

[Snap Judgment intro]

Glynn: Hey, Snappers. We know you enjoy your storytelling in the bright light of day, but if you also like your storytelling crafted in the dark of night, this is for you. Because right now, we're hiring two freelance stories scouts for our incredible sister show, Spooked. In our efforts to bring you more supernatural stories from around the globe, Spooked is searching for someone who has lived in or has deep cultural knowledge of the Caribbean or the indigenous peoples of the Americas, the American South, Southeast Asia, or West Africa. This amazing story scout will find and pitch original first-person stories, and will work closely with the Spooked Team and work closely with me. Is this person you? Do you know someone who might be interested? For more information, go to snapjudgment.org/careers.

[music]

Glynn: You might not know it, but we're living right now through a golden age. An explosion of audio storytelling, the radio, podcast, streaming, TikTok, beatbox, and however you want to tell stories. In Oakland, California, this place for storytellers, for documentarians, it sometimes feels like NYC during the birth of rap. Or maybe New Orleans during the advent of jazz. It's ground zero, for people trying to uncover stories that matter. And just like those earlier movements, it's incestuous that everyone knows each other. In fact, one guy, many years ago Roman Mars, he helped the uber producer, Mark Ristich, and I found Snap Judgment. His fingerprints are still on every story we produce, if it's good at least. He went on later to start an amazing podcast called 99% Invisible, where former Snap producer, Joe Rosenberg, currently resides [unintelligible 00:02:20] this open web. Today, I'm proud to feature on Snap, a story where Roman and Joe do what 99% Invisible has become masters at. They take something we think we know and hold it up to the light. This episode they're calling, "The Known Unknown," and you're about to find out why. Joe Rosenberg, Roman Mars, take it away.

Roman: This is 99% Invisible, I'm Roman Mars.

Ronald Reagan: My fellow Americans, Memorial Day is a day of ceremonies and speeches. Throughout America today, we honor the dead of our wars.

Roman: Whatever you think about Ronald Reagan, they called him the Great Communicator for a reason.

Ronald Reagan: The Unknown Soldier who has returned to us today and who we lay to rest is symbolic of all our missing sons.

Roman: This is him in 1984 during a military funeral, at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery. On that Memorial Day, Reagan was eulogizing the remains of an unidentified service member from the Vietnam War. The remains would be entombed alongside three other unknown service members from World War I and II and the Korean War.

Joe: It was a big event.

Roman: That's our own Joe Rosenberg.

Joe: A horse-drawn carriage brought the casket to the tomb past 250,000 onlookers, including hundreds of veterans who emerged out of the crowd to walk behind the remains on their way to Arlington. The most powerful part though is when Reagan talks about who this Unknown Soldier might have been.

Ronald Reagan: Did he play on some street in a great American city? Did he work beside his father on a farm out in America's heartland? Did he marry? Did he have children? Did he look expectantly to return to a bride? We will never know the answers to these questions about his life.

Joe: As Reagan spoke, etched on the side of the tomb itself, with the words, "Known, but to God." It's all really moving, even knowing what we know now, that although the person being buried that day might have been unknown to the public, a lot about his identity actually was known.

Roman: The government likely even knew that he had a family who would like to have his body back, but they buried him anyway.

Joe: How to honor unidentified remains has always been one of the great conundrums of war. The Romans were fond of honoring them with an empty sarcophagus. After the Civil War, the Union buried 2111 soldiers in a mass grave in Arlington that they purposefully built on top of Robert E. Lee's rose garden.

Roman: It wasn't until the 20th Century that it occurred to anyone to bury a single unknown soldier in a public setting.

Robert: This sort of memorialization came about from World War I.

Joe: This is Robert Poole. He's a former executive editor for National Geographic who wrote a book about Arlington called *On Hallowed Ground*. He says World War I ushered in an era of total war and mass participation, in which the combatants on both sides were mostly ordinary citizens. Anonymous everymen often rendered literally anonymous. It's the violence of the Western Front.

Robert: Everything about the war, not only the numbers, but the nature of it was dehumanizing. Nobody who went through that war was ever the same again. And there was a British chaplain, who was in the worst of the fighting on the front lines, named David Railton.

