served in an unpopular war. In the rush to find an Unknown Soldier from Vietnam politics overran the findings of forensic pathologist and forced decisions that should never have been made.

As the evidence mounted that the identity of the Vietnam Unknown Soldier was actually known, President Clinton authorized the crypt to be opened at midnight on May 14, 1998, and the few fragments of remains be examined again. On June 28, 1998 the Vietnam Unknown Soldier was identified as Air Force First Lieutenant Michael Blassie.

First Lieutenant Blassie was one of 58,220 killed in the Vietnam War. There are still 1,244 Americans listed as missing. And then there is "Agent Orange" – approximately three million Vietnam Veterans were exposed to the 11 million gallons spread over 20 million acres. The number of deaths caused by Agent Orange is not finite with estimates ranging as high as 300,000<sup>3</sup>. You will not see these names on a wall in Washington, nor will you see the names of the children of veterans exposed to the defoliant that died of brain cancer or suffered miscarriages directly linked to Agent Orange. This unending American pain and agony is the result of a war still causing casualties long, long after the bombs stopped falling and the guns became silent on May 1, 1975.

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<sup>1</sup> You can find McMahon and Judge on "the Vietnam Memorial Wall" in Washington at Panel W1, Line 124

<sup>2</sup> Twenty five years later that young girl, Becky Potratz graduated with honors from the University of Southern California

<sup>3</sup> North Dakota Veterans Affairs News March 23, 2015

Ralph Waldo Emerson, American poet, writer, and lecturer gave his perspective on living when he said: *“Life is a journey not a destination.”* The journey of the Vietnam Unknown Soldier is rich with the devotion of our military to honor and respect the mortal sacrifices of their countrymen. A young Soldier, Specialist - (E-4) Bill Hottinger with the 3rd United States Infantry Regiment - (The Old Guard), along with many of his fellow soldiers supported the ceremonies of the Vietnam Unknown Soldier at Pearl Harbor, Alameda Naval Air Station and Travis Air Force Base (AFB) in California and Andrews AFB in Maryland across the Anacostia River from Washington, D.C.



These soldiers of America’s Regiment – the Old Guard - carried the flag covered casket, presented the colors and stood vigil over the coffin during the journey home. They later stood watch at the Capitol Rotunda and then walked beside the caisson to Arlington National Cemetery on Memorial Day 1984. Like their brothers in the Tomb Guard Platoon they never sought recognition or praise. Their reward was honoring American war dead to uphold their article of faith: *“Soldiers never die until they are forgotten, Tomb Guards never forget.”*

This journey home for the Vietnam Unknown Soldier began on Thursday May 17, 1984, at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii with the Designation and Departure Ceremony where Marine Corps Sergeant Major and Medal of Honor recipient Allan J. Kellogg, Jr. officially recognized the Vietnam Unknown Soldier by presenting a green and white wreath in the colors of the Vietnamese campaign ribbon in front of the flag covered casket.



*Sergeant Major Allen Kellogg, Jr (USMC) designates the Vietnam Unknown Soldier*



*Sergeant Major Allan J. Kellogg,*

Sergeant Major Kellogg was born on October 1, 1943, in Bethel, Connecticut. He enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps in November 1960 and began serving his first of two tours in Vietnam in March 1966 as Weapons Platoon Sergeant with Fox Company 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 9<sup>th</sup> Marines. He returned to the Republic of Vietnam for his second tour in December 1969.

In March 1970 then Staff Sergeant Kellogg was serving as a platoon sergeant with Company G, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 5<sup>th</sup> Marines in I Corps, Republic of Vietnam. During the night of March 11th Staff Sergeant Kellogg led a group of Marines outside the company perimeter to evacuate a wounded Marine in the jungle. As the fallen Marine was being moved a numerically superior enemy force well concealed in the dense foliage let loose a high volume of small arms and automatic weapons fire on the Marines. While Staff Sergeant Kellogg was directing return fire an enemy soldier threw a hand grenade that bounced off Kellogg's chest and fell to the ground. Thinking quickly Staff Sergeant Kellogg pushed the grenade into the mud and fell on it to protect the Marines engaged in the fighting around him. When the grenade detonated his body absorbed the full impact of the blast causing severe chest and shoulder injuries. Despite these wounds Staff Sergeant Kellogg was able to direct his men to the safety of the company perimeter without further casualties. For his actions he would receive the Medal of Honor.

