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LOCAL NEWS

Posted on: Sunday, January 24, 2010

Fallen soldiers honored

Hundreds show up to pay respects to remains of 3 unidentified troops

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By **William Cole**
Advertiser Military Writer



War remains return to US (01:15)
Bruce Asato | The Honolulu Advertiser

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Audrey Meehan, a DNA sampling specialist at the Central Identification Laboratory at Hickam Air Force Base, superimposes a photo of a service member over a skull in an effort to identify a set of remains.

Photos by BRUCE ASATO | The Honolulu Advertiser

HICKAM AIR FORCE BASE — Their deaths occurred decades ago during war in Papua New Guinea, Vietnam and Laos, and their names aren't yet known, but more than 250 people were there Friday to recognize their sacrifice as the fallen service members were returned to American soil.



Military pallbearers at Hickam Air Force Base carry a coffin symbolizing the return of the remains of three unidentified service members.



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Three American flag-draped transfer cases were solemnly carried off a C-17 transport plane and into a hangar at Hickam. From there they were placed on a blue bus for delivery to the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command and hoped-for identification.

The deplaning was symbolic — the remains had arrived days earlier. But the sentiment expressed over the returned Americans was no less strong.

Nick Nishimoto, 81, was there, just as he has been for years. He's gone to so many arrival ceremonies he's lost count.

Nishimoto was captured in the Unsan area of North Korea on Nov. 27, 1950, and held prisoner until Aug. 11, 1953. He buried a buddy from Kapahulu, Al Chang, who died in Camp 5.

"I call them brothers," Nishimoto said of the U.S. service members honored Friday. Even though his friend hasn't been recovered, the arrivals at Hickam are a substitute.

"To me, his (Chang's) remains are coming in," Nishimoto said.

The arrival ceremonies are just one part of the Hawai'i-based accounting command's mission to search for, recover, identify and return to families missing dead from

America's past wars.

A total of 74,213 remain missing from World War II, with 19,000 deemed recoverable. There are also 127 missing from the Cold War, 8,034 from the Korean War, and 1,723 from the Vietnam War, according to the command's latest figures.

In fiscal 2009, the accounting command deployed to 16 countries on 69 missions and made 95 identifications, officials said.

Friday's arrival ceremony was the first for fiscal year 2010, which began in October. The remains are from service members who died in Papua New Guinea in World War II, and from fighting in Vietnam and Laos decades later. Last year, six such ceremonies were held.

Ida Hori, 62, stood with her hand over heart as taps was played. Her husband, Melvin, is a Desert Storm veteran and part of VFW Fort Shafter Post 10276.

"I get teary-eyed," Ida Hori said after the ceremony. "You cannot imagine what they went through in their final days. This is the only way I can pay respect to them."

Barry Bridger, 69, a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel who spent 6 1/2 years as a prisoner of war in North Vietnam, said the repatriation ceremony is reflective of America's values to "help one another, and you go find one another, and you stay together."

"The (arrival) ceremony is an awesomely respectful event — as it should be," he said.

MEMORIES OF A POW

Bridger, who lives in Missouri, recalled how in solitary confinement he once got a message, tapped

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