Joe: Railton would spend his nights conducting funeral services of the remains of soldiers ripped apart by shell fire, often burying them on the spot. Sometimes en masse in the giant craters the shells had left behind.

Robert: While he was there, he thought about how terrible it was that there were these people who were essentially forgotten, buried in their graves, and nobody would ever remember them, and that there should be something better than that for them.

Roman: It was around this time that David Railton came across a temporary grave a few miles behind the front, marked by a cross, bearing the name of a regiment, and the words "An Unknown British Soldier."

Joe: And he realized--

Robert: If you had a mass grave with 2000 people in it, then it's a mass grave with 2000 people in it. It's not an individual who had a life. Something about having a particular person makes it more real, more human.

Roman: After the war, Railton advocated for a grave burying the body of a single soldier to bring the impossibly large tragedy down to a human scale.

Joe: The soldier's anonymity would allow each person who came to the grave to project whatever it was most important to them on to the mystery. It didn't matter if you wanted to honor all those who served or merely those who died, those who volunteered or those who were drafted, or even whether you were for the war or against it, everyone was free to mourn in their own way.

Roman: And sure enough, when Britain dedicated the grave of an Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey in 1920, it was an overnight success. The dedication alone attracted so many mourners, the line for viewing lasted 10 days.

Joe: And Britain's Unknown Warrior wasn't the only one.

Robert: Britain, France, Romania, Italy, everybody at the same time, jumped on this idea.

Joe: Over 50 countries would end up building similar memorials, in part because the formula was so easy to follow. All you needed was the body of a single unknown soldier.

Roman: The American Memorial is especially beautiful. It sits at the top of a hill that overlooks the rest of Arlington Cemetery. And starting in 1937, it has been watched over day and night without a single interruption by a lone guard, forever marching back and forth in front of the tomb.

Joe: No one knows which service the remains are from. So, instead of soldier or sailor or marine, they're simply referred to as "The Unknown." In fact, anything that narrows the scope of who this person could be, including where exactly they were found, is purposefully withheld from the public in order to make sure that they represent everyone who fought. The tomb has become one of the Washington DC area's biggest tourist attractions.

Roman: But in 1956, we made one small, seemingly innocent change to the formula of the unknown that would end up proving tricky.

Joe: We began adding a new set of unidentified remains for every subsequent war. World War II, Korea, and eventually Vietnam. Each war would get their own unknown.

Roman: Which made sense. There were lots of unknowns to choose from, at least at first.

Robert: In World War I, there were something like 1648 unknowns. World War II, the unknowns were 8526. Korean War, 848. And then the last war in which we had an unknown, Vietnam, four.

Joe: Thanks to improved battlefield evacuation tactics, the Vietnam War produced only four sets of unidentified remains that could potentially go into the tomb. And then, as more information about those remains was discovered--

Robert: It was down to three, then down two, then down to one. One set of remains for all of Vietnam, who was unknown.

Roman: That single set of remains, the one Reagan eulogized in that moving ceremony in 1984, and which was presented to the public as The Unknown Soldier, was referred to internally as X26.

Joe: But his actual name was Michael Blassie.

Patricia: There's not supposed to be favorites in families, right? [chuckles]

Joe: This is Patricia Blassie.

Patricia: But the firstborn just has something about them.

Joe: Michael Blassie was Patricia's oldest brother. He was the oldest of five actually in the Blassie family. So, growing up in St. Louis in the 1960s and 70s, she looked up to him.

Patricia: He was actually very good at anything that he did.

Joe: Patricia says that Michael was constantly bouncing between activities, mastering each one before moving on to the next, school, music, sports.

Patricia: I think he could have done whatever he wanted to, but then he received an appointment to the Air Force, and he fell in love with flying at the academy.

Joe: At flight school, Michael was assigned to fly a ground attack aircraft known as the A-37, dubbed the Dragon Fly, or sometimes the Super Tweet. It was designed to fly low over its target. Pilots loved it,

because that close to the ground, the landscape rushing by, the sense of flight, speed, of combat was heightened.

Roman: To the uninitiated, of course, all these things made flying A-37 downright terrifying.

