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Meaning and use of the flag

Excerpted from March 5, 2001 Washington Post,
By Craig Timberg
Washington Post Staff Writer

The man's head is bowed in silhouette. Above is a guard tower; below are the words "You are not forgotten." And three decades after a former Army pilot first sketched the stark image to commemorate those missing in action from America's longest war, it has become an enduring emblem of Vietnam, a flag second in popularity only to Old Glory itself.

The POW/MIA flag, appearing almost always in mournful black and white, has flown over the White House and the Super Bowl, at the New York Stock Exchange and at every post office. It has grown beyond the wildest hopes of its creators to become a quiet yet persistent reminder that not all the wounds of Vietnam have healed.

The POW/MIA flag was created in 1971 by the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia. Historians and flag experts call the



proliferation of the POW/MIA flag unprecedented in the history of the United States and perhaps the world. Never before, they say, have sovereign states and nations required that the flag of a political movement regularly be flown alongside their own. The flag grew from Vietnam, but to veterans organizations it has come to represent all the missing from U.S. military actions dating back to World War II, a group totaling 88,000. Most are from World War II; fewer than 2,000 are from Vietnam.

Sharing his surprise is the flag's creator, a former World War II Army Air Forces pilot named Newton Heisley, now 80. He first sketched the imagery in pencil while working for an advertising agency contracted to design the POW/MIA flag. He intended to add color to the black and white image but never got a chance before flag manufacturer started production. The man's head shown bowed forward in the center is a silhouette of Heisley's son Jeffrey, then 24 and suffering from hepatitis after a Marine Corps training program at Quantico. The words "You are not forgotten" came from Heisley's memory of long military flights across the South Pacific, when he sometimes found himself imagining the terror of being downed, captured and forgotten.

It first flew over the White House in 1988 and was installed in the Capitol Rotunda in 1989, making it the only flag ever permanently displayed there, according to flag experts. And in 1990, Congress adopted the flag as "the symbol of our nation's concern and commitment to resolving as fully as possible the fates of Americans still prisoner, missing and unaccounted for in Southeast Asia."

Congress later passed a law requiring that on six holidays the flag be flown at all post offices, the Capitol, the White House, national cemeteries, military bases and the memorials for the Korean and Vietnam wars. The holidays are Armed Forces Day, Memorial Day, Flag Day, Independence Day, Veterans Day and National POW/MIA Day (the third Friday of September).

submitted by Phil Nelson, 5 March 2001

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