

TuesdayMorning

LIVING MEMORIAL



Workers from First Choice Tree Service and Par 3 Landscape prepare the ground Saturday for replanting The Freedom Tree, shown in the background, at the Southern Nevada Veterans Memorial Cemetery in Boulder City. The canopy of the 20-foot-tall olive was trimmed before it was moved from in front of a state building on Bonanza Road, but two branches were lost while hauling it beneath an overpass.

SARA TRAMIEL/REVIEW-JOURNAL

Freedom Tree finds home

Symbol saved from path of bulldozer, replanted at veterans cemetery

An olive tree that for 34 years stood as a symbol of freedom in honor of Nevadans who were missing in action has been safely moved from the path of a bulldozer to continue growing at the Southern Nevada Veterans Memorial Cemetery as a memorial to Sgt. William Skivington Jr. and others.

Volunteers and private donors had the tree dug up and trucked on Saturday from downtown Las Vegas to the cemetery in Boulder City where Skivington's father, Bill Skivington Sr., and Allen "Doc" Hoe, senior medic for the junior Skivington's reconnaissance team in Vietnam re-dedicated the tree's planting.

"It meant a great deal to me," Skivington said Monday. "I was glad of the new location."

After 38 years since his son was declared missing in action, the remains of U.S. servicemen found at Kham Duc, Vietnam were returned to U.S. soil this year.

On Wednesday, a representative from the government's casualty branch will meet with the elder to Skivington to confirm that his son's remains have been positively identified through DNA testing.

He had been told that would be the case after his son's dog tags, wallet and girlfriend's ring had been found.

"Today, a new chapter opens on the legacy of this sacred tree."

ALLEN "DOC" HOE

SENIOR MEDIC FOR SGT. WILLIAM SKIVINGTON JR.'S RECONNAISSANCE TEAM IN VIETNAM, SPEAKING AT THE RE-DEDICATION OF THE FREEDOM TREE

Meanwhile, amid failing health that has him dependent on an oxygen tank, Skivington learned that The Freedom Tree would either have to be relocated or destroyed to make way for a new state building to house the Department of Public Safety's Division of Parole and Probation.

The timing of the tree's move with word that his son's remains had been positively identified brought a sense of relief to the 85-year-old Skivington, himself a World War II combat veteran. He has also has lost his other two sons, a Vietnam War-era Marine who died of complications associated with exposure to the defoliant Agent Orange and his youngest son who died of a rare lung ailment in 2001.

The Freedom Tree was planted in 1972 by then-Gov. Mike O'Callaghan in front of the A.A. Campos state building on East Bonanza Road. It was dedicated to all prisoners of war and those missing in action, particularly William "Skip" Skivington Jr.

A graduate of Western High School, Skivington Jr. was presumed killed or captured after

his observation post at Kham Duc was overrun by a brigade of North Vietnamese soldiers and Viet Cong on Mother's Day, May 12, 1968. He carried the radio for the recon team, "Snoopy Six."

The last word he was alive was a radio transmission from a lieutenant advising headquarters that they were shooting enemy soldiers as they came through the post's entrance. The radio then went silent.

In all, 17 U.S. soldiers were killed, and eight, including Skivington, were missing in action.

Hoe lost his own son, 1st Lt. Nainoa Hoe, who was killed last year in Iraq while leading a platoon in the battle for Mosul.

At Saturday's re-dedication, Hoe recalled how his son had asked to carry Skivington's "Team Snoopy" battle flag in Iraq.

"Today, a new chapter opens on the legacy of this sacred tree. It will continue as a sentinel of freedom preserving the memory of not only Skip but of all the men lost that fateful Mother's Day," Hoe said.

On Monday, the elder Skivington said he regards Hoe as his "surrogate son."

Hoe said even with the tree being saved and the remains of Skivington Jr. positively identified after all these years, coming to terms with their losses will always be a challenge.

"There's never going to be closure," Hoe said. "It's something of an overused term for people."

"For me, having lost my son, I can only begin to understand but I appreciate what the Skivingtons have experience," he said. "There's never closure. You get to another level of acceptance."

The Freedom Tree's move was made possible by the efforts of the Department of Public Safety, Department of Transportation, the Office of Veterans Affairs and donations and services from a host of politicians, the Army Reserve, Boyd Gaming, Nevada Power Co., First Choice Tree Service, Sterling Escrow Co., Time Printing, carpenters Bob Sharpe and Jim Sharrad and the Scottish-American Military Society, Post 777.

Organizer Merritt Carlton said donations are still being accepted to cover expenses for maintenance, landscaping and a new stone to update the tree's history. Those donations, he said, should go to the "Freedom Tree Fund," Southern Nevada Veterans Memorial Cemetery Gift Fund, 1201 Terminal Way, No. 215, Reno, NV, 89502.