Patricia: But I don't remember Michael ever saying anything about being afraid of it. Once he graduated, it was off to pilot training. Then from there, it was off to survival training. From there, it was off to Vietnam. I remember seeing him get on the aircraft in St. Louis. I remember him looking back and waving to us with that beautiful smile. I just remember thinking, "Oh, we'll see him again." I think we all did.

Roman: By 1972, when Michael Blassie was deployed, America's military presence in Southeast Asia was shrinking rapidly. There were fewer than 25,000 US servicemen left in Vietnam, as opposed to over 500,000, who had been deployed by the late 1960s.

Bill: The war was in effect winding down, but it was still dangerous and there was still a lot of combat going on.

Joe: This is Bill Thomas. He's a reporter who wrote about Michael Blassie for The Washington Post. He says that the American servicemen who remained behind were stretched thin. They had to do a lot with a little. And that meant Michael was going to see a lot of combat.

Bill: He arrived in Vietnam in January of '72.

Joe: And by May of 1972-

Bill: He had flown something like 130 missions. So, virtually almost every day, he had at least one combat, sometimes two combat missions.

Joe: The A-37 Michael that flew had a good record up to that point in Vietnam. Only a few had gotten hit. But when they were hit, things could get ugly fast.

Bill: Because it could take all kinds of fire. You're flying 400 feet in the air and you get hit, you're not going to be able to parachute out of the plane. So, that made it very dangerous.

Joe: Michael would always take off and land from a protected airbase near Saigon. But his missions had him flying over a lot of dangerous places. The most dangerous was arguably a town in South Vietnam called An Lộc

Roman: In 1972, An Lộc was occupied by the South Vietnamese military, along with a handful of American advisors, but it was under siege by an invading North Vietnamese Army.

Bill: The siege lasted a very, very long time. It went on for months. I encountered a guy, it was in An Lộc, Chris Calhoun, and as he described it, it was like a scene out of *Apocalypse Now*.

Chris: The city of An Lộc was totally leveled. It looked like Hiroshima.

Joe: This is Chris Calhoun. He was stationed in An Lộc as an army ranger during the majority of the siege, and he often resorted to analogies as a way of explaining just how awful it was there. At one point, he described the South Vietnamese wounded with their meager medical support as looking like something out of the Civil War. An Lộc was completely cut off from the rest of the world.

Chris: We got food and ammunition by parachute dropped every day. We were under constant shellfire.

Joe: Chris's duty in the midst of all this chaos, was to call in airstrikes.

Roman: And it was Michael Blassie's squadron that was providing the air support. They were flying bombing runs over An Lộc nearly every day.

Joe: Michael and Chris never actually spoke one on one. Their time there didn't quite overlap, but Chris did get to know a lot of Michael squadron mates really well.

Chris: And we would talk on a radio, they'd read me *Stars and Stripes*.

Roman: *Stars and Stripes* is the US military's independently run daily paper.

Joe: Why would they read you *Stars and Stripes*?

Chris: Well, it was my only contact with the outside world. But in An Lộc, they'd be over us almost 20 four hours a day, and they kept the North Vietnamese off our back. So, these were people who I owed my life to.

Roman: And it was on one of these bombing runs keeping the North Vietnamese off their backs that Michael Blassie flew his 132nd and final mission.

Joe: We'll never know exactly what happened on May 11th 1972. Witnesses recall that day's fighting as being particularly intense and chaotic. So, a lot of what we do know comes from Blassie's commanding officer who's flying in a plane alongside Blassie's.

Chris: And he said, the thing he remembered most of all was how bright everything was.

Joe: The sky would have been filled with various planes and helicopters, each going after a separate target. But also, tracer rounds being fired from multiple enemy aircraft guns.

Chris: They were taking ground fire the whole time, but because they were flying into the sun, they couldn't see where it's coming from. So, this just added to the confusion of the battle.

Roman: And somewhere in the midst of the blinding sun and the chaos and confusion, Michael's plane was hit by ground fire.

Joe: And remember, Michael's plane was designed to fly low. When he got hit, he was no more than 500 feet above the ground.

Chris: He had lost control of the plane.

Roman: Blassie's plane began streaming fuel, inverted, and then disappeared into the jungle below.

Chris: There was no distress signal, which indicates that the pilot had probably been killed instantly.