The thirty-minute Designation and Departure ceremonies at Pearl Harbor took place on a partly sunny and breezy day with the distant mountains bathed in wisps of quickly moving thin grayish white clouds. Marching rows and columns of one hundred and eighty smartly dressed Marines, Sailors, Airmen, Soldiers and Coast Guardsmen were led by the Fleet Marine Force Pacific Band to the concrete area beside Pier B25 where the sleek, freshly painted gray hull of the USS *Brewton* stood moored in the background. Her gray decks were outlined in long rows of Sailors in their dress white uniforms with the ends of their rolled black neckerchief curling and twisting in the breeze.



Forty-one-year-old Sergeant Major Kellogg approached the single flag draped coffin and placed a wreath that designated the remains as the Unknown Soldier of the Vietnam War. Admiral S. R. Foley, Commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet commented: *'With the passage of time, historians are increasingly noting the enormity of the sacrifices of the men who fought in the Vietnam War.'*<sup>4</sup>

Standing the rail on the *Brewton* that day in his dress white uniform was Petty Officer Second Class (EM2) Electrician Mate Mike Thompson of the Engineering Division, who remembered thinking, *"Professionalism! And the immaculate uniforms of all the services was so impressive."*



Together Sergeant Major Kellogg and Air Force General Jerome F. O'Malley the Commander-in-Chief Pacific Air Forces gave a long hand salute and the multiservice pallbearers stepped in unison to solemnly carry the flag covered coffin up the boarding ramp to the *Brewton*, where seven Marines in dress blue uniforms waited on the hanger deck to escort the Vietnam Unknown Soldier home. First Lieutenant Denis Muller led the escort detail and stood square jawed and straight with his silver and gold Mameluke sword gleaming in the sunlight.



<sup>4</sup> United Press International May 18, 1984 – Gordon Sakamoto

A flight of Air National Guard F-4C Phantom jets in the “missing man formation” streaked above the ceremonies as Army howitzers began the firing of a 21-gun salute to honor the Vietnam Unknown Soldier as the *Brewton* slipped the berth from her home port. Also standing on deck in his dress white uniform was Seaman (E-3) David Conley who was 18 years old at the time. He had stood on the outside deck not being able to see the ceremony, only listening as he manned the rail. He remembered when the *Brewton* cast off from her moorings, he had to rush below deck and change uniform to man his duty station. He saw the ceremony and thought that it was a huge event at Pearl.

The Navy harbor tug, *Waxahatchie* (YTB-814) stood a mid-ships waiting to provide assistance as *Brewton* slowly motored up the channel from her berth other flag decked Navy ships rendered salutes to the Vietnam Unknown Soldier. The Coast Guard Cutter, *Storis* (WMEC-38)<sup>5</sup> steamed ahead of *Brewton* with two Coast Guard patrol boats, the *Point Harris* (WPB 82376) and the *Cape Corwin* (WPB 95326) directly behind the *Storis*. A forty-one foot Utility Boat served as the end escort.

With Commander Jim Cushman at the helm, the *Storis* escorted *Brewton* past the USS *Arizona* Memorial and toward the open ocean – a naval tribute with similarities to the USS *Olympia* when she carried the casket of the World War I Unknown Soldier from the port of Le Havre, France on October 25, 1921, under escort of the destroyer USS *Reuben James*



USCGC *Storis* leaving Pearl Harbor<sup>6</sup>

Commander Jim Cushman (now retired Captain) remembers the breezy day at Pearl Harbor waiting for the *Brewton* to lower the ensign on the bow indicating the ship was underway. As the *Storis* maintained station off the USS *Arizona* Memorial, Commander Cushman watched from the bridge of the *Storis* as the ensign was taken down and then immediately run back up the pole on the *Brewton*. A little uncertain of the signal he maneuvered the huge white ice-breaker toward *Brewton* to observe the ceremonies from a closer vantage point. A local television station

<sup>5</sup> The USCGC *Storis* was an Artic Patrol Cutter based in Alaska on refresher training in Hawaii (REFTRA) and released for escort duty of the Vietnam Unknown in the middle of exercise training with the US Navy

<sup>6</sup> Photo from LTC Painter on the right. Photo on the left provided by Captain Cushman (USCG)

was covering the ceremonies live and the crew on the bridge of the *Storis* had access through a monitor to the television pictures. At one point Commander Cushman remembers watching the monitor as a huge white background with a large red Coast Guard seal appeared behind *Brewton*. The *Storis* and her crew were proudly standing by ready to lead the *Brewton* to the open sea.



