

# Ashton relieves Drake as USS Columbia's commanding officer

**JO2 Cori Rhea**  
COMSUBPAC Public Affairs

Cmdr. Duane R. Ashton relieved Cmdr. William M. Drake as commanding officer of the attack submarine USS Columbia (SSN 771) in a change of command ceremony at Pearl Harbor on Nov. 27.

"The men of USS Columbia compose the finest fighting unit in the Pacific submarine force. They have operated in all four corners of the Pacific," said Drake. "They have observed sunrise in the Arabian Gulf and have seen the sunset over the Indian Ocean. They have conducted exercises with our allies and they have completed operations vital to national security.

"They have sailed expertly in hazardous areas and shallow water. They have sailed thousands and thousands of miles, safely and silently. They

are quiet and competent warriors," continued Drake.

The atmosphere onboard Columbia is positive. Since Drake assumed the role as "CO", the crew's retention rate has dramatically increased with 69 Sailors re-enlisting and attrition dropping from 18 percent to 2 percent.

"Cmdr. Drake is a very personable, outgoing and jovial kind of guy. He has a great attitude and cared about our well-being.

"He created an environment where Sailors onboard felt like they were part of a great team and that each and every one of us counted," said Columbia crewmember, Yeoman First Class (SS) Robert Sutton, a native of Lake Tahoe, Calif. "We will miss him."

"During Bill Drake's tenure, every single measurable indi-

cator improved. With characteristic modesty, Cmdr. Drake credits his crew with all of its accomplishments. Anyone who has been in command understands how that works. But anyone who has followed a special leader also understands that the right captain and leadership makes all the difference," said guest speaker, retired Capt. Ronald C. Mathieu.

"The result is a boat that has distinguished itself for tactical proficiency as well as for having the best morale on the waterfront. We should take particular note that the people who have worked for Bill Drake are staying in the Navy," concluded Mathieu.

Before reading his orders, Drake addressed the crew of Columbia. "I have been extremely privileged and honored to have had the opportu-



JO2 Cori Rhea photo

Cmdr. William Drake (left) and Cmdr. Duane Ashton (right) cut the cake after the change of command ceremony of USS Columbia Nov. 27.

nity to work with you the past two and a half years. You were called upon to do a job and you did it... quietly and competently. I extend to you my sincerest mahalo and I wish you fair winds and following seas."

USS Columbia is a Los Angeles-class attack submarine and was christened in

1995 by the ship's sponsor, former first lady, New York Senator Hillary Clinton. The submarine is capable of long-range Tomahawk strike operations, anti-submarine and surface shipping operations, surveillance and intelligence gathering, and special forces insertions.

# Remains of fallen servicemembers return from Laos, Vietnam



JO1 Tim Paynter photo

A set of remains thought to be a missing American servicemember from the Vietnam War are escorted off of an Air Force C-17 at a repatriation ceremony Dec. 11 at Hickam Air Force Base, Hawaii.

**JO1(SW) Tim Paynter**  
JTF-FA Public Affairs

CAMP H.M. Smith – Over the past several days, televi-

sions around the world have been filled with scenes of U.S. Marine Corps and U.S. Army honor guards carrying flag-draped caskets of fallen com-

rades from Afghanistan.

Much like those scenes, Joint Task Force-Full Accounting (JTF-FA) joint honor guards solemnly escorted six sets of remains thought to be those of fallen Americans from the Vietnam War during a repatriation ceremony Dec. 11 at Hickam Air Force Base.

While most think of the country of Vietnam when referring to the Vietnam War, a substantial number of servicemembers were lost in Laos, Cambodia and China as well. Out of these six sets of remains thought to be Americans, four were from the provinces of Savannakhet and Khammouan in Laos, while two sets were recovered in the Cao Bang province of North Vietnam and the Nam Binh province near Hanoi.

These Americans are thought to be related to Air Force and Navy aircraft that were shot down while conducting bombing, electronic

warfare and forward air controller missions during the war.

While current world events take center stage, many Americans may be unaware that the search, recovery and identification of Americans still missing in action (MIA) from the Vietnam War continues in the countries of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

The search for the remaining 1,948 unaccounted-for Americans does push forth - and the responsibility falls on the shoulders of Joint Task Force-Full Accounting. The 160-person, Camp H.M. Smith-based task force is responsible for the research and investigation of sites where Americans were lost in Southeast Asia.

Based upon JTF-FA's investigation, several factors are carefully considered and sites are selected for excavation. The excavation process is a joint endeavor between JTF-

FA and the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory, Hawaii (CILHI) based at Hickam Air Force Base.

Once recovered, remains are brought to Hawaii where CILHI then embarks on the identification process using dental and medical records and mitochondrial DNA testing if necessary. Once remains are positively identified, they are then returned to the families and interred.

The six sets of remains repatriated Dec. 11 bring the number of remains repatriated to 537 since 1992 when JTF-FA was established, a total of 27 sets this year alone.

Though 1,948 are still unaccounted for, JTF-FA and CILHI have recovered and positively identified 322 Americans since 1992. For more information on the full-accounting process in Southeast Asia, visit the JTF-FA web site at [www.pacom.mil/jtffa.htm](http://www.pacom.mil/jtffa.htm).