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### **DOD Medical Museum Highlights Tomb of the Vietnam Unknown in Small Exhibit**

Washington, D.C. – June 18, 1999 – The National Museum of Health and Medicine recently unveiled a small exhibit highlighting the DNA research of the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology (AFIP) used to identify the Vietnam Unknown. The exhibit, “Naming the Vietnam Unknown: Michael Joseph Blassie Comes Home” explains the science of mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) testing as well as the story of First Lieutenant Michael J. Blassie, United States Air Force, who was identified as the Vietnam Unknown in 1998.

“Over the past two years, it has become a tradition for the National Museum of Health and Medicine to highlight AFIP’s scientific and medical research in a small exhibit called Research Matters,” says Adrienne Noe, Ph.D., museum director. “Through Research Matters exhibits, museum visitors can learn about the relevance of scientific research on their personal lives as well as the role the military plays in civilian medicine. In addition, this particular exhibit demonstrates how the AFIP sets the gold standard in DNA identification.”

The Research Matters exhibit displays the items found with the Unknown Vietnam serviceman and interred with him in the Tomb of the Unknowns. Artifacts include fragments of Blassie’s Air Force flight suit and holster; remnants of his parachute and identification tag chain; an ammunition pouch; and a signal marker and fire starter. The exhibit also contains the flag used to drape Blassie’s casket as well as his ribbons,

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medals and Purple Heart. The exhibit is housed in a case that is six feet wide and five feet in length.

“It is a privilege for my brother’s story to be part of this very important display at the National Museum of Health and Medicine because *Research Matters* to the Blassie family,” says Pat Blassie, sister of 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Blassie. “If it wasn’t for the work of the scientists at the AFIP, my family’s claim that it was Michael Blassie in the Tomb of the Unknowns would still be questioned today.”

On May 14, 1998, the Tomb of the Unknowns was opened, and the remains of the Vietnam Unknown serviceman X-26 were removed from the vault. X-26 was escorted to the AFIP where forensic scientists studied the remains and took samples for mtDNA testing. Scientists at the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory of the AFIP then analyzed these samples. The results established that the remains formerly interred in the Vietnam Tomb of the Unknowns were of 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Blassie. On July 9, 1998, the remains of 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Blassie left AFIP. On July 11, Blassie was buried with full military honors in Jefferson National Cemetery, MO, near his hometown and in the same cemetery as his father.

The National Museum of Health and Medicine, founded as the Army Medical Museum in 1862 to study and improve medical conditions during the American Civil War, is a division of the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology. Open daily except Christmas from 10:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., the Museum is located at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, 6900 Georgia Avenue and Elder Street, NW, Washington, D.C. [www.natmedmuse.afip.org](http://www.natmedmuse.afip.org). Admission is free.

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