*US Marines standing the death watch over the Vietnam Unknown Soldier while aboard the USS Brewton as they are underway to the US mainland.*

The USCGC *Storis* had been ordered to Pearl Harbor earlier in May to work with the Navy on refresher training that involved drills at sea, gunner practice and engineering exercises. The *Storis* was halfway through the training earning a number of “E” for excellence scores when the order came to cease training and prepare to escort the *Brewton*. Commander Cushman later said that he and the crew felt “*humbled and honored*” for their assignment.

Commander Cushman remembered telegraphing the engine room for full speed to stay ahead of *Brewton*, but the heavy ice breaker would not maintain the lead long with the sleek fast frigate pressing hard behind his vessel. Between Diamond Head and Waikiki Beach *Brewton* overtook and passed *Storis* steaming through choppy, four to five foot seas at 15 knots. *Brewton* and the Vietnam Unknown Soldier were on their way home.

The USS *Brewton*, a Knox Class destroyer was named to honor a Navy SEAL (Sea Air and Land), Lieutenant Junior Grade John C. Brewton who died from wounds inflicted during a firefight on the night of November 24, 1969 in the mango swamps near Nhà Bè, South Vietnam. John Cooke Brewton was born in Mobile, Alabama on May 9, 1943. At the University of Alabama he enlisted in the Army ROTC, but was medically discharged in 1963 due to a hernia. Intent on serving in the military Brewton underwent surgery after graduation to correct his hernia condition. Once surgery had healed, he enlisted in the Navy and was sent to Officer Candidate School in Newport, Rhode Island where he graduated in April 1967.

In high school John Brewton worked as a life guard and took up scuba diving as a hobby. He was attracted to the Navy’s elite SEAL unit. At that time a prerequisite for application to the SEAL program was time spent in an Under Water Demolition Team (UDT). After acquiring the skills of explosive handling, scuba diving, and underwater swimming he was assigned to UDT-

22 and was sent to Army Ranger School and Airborne School where he earned jump wings. He transferred to SEAL Team Two in December 1967 and left for Vietnam in early 1968.

Serving as assistant platoon commander for the third platoon SEAL Team Two, Lieutenant Brewton completed 45 missions in the Rung Sat Special Zone and Long An Province. In the rivers and swamps of Long An Province he actively searched for Viet Cong supply routes and units of the enemy. For his actions and leadership he earned two Bronze Stars with Combat V. On the night of November 24, 1969 while returning from an ambush site Lieutenant Brewton observed two enemy soldiers and immediately engaged them. A superior enemy force concealed in the swamp poured accurate and heavy fire on Lieutenant Brewton and two of his men. Brewton was hit twice but continued to return fire killing two enemy soldiers as he attempted to assist a wounded team member, Robert Christopher who had been hit by small arms fire and fallen face down in the swamp water. Corpsman HM1 “Doc” Rojas and Corpsman HM1 Robert Clark were able to pull the wounded men from the firefight. The two Navy Corpsman swam with Christopher and Brewton across a flooded bomb crater to the waiting skids of a Navy helicopter that hovered just above the water. Christopher would make a full recovery but Brewton would not.



*USS Brewton (DE1086) underway with the Vietnam Unknown Soldier.*

The USS *Brewton* was launched on July 24, 1971 at the Westwego, Louisiana Avondale Shipyard as DE-1086. On June 30, 1975 the Navy changed *Brewton*'s designation to a “fast frigate” FF-1086. The ship was sponsored or christened by Mrs. Mouza Zumwalt, the wife of Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr, who was formerly the Commander Naval Forces Vietnam and who had twice visited Lieutenant Brewton while struggling for life in an Army field hospital in Saigon where he died January 17, 1970.

The *Brewton* boasted a speed of 27 knots with a crew of 285 officers and enlisted. The ship carried a LAMPS<sup>7</sup> helicopter SH-2F Seasprite in an aft hanger. The hanger would serve to house the casket of the Vietnam Unknown Soldier from Pearl Harbor to the Naval Air Station (NAS)

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<sup>7</sup> LAMPS – Light Airborne Multi-Purpose System for anti-submarine warfare

Alameda, California. The Navy selected the perfect ship for the return home of the Vietnam Unknown Soldier and continued the Department of Defense tradition of returning the nation's Unknown Soldier by naval vessel – first the USS *Olympia* in 1921 with the World War I Unknown Soldier, then the World War II and Korean Unknown Soldier aboard the USS *Blandy* in 1958 and now in May 1984, the Vietnam Unknown Soldier aboard the USS *Brewton*.