Joe: Michael's plane had crashed deep in North Vietnamese held territory. A helicopter team tried to get to the crash site, but due to heavy enemy fire, they had to leave after just a few minutes emptyhanded. After that, there didn't seem to be any way to get to the side or find out exactly what had happened. Michael Blassie was declared missing in action and presumed dead.

Roman: The Blassie family was informed that Michael's body would not be coming home.

Patricia: It's the strangest thing that when there is no body, there is no gathering.

Joe: When Michael died, it wasn't the first time Patricia had had to deal with a loss of a close family member. Both their parents came from big families, lots of aunts and uncles, lots of funerals. And she says that anytime someone passed away, they processed it by gathering together at the funeral and just talking about the person's life, who they were, how much everyone missed them. But this time, without a body to place beneath the tombstone, the family opted not to have a funeral.

Patricia: There was a memorial gathering, but it still wasn't the same. We didn't talk about it. I remember it's just quiet. And then, it was just like, "Well, we'll go on with our lives and try to be normal." Well, it wasn't normal.

Joe: Patricia says that Michael's death, or rather the "not talking about Michael's death" ended up putting a strain on their parents' marriage. They later separated, and Patricia joined the Air Force, eventually attaining the rank of colonel. Life, in other words went, on even as the topic of Michael sat undiscussed and unfinished.

Patricia: It was just sort of put on over on a shelf, this thing that we didn't get to deal with. And it didn't resurrect itself until 26 years later after he was killed, we realized where he was.

Roman: In 1994, more than two decades after Michael had been killed, both Patricia and her mother received a phone call from a complete stranger.

Patricia: And he said, "I'm Ted Sampley, and I am a former Green Beret who served in Vietnam."

Joe: Ted Sampley has since passed away. But back then, he was sort of this minor celebrity, who championed the cause of Vietnam POWs and MIAs. He was convinced the government wasn't telling veterans everything it knew. And he was calling Patricia with an outlandish theory about Michael's death.

[music]

Glynn: When we return, the shocking theory behind Michael Blassie's death and the strange truth it's just[?]. Snap Judgment "The Known Unknown" 99% Invisible Special continues. Stay tuned.

[music]

Glynn: Welcome back to Snap Judgment, "The Known Unknown", the 99% Invisible spotlight. When last we left, Patricia Blassie had just received a phone call from a stranger who told her he had a new theory. A theory about her brother, Michael, who had been declared MIA in the Vietnam War decades prior. Snap Judgment.

Patricia: And he said, "I'm Ted Sampley, and I am a former Green Beret who served in Vietnam."

Joe: Ted Sampley has since passed away. But back then, he was sort of this minor celebrity who championed the cause of Vietnam POWs and MIAs. He was convinced the government wasn't telling veterans everything it knew. And he was calling Patricia with an outlandish theory about Michael's death.

Patricia: There wasn't anything in his voice that was angry. He was just matter of fact. But he said, "I started researching who was shot down on May 11th 1972 and what was found with them, and would that be on a fighter aircraft?"

Joe: His evidence was circumstantial, and his logic was longwinded.

Patricia: But he said, "I believe your brother's in the Tomb of the Unknowns."

Roman: That the body from Vietnam that President Reagan had buried with pomp and ceremony in 1984, wasn't unknown at all. That it was, in fact, Michael.

Joe: At first, Patricia didn't know what to make of any of this. As far as she knew, Michael's body had never even been recovered. And remember, she herself was in the Air Force. So, after getting off the

phone with Sampley, she called up the Air Force casualty office and asked, "Could this be true? Could Michael be in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier?"

Patricia: And they said, "By no means is there anything to substantiate that your brother's in the tomb." I said, "Well, you know what? Thank you very much, because that is the craziest story that I could ever imagine that a known soldier was in the Tomb of the Unknowns." [chuckles] I don't know, that's the crazy-- it just didn't make sense.

Vince: I thought this is the best example of internet conspiracy garbage I've seen to date.

Joe: This is Vince Gonzales. He was a young reporter at CBS, Denver when he accidentally came across a post Ted Sampley had made on the internet, about his theory that Michael Blassie had been buried in the Tomb of the Unknowns. This was in 1997, three years after the phone call with Patricia. He says yeah, of course, at first, he totally dismissed it.

