

Law Passed After Woman's Protest

POW Kin Get Funeral Travel Pay

By Ron Shaffer

Washington Post Staff Writer

President Nixon signed into law yesterday a bill that authorizes the Pentagon to provide expenses to funerals for the families of deceased prisoners of war and men once classified as missing in action in Southeast Asia.

The President's action follows the swift passage of the bill in the Senate and House in response to the concern of Cecile Abbott, a Sacramento, Calif., POW widow who complained about "inequitable" treatment from the government in a story published by The Washington Post nine days ago.

Mrs. Abbott said she was disturbed the government had provided transportation for stateside reunions at military hospitals for the families of 556 former POWs released last year and had brought more than 500 of them to a White House reception, but could not provide families of 23 dead POWs transportation to funeral sites. The remains of the 23 were released by Hanoi earlier this month.

"Just because men come

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

Her husband, Navy Capt. John Abbott, was identified as one of the 23 Americans who died in captivity in North Vietnam. He had been shot down and captured in 1966, but died after seven days in captivity, according to Hanoi.

The remains of the 23 were not released until this month when, according to some analysts, Hanoi used their release in an effort to encourage U.S. economic aid.

Mrs. Abbott's husband had requested burial in Arlington Cemetery, but she had been told by her military liaison officer recently that the government would provide only the standard military death benefits, which did not include transportation for her and her 12-year-old son to Arlington.

No timetable has been set for the burial pending final identification of the remains of the 23 at military bases in Oakland, Calif., and Thailand.

Mrs. Abbott said yesterday that she was not surprised at the President's action, although had she said she was

"overwhelmed" by the swift action in the House and Senate. "I think the point has been made now," she said yesterday. "There's nothing more to say."

Mrs. Abbott had said she had spoken out more on principle than for money. She has turned down numerous offers of financial assistance since her story was published.

The Pentagon at first reacted to her concern by stressing that the next of kin of dead servicemen receive a death gratuity of from \$800 to \$3,000, depending upon rank, and that money can be used for funeral travel expenses.

Following quick Senate passage of a bill introduced by Sen. Robert Dole (R.-Kan.), the Pentagon said it would support the legislation.

The House and Senate acted on the bill by voice vote, without the standard committee study and hearings.

The law provides for round trip funeral transportation for relatives of POWs or former MIAs and whatever living and other expenses for the funeral the Secretary of Defense deems proper.