The World War I Unknown Soldier was escorted home from France onboard the USS *Olympia* by a detachment of United States Marines commanded by Captain Graves B. Erskine. Sixty three years later the Vietnam Unknown Soldier was escorted home from Hawaii onboard the USS *Brewton* by United States Marines commanded by First Lieutenant Denis Muller. Called to the office of Colonel Marcel Dube, Commanding Officer Marine Barracks Hawaii, verbal orders were given to First Lieutenant Muller to assemble a Marine Honor Guard to escort the casket of the Vietnam Unknown Soldier aboard the *Brewton*.



*From left to right – Private First Class Eddie Boulrice, Lance Corporal Robin Triplet, Corporal Theodore Walker, Sergeant Otto Konopa, First Lieutenant Denis Muller, Lance Corporal Alvarado, and Unidentified Marine (not shown Lance Corporal Dale Dowell*



*First Lieutenant Denis Muller*

With orders in hand First Lieutenant Muller handpicked the honor guard with First Sergeant Holding and Gunnery Sergeant Vogelweid of Guard Company Pearl Harbor. According to Muller the Marines in the Barracks who demonstrated the highest degree of professionalism and who deserved the honor to guard the Vietnam Unknown Soldier were chosen. A high honor that came with the pressure of enormous responsibility was assigned to the detachment Non-commissioned Officer in Charge (NCOIC) Sergeant (E-5) Otto Konopa.

Like Captain Erskine who commanded the *Olympia* Marines, First Lieutenant Muller not only spoke French, but his father and uncle served in the French army during World War II and together joined the “resistance” to the Nazis after the fall of Paris. In 1957 during the beginning of the Vietnam War Denis Muller came to America only six weeks old. Twenty seven years later he would be chosen to lead the Marine Corps Honor Escort of the Vietnam Unknown Soldier from Pearl Harbor to NAS Alameda in California. This ironic twist of fate was yet another small example of America's connection to the French people. Our French brothers and

sisters sacrificed the lives of their own young soldiers, sailors and marines during our revolution, so we would rise as a free nation.

Denis Muller graduated from Seton Hall University in 1979 and lettered in three sports, soccer, tennis and fencing (saber). His love of America led him to Marine Corps Officer Candidate School at Quantico where he was commissioned a Second Lieutenant.<sup>8</sup> His first assignment was with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion Second Marines at Camp Lejeune before being reassigned as the Guard Officer of Guard Company Pearl Harbor, Marine Barracks Hawaii. Colonel Dube could not have chosen a better officer to command the historic detail.

Every officer knows the importance of serving with an outstanding Non-commissioned Officer. Sergeant Otto Konopa demonstrated all the leadership skills to carry out every assignment with precision, knowledge and compassion. As the *Brewton* cast off from the pier Sergeant Konopa took the first four hour watch to allow his men to find and prepare their births below decks. He has stated: *“The officers and crew of the USS Brewton were extremely welcoming and accommodating.”* Sergeant Konopa felt honored to serve on the escort detail. He recently wrote:

*“My feelings with regard to being selected to be on this detail were those of humble honored pride. My first cousin John Theodore Gallagher was part of FOB 3, CCN MACV-SOG 5th SF<sup>9</sup> group and was MIA Since January 5, 1968. The Huey that his team was riding in was shot down in Laos and his remains were not recovered. He was declared dead in 1978, however with no remains to inter there was special meaning to me and to my family for my small part in this detail -every Marine felt the emotion.”*



*Sergeant Otto Konopa, USMC standing watch over the Vietnam Unknown Soldier.*

Petty Officer (EM2) Mike Thompson remembered the Marines stoically standing watch in dress blue uniforms around the coffin that was positioned in the hanger on the aft of the ship.

In the evenings as Petty Officer Thompson and his shipmates gathered on the fantail when the smoking lamp was lit, the Marine guard would close the door to the hanger and continue their round the clock vigil. Seaman (E-3) David Conley remembers the Marines were all business and *“pretty much stayed to themselves.”* For 18 year old Seaman Conley the enormity of the event did not hit him until the third day at sea when he passed the flag covered coffin guarded by the Marines<sup>10</sup>. He was struck by the sight that stays fresh in his memory today.

