

WXPost

Widow Must Pay Way to POW Burial

MAR 22 1974

By Ron Shaffer

Washington Post Staff Writer

If Cecile Abbott of Sacramento, Calif. and her 12-year-old son make it to the Arlington Cemetery graveside for the burial of her POW husband, U.S. Navy Capt. John Abbott, whose body was recently released by North Vietnam, it will only be because she paid the cost of getting there.

Mrs. Abbott thinks that's unfair, since the government spent so much money 14 months ago to bring relatives of 556 returning live POWs to stateside hospitals for reunions. And later the government spent more to

bring over 500 POWs and relatives to the White House for a Presidential reception.

"I got to thinking about it," Mrs. Abbott said yesterday, "and it seemed inequitable that President Nixon could fly POWs and their wives to Washington for a big wing-ding at the White House, but someone at the top could not provide travel for 23 families of (dead) men returning from Vietnam."

Capt. Abbott died in captivity in North Vietnam, and in the last two weeks Hanoi released his remains along with those of 22 other imprisoned American servicemen who died there.

"Just because men come home in a

coffin does not make them any less heroes than the ones who came back alive," said Mrs. Abbott.

A Navy spokesman who refused to be identified because of what he termed the sensitive nature of the problem, explained that the law does not allow the military to provide transportation for the families of men who died while in the service. "The law didn't allow us to do it for 55,000 men killed in Vietnam and we can't do it now."

The spokesman said he sympathized with the relatives of these 23 families — "I know what they're faced with and we would like to make it as easy as

See POW, A23, Col. 1

POW, From A1

possible for them, but we're kind of tied down in this."

Mrs. Abbott, he said, would have been accorded the same treatment as the other families if her husband had come back alive.

Although the law is specific about what can be provided for relatives of men who die in the service, no one should begrudge the special treatment accorded to the POWs who returned safely, the Navy spokesman said. "After all," he said, "those POWs were something special to all of us."

Mrs. Abbott, 43, had just celebrated her 10th wedding anniversary when she received word that her husband had been shot down while flying his A-4 jet attack aircraft over North Vietnam. The military told her that a parachute had been sighted, but that a search and rescue team sent to the area reported no signs of the pilot.

That was April, 1966.

She heard nothing more until Jan. 27, 1973, the day the peace accord was signed in Paris. Then the North Vietnamese informed her that her husband had died after seven days in captivity.

Last week she received word from the military that the North Vietnamese said they were releasing the remains of her husband. There have been no other details about his death.

Capt. Abbott had enlisted in the Navy just before the end of World War II, Mrs. Abbott said. "He was a test pilot at one point, and he flew in Korea, and he had a chestful of medals."

Now, she says, with the

latest message about her husband it's as if she is going through his death for the third time. "But I'm greatly relieved that finally we can bury his body on home soil."

The remains of the 23, all officers, according to the Pentagon, were taken to an American base in Thailand for identification after Hanoi released 12 bodies on March 6 and 11 on March 13. Negotiations are still under way for the 32 other Americans who Hanoi said died in captivity in South Vietnam.

The remains of six of the 23 released this month arrived at Travis Air Base in California yesterday. A Defense Department spokesman said their identities could not be divulged pending final identification work at the Oakland Army Terminal mortuary.

No timetable has been set for burial of any of the 23, or the return of the other 17 bodies from Thailand, according to a Defense Department spokesman.

Relatives of deceased servicemen are entitled to government transportation of the remains to a burial site selected by the next of kin, and up to \$625 for interment costs in a private ceremony, depending on the type of funeral. A military ceremony is provided without charge upon request.

The next of kin of all men who die during military service receive a death gratuity of from \$800 to \$3,000, depending upon rank. This money can be used any way the family sees fit, including for funeral travel expenses, according to a Pentagon spokesman.

A serviceman's government-sponsored insurance provides \$15,000 to beneficiaries, and the next of kin of men killed in action continue to receive full medical, commissary and exchange privileges unless the widow remarries. The children continue to receive those benefits until they are 21, unless they are adopted.