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McKinley honors Serbian contributions in two world wars

By Army Staff Sgt. Jim Greenhill
National Guard Bureau

MOUNT AVALA, Serbia - Honoring Serbian contributions in two world wars, Air Force Gen. Craig McKinley, the chief of the National Guard Bureau, placed a wreath at the Monument to the Unknown Hero here Sept. 11.

"It was especially poignant today, on the anniversary of Sept. 11, 2001, when our nation was attacked, that I symbolically thanked the Serbian military for their support to the United States in World War I and World War II," McKinley said.

McKinley is visiting Serbia with a delegation of Ohio National Guard members and observing National Guard State Partnership Program activities. Serbia is Ohio's SPP partner.

"This is something which is very important to us," said Dragan Sutanovac, the Serbian Minister of Defense. "This is a message to the [Serbian] military. We appreciate it very much. This is something which, symbolically, means a lot."

Sutanovac was the first Serbian defense minister to visit the Tomb of the Unknowns at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia in February.

Though estimates vary, Serbian casualties in World War I may have been as high as 1.2 million, the majority of whom were civilians. The war decimated the country, killing more than 25 percent of its people and more than half its males, said Serbian and other sources.

At least one million more Serbians may have died during World War II, said Serbian and other sources.

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Serbians helped save the lives of 500 downed U.S. pilots during World War II. Serbian villagers sheltered aircrews who were later rescued in Operation Halyard with Serbian help. Interviewed on the anniversary of 9/11, Sutanovac said the United States and Serbia share a common enemy: Terrorists.

"Today is one of the most difficult days in U.S. history," he said. "Not just the history of the U.S.: The history of all humans worldwide. The day when some terrorists - lunatics - did what they did to the innocent people was a signal to all of us to see how we can prevent this."

Three years after the 9/11 attacks, more than 300 people died - many of them children - in a terrorist hostage taking at a school in Beslan, Russia, Sutanovac recalled.

"So we have a common enemy," he said. "The terrorists are enemies of all of the world."

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FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT: The Ohio National Guard Public Affairs Office at 614-336-7000 or Capt. Matt Molinski at 614-336-7449.