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<sup>8</sup>Denis Muller retired as a Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) in 2005 with service in Desert Storm and later as the Assistant Naval Attaché to the Embassy in Paris where the Commandant of the Marine Corps General Charles Krulak pinned on his silver oak leaves at Belleau Wood

<sup>9</sup> FOB (Forward Operating Base) CCN MACV-SOG 5<sup>th</sup> SF (Military Assistance Command Vietnam Studies & Operations Group 5<sup>th</sup> Special Forces) a highly classified multi-service unit conducting unconventional warfare

<sup>10</sup> In 2019 David Conley founded “One More Day” suicide prevention for veterans viewable at [onemoredayvertan.com](http://onemoredayvertan.com)



*EM2 Mike Thompson*

According to Mike Thompson, “*the weather could not have been better with deep star speckled skies at night and smooth seas during the day.*” The deep skies at night above the *Brewton* revealed constellations stretching endlessly above the ship as waves slapped rhythmically along the hull and the ships engines murmured a constant hum of a ship racing toward its destination – home to America.



*USCGC Midgett (WHEC-726)*

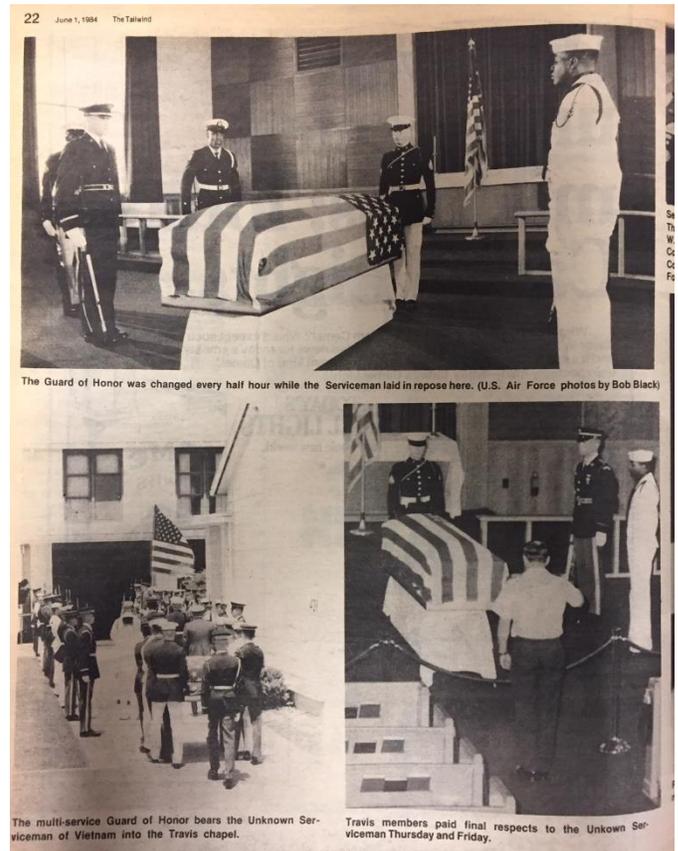
After a week at sea crossing the Pacific, the *Brewton*, was met fifty miles from San Francisco Bay by Coast Guard Cutter *Midgett*<sup>11</sup> (WHEC-726) that escorted the *Brewton* under the Golden Gate Bridge on Thursday May 24, 1984. A flotilla of civilian boats that bobbed in the choppy seas in a wide arch around the path of the two vessels welcomed home the Vietnam Unknown Soldier as both vessels steamed across the bay toward NAS Alameda the home port for the *Midgett*.

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<sup>11</sup> USCGC *Midgett* named for John Allen. Midgett a member of the Life Saving Service born on the Outer Banks of North Carolina and the recipient of the Gold Life Saving Medal for saving lives of a torpedoed British tanker in 1918

With Sailors manning the rails in their dress white uniforms the *Brewton* pulled along the Navy docks just outside the Sea Plane Estuary at NAS Alameda. From the dock at Alameda the Vietnam Unknown Soldier was carried by a multi-service honor guard that included two members from The Old Guard Jerry Mills and Tom Tilton to a waiting Navy hearse while a twenty-one-gun salute was rendered by Army howitzers.

A convoy transported the Vietnam Unknown Soldier fifty miles northeast to Travis Air Force Base (AFB) Chapel where the casket rested in state under a continuous joint service guard that changed every half hour until Friday morning at 5 A.M.



*Copy of Tailwind newspaper for Travis AFB in May 1984*



*Vietnam Unknown Soldier at Travis AFB Chapel with Old Guard Sergeant Michael Kirby, a former Tomb Guard, standing above the coffin*



*Vietnam Unknown Soldier aboard the C-141B*

Following a short ceremony on the flight line, the flag draped casket was carried aboard a C-141B Starlifter, tail number 65-0245 by the Travis Elite Honor Guard who remained with the Vietnam Unknown Soldier during the flight to Andrews Air Force Base. The air crew for the C-141B was a composite crew, commanded by Captain Patrick Bassett of the 7<sup>th</sup> Military Airlift Squadron (MAS) and flight personnel from three other MAS units – the 86<sup>th</sup>, 708<sup>th</sup> and 710<sup>th</sup>.

