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Rites honor POWs, MIAs

Memorial unveiled at Riverside National Cemetery

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RIVERSIDE - Thousands of U.S. prisoners of war and soldiers missing in action were honored Friday with the dedication of a national memorial.

A crowd of more than 1,000 people mostly veterans, their families, friends and supporters filled an outdoor plaza at Riverside National Cemetery for the unveiling of a sculpted bronze and granite monument that memorializes the sacrifice made by POWs and those still missing.

Inside a semicircle of granite columns, 1,200 pounds of sculpted bronze depicts a prisoner of war on his knees, his hands bound in front of him and a wooden rod wedged between his arms and his back.

The POW is placed so that his head looks to the U.S. flag with hope, said Paul Adkins, of the cemetery's support committee.

During the dedication, the Semper Fi Memorial Honor Detail solemnly marched in the afternoon sun, alongside the 42nd Highlander Regimental Drums and Pipes, from the plaza to the memorial site to raise the black POW/MIA flag.

The flag slowly unfurled in a slight breeze as it was raised.

"Today is our day," said Cecil G. Davis of the Inland Empire Chapter of American Ex-Prisoners of War.

"I have kind of mixed emotions. But it's something we've wanted for a long time," Davis said.

The memorial, sculpted by Vietnam veteran Lewis Millett, Jr., honors 607,000 U.S. POWs and 170,000 service men and women who have been listed as missing in action since the Revolutionary War, Adkins said.

The dedication was planned to coincide with National POW/MIA Recognition Day.

A UH1B Huey helicopter flying overhead showered the memorial with multicolor rose petals as bagpipes played "Amazing Grace." As the memorial was unveiled, dozens of white doves flew from the center.

"This monument is now a closing action for all the service that has gone before us," former POW Lloyd Kilmer said upon seeing the memorial close up.

A former World War II bomber pilot, Kilmer was pleased with the memorial.

Adkins said the memorial honors the sacrifices made by, and the service of, soldiers taken prisoner and those missing in action.

"For a lot of families of MIAs, they've had no one to bury. They've had no closure," Adkins said.

The memorial was paid for with private donations from supporters, including Jack Brown, chairman of the board and CEO of Stater Bros. Markets, Skip Fordyce Harley Davidson dealership, the Morongo Band of Mission Indians and the Agua Caliente Band of Mission Indians.