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Remains of two Wisconsin Marines killed in Vietnam identified

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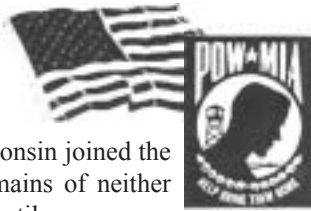
Nearly 40 years ago, two young men living on the far ends of Wisconsin joined the Marines, fought together and died together in Vietnam. But the remains of neither came home. They were, in the Pentagon's words, missing in action - until now.

Lance Cpl. Raymond Heyne of Benoit and Pfc. Thomas J. Blackman of Racine are among 12 men who the Pentagon said represent the largest group of MIAs identified from the Vietnam War in a single incident. Their families, who held funerals for them decades ago, said Wednesday that recovering some of their remains - three of Heyne's teeth and Blackman's dog tags - from the battle field finally brings closure to their deaths.

They were listed as MIAs after a fierce battle near the Laos-Vietnam border May 9, 1968. "It has been hard all these years, wondering and not knowing," said Janice Kostello of Washburn, Heyne's sister who raised him after their parents died when he was young. "We finally got remains back."

Blackman's father, Donald Blackman, 85, of Racine said the family accepted long ago his son had died even though there were no remains. "In the last 4 1/2 years, there was hope that they would find his body parts," he said. "There is no proof of that so it will be good to get the whole thing over with; complete closure then. All that we have physically from him, and we just got them, are his dog tags."

DNA testing identified five of the men, including Heyne, and their families will bury the remains, the Pentagon said. Other remains, believed to be from the seven other men, could not be identified and will be buried as a group in Arlington National Cemetery in October. The Marines and Army sergeant were killed during a 10-hour battle on a football field-sized area in South Vietnam, said Larry Greer, a spokesman for the Pentagon's missing personnel office. The men were part of an artillery platoon airlifted in to support a unit that was at risk of an attack from nearby North Vietnamese forces. All part of the 11th Mobile Strike Force, they were trying to scout an area when they were attacked by North Vietnamese Army troops and overrun, the bodies of the dead fighters unable to be recovered, Greer said.



The Vietnam Veterans of America and other advocates urged the excavation at the site.

Greer said villagers, former Vietnamese soldiers and American survivors helped investigators narrow their search to three excavations in 1998 and 1999, when they recovered the remains, personal materials like billfolds and combs and weapons. Kostello said three teeth from her brother were recovered along with his dog tags.

In 1968, the family waited until August, hoping the military would recover some of Heyne's remains, before having a funeral for him, Kostello said. The service included a casket with military honors and a memorial grave between his parents and grandparents. "You have to do something," the 71-year-old sister recalled. "We were told he was dead on one hand, but there was always a little doubt in our mind." The teeth, along with his medals and some of his military clothes, will be buried in Arlington National Cemetery near where the group remains will be buried, she said.

Her brother enlisted as a gung-ho Marine shortly after graduating from high school in 1966 to avoid being drafted into the Army, Kostello said. "He had such a winning smile," she said. "He was like a brother to my kids. He loved working on the farm with the machinery and stuff. In school, he loved working with the cabinetry and in the shop class."

Heyne arrived in Vietnam in February 1968. "He wrote all the time, just the things that they were doing," the sister recalled. "In his last letter, he said that they were going to be sent out and they are clearing the way for them now and pray for me. That was the last letter I got. That was probably the week before he was killed."

Blackman graduated from high school in 1967 and joined the Marines three months later, his father said. One time as a teenager, Blackman tried to ride his bicycle from Racine to the family's hometown in Davenport, Iowa, and back again. "That is a big memory," the father said.

The father said his son's decision to enlist in the Marines upset him but he respected it. "It was during the war. I am not a believer in the war. I never have been," the father said.

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