The camouflaged painted, four engine C-141B gently touched down at Andrews AFB at 2 P.M. on Friday May 25<sup>th</sup> and was met by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the former U.S. Commander in Vietnam, General William C. Westmoreland along with the presidents of various veteran organizations.



*The Vietnam Unknown Soldier arrives at Andrews AFB and prepared to depart to the US Capitol*

From Andrews AFB the Vietnam Unknown Soldier was taken by hearse to the Capitol building where the remains lay in state in the Rotunda under continuous joint military guard until Monday, May 28, 1984, allowing veterans, Gold Star Mothers, and the public to pay their respects and welcome home this warrior.



*Procession of the Vietnam Unknown Soldier from the US Capitol to Arlington National Cemetery.*

On Memorial Day morning the flag covered casket was moved in a solemn military procession by caisson through the streets of Washington lined with spectators standing in a light mist to Arlington National Cemetery for internment. Less than an inch of rain fell from a dull gray overcast sky and with a low cloud ceiling the missing man formation was cancelled.



President Reagan gave an emotional speech inside the Memorial Amphitheater and spoke of healing as a nation, prior to conferring the Medal of Honor upon the Vietnam Unknown Soldier:

*“The Unknown Soldier who is returned to us today and whom we lay to rest is symbolic of all our missing sons.... He saw the horrors of war but bravely faced them, certain his own cause and his country's cause was a noble one; that he was fighting for human dignity, for free men everywhere. Today we pause to embrace him and all who served us so well in a war whose end offered no parades, no flags, and so little thanks. We can be worthy of the values and ideals for which our sons sacrificed -- worthy of their courage in the face of a fear that few of us will ever experience -- by honoring their commitment and devotion to duty and country.”*



Specialist (E-4) John Bollen of the Tomb Guard Platoon guided the wreath to the casket for the President. Sentinel Bollen remembered the day well:

*“As far as the mood or climate of the Vietnam Internment I can tell you that the feeling of the Sentinels was a combination of pride and heartfelt emotion. As the bearer of the Presidential wreath, I can tell you that it was the highlight of my ceremonial career ... my proudest moment though was when the joint pallbearers were relieved by Sentinels from the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier Platoon, and I felt that the Unknown Soldier had arrived home.”*

After all the speeches had ended and the band played the last mournful tune, the crowd, many dressed in black and dark clothes quietly left the plaza to the Sentinels and the remaining Old Guard Soldiers. America had honored and welcomed home the fallen of Vietnam with precision, splendor and respect and now the Sentinels resumed their duty to guard the crypt.

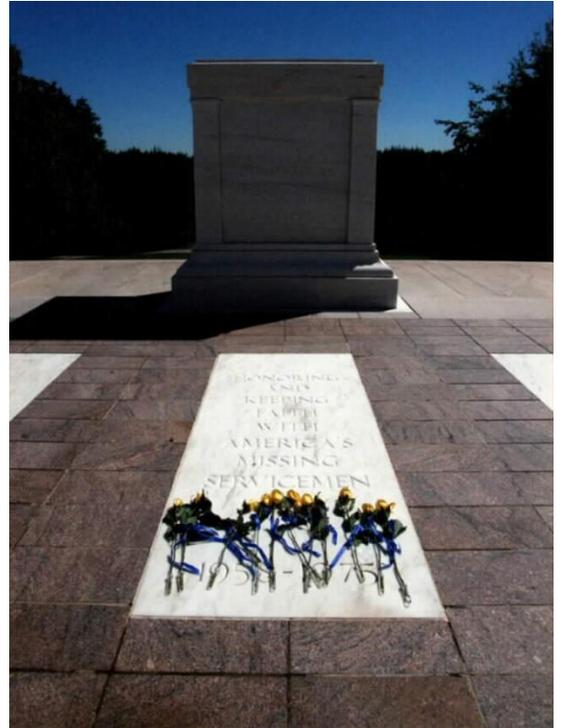


Sentinel Bollen stood in silence near the Tomb as the evening clouds above the cemetery parted for a moment allowing a few rays of sunshine to push the gloom aside. The arch of a colorful rainbow quickly formed in the sky above Arlington that appeared to frame the plaza and the Vietnam Unknown Soldier. The Vietnam Unknown Soldier was home, and the sky had opened to accept him – maybe a celestial sign that the healing had begun.

