



DEPUTY SECRETARY OF DEFENSE  
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MEMORANDUM FOR SECRETARIES OF THE MILITARY DEPARTMENTS  
CHAIRMAN OF THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF  
UNDER SECRETARIES OF DEFENSE  
DEPUTY CHIEF MANAGEMENT OFFICER  
CHIEF OF THE NATIONAL GUARD BUREAU  
COMMANDERS OF THE COMBATANT COMMANDS  
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SUBJECT: Disinterment of Unknowns from the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific

The DoD remains committed to fulfilling its sacred obligation to achieve the fullest possible accounting for U.S. personnel lost in past conflicts. For several years, the Department has considered the complexities of a decision to disinter unknowns buried as groups where the remains are commingled. Recent advances in forensic science and technology, as well as family member assistance in providing genealogical information, have now made it possible to make individual identifications for many Service members long-buried in graves marked "unknown." I therefore direct the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency to analyze all information pertaining to unknowns buried at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific (NMCP) and when defined thresholds (see below) for effecting individual identifications of those remains are met, to disinter the remains for the purpose of making individual identifications and returning these venerable heroes to their families for the honored burial they so richly deserve.

The NMCP, which is administered by the Department of Veteran Affairs, is the dignified resting place for 2,760 unknown Service members. Of these, 1,988 unknowns are from World War II and 772 are from the Korean War. Included in the number from World War II are 1,061 unknowns associated with ships attacked at Pearl Harbor and subsequent maritime losses suffered during World War II. In many cases, the human remains from these ship losses were buried in group caskets in a commingled state. For example, the 388 unaccounted-for Sailors and Marines who died on December 7, 1941, in the sinking of USS *Oklahoma* (BB-37) are buried in 61 caskets at 45 grave sites at the NMCP. Since 2003, the Department has contacted families, collected and analyzed DNA from 84 percent of applicable USS *Oklahoma* family members, and has collected





90 percent of *antemortem* medical and dental records from the ship's crew. Analysis of all available evidence indicates that most *Oklahoma* crew members could be identified individually if the caskets associated with the ship were disinterred. I thereby direct DoD to coordinate with the Department of Veteran Affairs for the disinterment and individual identification, to the extent practical, of all unknowns associated with *Oklahoma* within the next five years.

In addition to my decision to disinter the unknowns associated with *Oklahoma*, I am establishing a broader DoD disinterment policy that applies to all unidentified human remains from the NMCP and other permanent U.S. military cemeteries from which we conduct disinterment to effect identifications. Effective immediately, the following thresholds must be met in order for the Department to proceed with disinterment. For cases of commingled remains, research must indicate that at least 60 percent of the Service members associated with the group can be individually identified. For individual unknowns, there must be at least 50 percent likelihood to make an identification before disinterring the remains. To meet these thresholds, DoD must conduct the research necessary to determine the list of possible missing Service members who could be among the unknowns, collect the relevant family reference samples for comparison with any DNA obtained from sampling the remains, obtain the necessary *antemortem* medical and dental records, and have the scientific and technological ability and capacity to identify the personnel in a timely manner. These standards are meant to clarify and support existing policies established by the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness.

I make this decision knowing that not all families will receive an individual identification as a result of these efforts. But I accept as a matter of principle that DoD must strive to provide resolution through individual identification to as many families as possible and to the reasonable limits of our scientific abilities.

This policy does not extend to unaccounted-for Service members who were lost at sea. It also does not extend to remains entombed in U.S. Navy vessels that currently serve as national memorials. However, if there are remains affiliated with losses from national memorial Navy vessels that are buried in a national cemetery and those remains meet the criteria established above, then those remains may be disinterred.

The Department's efforts to identify and account for missing Service members will require close coordination across DoD and with other Federal departments and agencies, families, Members of Congress, and external stakeholders. Accordingly, the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, in coordination with the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness and the Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, will ensure our efforts are clearly coordinated and communicated, particularly with the families of these heroes from our Nation's past conflicts.