In June 1998 the Vietnam Unknown Soldier was identified as Air Force First Lieutenant Michael Blassie. For First Lieutenant Blassie his journey home to St. Louis finally ended on July 10, 1998, with a formal military burial at the Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery.

After more than a year the empty crypt was rededicated. On September 17, 1999 a day set aside for the recognition of America's Prisoners of War (POW) and Missing in Action (MIA), the empty crypt of the Vietnam Unknown Soldier was rededicated to honor all missing in action from the Vietnam War. As of April 27, 2021 there are still 1,244 Americans missing in action in Vietnam.<sup>12</sup> The number increases to 1,584 if Laos, Cambodia and China are included. This is the inscription on the marble stone over the empty crypt of the Vietnam Unknown Soldier:

***“Honoring  
and  
Keeping  
Faith  
with  
America’s  
Missing  
Servicemen “***



Senator Max Cleland (D-GA.) , a Silver Star recipient who lost two legs and an arm to a grenade in Vietnam, said he thought the new inscription was proper and fitting.

*"When I come to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, I am reminded of the quote from one of (the Duke of) Wellington's troops, which says, 'In times of war and not before, God and soldier men adore. But in times of peace with all things righted, God is forgotten and the soldier slighted.' We are here today to reiterate our promise to our soldiers that they will not be slighted--not now, not ever."<sup>13</sup>*

For Sergeant Otto Konopa this dedication has a special meaning with the loss of his cousin, Sergeant John Theodore Gallagher who was listed as missing in January 1968. Sergeant Konopa's uncle, Richard Gallagher, wrote a poem for the Tomb Guard Platoon that was posted in their quarters titled *The Vigil*:

### **The Vigil**

In measured steps he makes his rounds,  
the click of heels the only sound.

He stands erect so straight and tall,  
with pride and dedication he responds to the call.

With deep affection his vigil keeps  
over those who forever sleep.

<sup>12</sup> Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency Fact Sheet April 21, 2021

<sup>13</sup> Chicago Tribune September 18, 1999 Vietnam Veterans' Crypt Rededicated to the Missing, Michael Kilian

He responds not to the visitor's stare  
maintaining his vigil as if in silent prayer.

In the morning's twilight hours  
his watch becomes like cathedral towers.  
reaching from earth to heaven above,  
a lasting tribute to one man's love.

As time and seasons come and go  
his vigil remains for all to know  
that beneath the sacred Arlington sod  
lies three buddies known but to God."

*Dedicated to staff Sgt. John T. Gallagher U.S. Special Forces, MIA/KIA 5 January 1968,  
Republic of Vietnam and to the men who guard the tombs of the Unknown Soldier – Richard  
Gallagher<sup>14</sup>*

When the last American left Vietnam in 1975, there were only a few members of the Tomb Guard Platoon who spent time "in country". One such Tomb Guard was Michael C. Jankowski. In September 1975 then Specialist (E-4) Jankowski was a member of the second relief under the leadership of Staff Sergeant John C. Kirby another Vietnam veteran. Mike Jankowski recently wrote:

*"I have to admit during my two years and nine months at the Tomb of The Unknown Soldier, during the daytime when the cemetery was open to the public, I mostly would only think about doing the best job as humanly possible. But at night, in the quiet of the plaza, just you and the Unknown Soldier, you have time to think about why you are guarding these fallen heroes. For me, thoughts of all the MIA's, KIA's and unidentifiable remains from Vietnam and if there would ever be an Unknown Soldier selected from the Vietnam War had crossed my mind often."*

In 1976 as a member of the second relief Mike Jankowski bought a POW/MIA bracelet to wear in memory of those who served, died and went missing in Vietnam. He would wear this bracelet only once while "walking the matt" in 1976. The bracelet was inscribed with the name, SGT. GARY LABOHN, who went missing in action on November 30, 1968. Years later Jankowski escorted two friends, both Vietnam Veterans, to a visit at the Vietnam Memorial Wall in Washington. During the visit Jankowski wore the bracelet honoring Sergeant Gary Labohn. While stopping at a vendor of POW/MIA bracelets near the Memorial, an older woman saw the bracelet and excitedly grabbed his arm:

*"She then emotionally started to tell me a story of how SERGEANT GARY LABOHN, the name on the bracelet, was the son of her best friend. Her friend had passed away not knowing if her son was a POW that hadn't returned or MIA. She also told me that his name at that time was still not on the wall of the*

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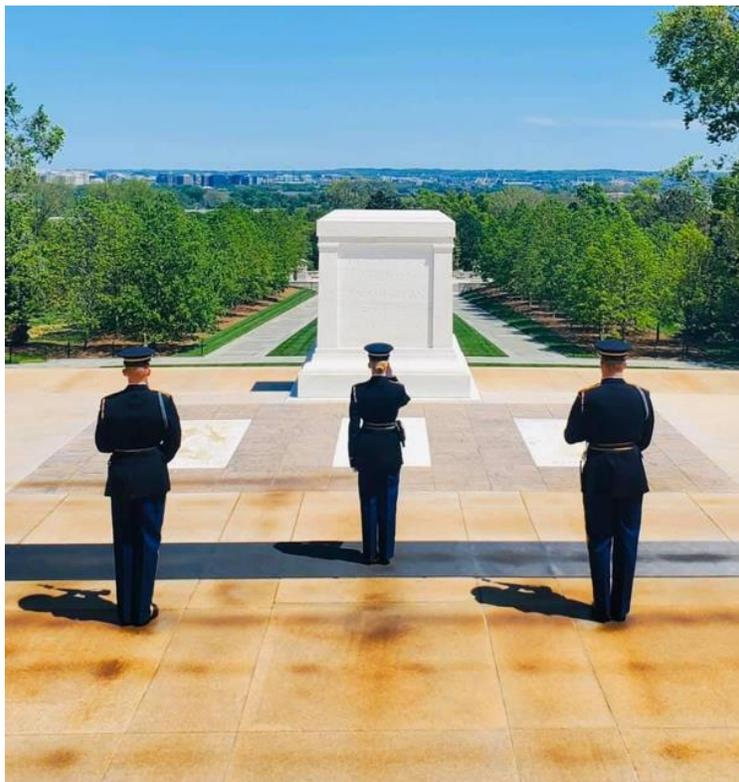
<sup>14</sup> From the Knowledge Book that Tomb Guard's memorize

*memorial. Then to give her some comfort, I told her what I had done with the bracelet as a sentinel. I further explained that I belonged to the Society of the Honor Guard Tomb Of the Unknown Soldier. I recited our article of faith: 'Soldiers never die until they are forgotten, Tomb Guards never forget.' SGT. GARY LABOHN will never be forgotten, Tomb Sentinels will never let that happen. Gary's memory and sacrifice will always be guarded by a sentinel 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and those Unknown Soldiers represent all of our fallen, including him."*

Mike Jankowski, like many Vietnam veterans was changed forever by his experience in Southeast Asia. We all carry indelible memories that sometimes invade our dreams or give us chills when we hear the sound of a helicopter passing overhead. We carry with us memories of the heat, the rain, the red dust and of friends who never came home. As Mike Jankowski reflected:

*"Just like all veterans, we will all physically disappear into eternity. We will not be forgotten, because of the undying commitment and devotion of the sentinels on guard duty; past, present and future at The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. I will always be humbly grateful that I was able to be one of Vietnam veterans representatives honoring their sacrifice."*

This journey and the nation's "welcome home" was not about who was buried in the crypt of the Vietnam Unknown Soldier, it was about the dedication of the Soldiers, Sailors, Airman, Marines and Coast Guard who stepped forward to honor a fallen comrade they had never met or known, but shared a brotherhood that runs deep through the veins of our American heritage – it is the blood that keeps the American heart pumping and the desire to never forget.



### Postscript

During the summer of 2012, I stopped by a local newspaper office in Western Maryland to say hello to a high school classmate who worked as a reporter. While I was waiting in the reception area a pressman opened the door from the buzzing machine room. He saw my worn black ball cap with the faded gold eagle, globe and anchor, and asked me, “Are you a veteran?” I replied “yes I am”. He then asked if I served in Vietnam. I replied, “yes - I did in 1969.” He immediately stuck his hand in his right pocket and then quickly reached out to shake my hand. As I stood and reached for his hand he gave me a wooden token. The token the size of a fifty cent piece carried the inscription: “Welcome Home” on one side and the Vietnam Veterans Chapter on the other.



The world has changed again. Hardly a week slips by that someone sees my faded black ball cap and says “Thank you for your service”. The memories of Vietnam are still fresh after 52 years. I often wonder why I cannot remember what I did on my last birthday, but I can vividly see the heart shaped cake baked by my wife back in “the world” that turned to crumbs during its journey from Maryland to a dusty hill outside Da Nang on my 23 birthday. A close friend and Vietnam veteran has told me frequently – “Forgive but do not forget!” I am finally learning to do both.

- J. R. Neubeiser