Chris: And I thought, "I'm going to print it out. I'm going to show it to college classes when I visit and say, 'This is why we say don't believe everything you read on the internet.'" I did that. I printed it out, had it on my desk at CBS. And then one evening, I sat down and started reading it, and I thought, "Well, maybe I should check this out."

Roman: Sampley had no direct evidence proving that Michael Blassie was in the tomb, but that didn't make him wrong.

Joe: Whatever was known about the remains of the Vietnam Unknown had never been revealed. It was all part of the effort to make sure that the Unknown could represent everyone who ever fought in the war.

Roman: But Sampley had come across some secondhand accounts, suggesting that America's only set of unknown remains from Vietnam, had been recovered from an aircraft that had been shot down in 1972. And he had only been able to find one missing plane that fully matched the description, Michael Blassie's.

Joe: What still made it hard to believe, was that the government was not supposed to bury anyone in the tomb if there was a chance he could be identified like this. Vince called a few sources in the military, not asking any hard questions, just wondering, almost kind of embarrassed, "Couldn't government possibly bury a known person in the Tomb of the Unknowns, and not tell anyone?"

Vince: One conversation in particular told me there was an attitude within some parts of the military that might allow something like this to happen. I called up a researcher in the Pentagon. I tried to talk really around the issue. I didn't want to let them know what I was working on. But I finally said, "What if you could figure out who this was? What if we could go in and identify this person and give them back to his family?" His response was, "Oh, that would never happen." I said, "But that would be the truth." "Well, the truth doesn't matter. He's not a human being anymore. He's a symbol in America's most

sacred military shrine, and we would never let that happen.” I wrote down “The truth doesn't matter” on a post-it note, stuck it to my computer console. I thought, “If there's a chance you could figure out who this is and give him back to his family, you should do it.”

Joe: Vince began filing FOIA requests, trying to get his hands on any government document he could about Michael Blassie.

Vince: But there were things I wanted that only family members could get, where you needed an affidavit. That was when I reached out to the Blassie family.

Joe: Vince got in touch with Patricia and laid out his case, fact, by fact, pattern by pattern.

Patricia: Vince and I started talking, and I called my mom and I said, “You know what? It's somebody, and if it's Michael, we need to pursue it.”

Joe: Which eventually gave Vince the leeway to file yet another FOIA request. Nothing special. Just some documents related to Michael Blassie from an Air Force base in Texas.

Vince: Not mentioning the tomb, not mentioning the Unknown Soldier, just asking for anything with Michael Blassie's name in it. I got back this really thick, padded envelope, which is more than I think I'd gotten back from any other request. I was actually back in Denver at that point sitting in the newsroom and I opened it up, and I was paging through it, page after page, and going, “Oh, my God. This is it.”

Joe: Because this wasn't just some small file containing a good lead or a tantalizing clue.

Vince: These were military documents showing the entire Unknown Soldier selection process.

Joe: When combined with his earlier research, the documents Vince Gonzales now held in his hands, painted a nearly complete picture of what the government knew regarding the identity of the Unknown Soldier, starting with something very important that they had known almost from the beginning.

Roman: That Michael Blassie's remains had been recovered in Vietnam, and that they'd been recovered by Chris Calhoun, the Army Ranger, stationed in the An Lộc.

Chris: I don't really know exactly what went down, but I do know that everything pointed to me.

Joe: Now, remember, Calhoun didn't know Blassie personally, but he was friends with a bunch of the other pilots in Michael's squadron. They were the guys reading the newspaper to Calhoun over the radio. It was on one of those lonely nights just chatting that they started telling him about Michael.

Chris: The only thing I know is they asked me that one of their squadron mates had been shot down. They gave me the coordinates, and they wanted to know if we could get the body back.

Roman: This was in October of 1972, over five months since Blassie's plane had disappeared into the jungle. They knew they were asking a lot.

Chris: I think if that rapport wasn't there, then the request would have never come and I would have never acted on it.

Joe: Chris took the matter to his regimental commander, who assembled a special South Vietnamese patrol dressed up as the enemy.

Chris: In North Vietnamese uniforms with North Vietnamese weapons and they went out in no man's land, and they found the wreckage. They brought back to me what was left of the remains of Michael Blassie in a black plastic bag.

Joe: The remains did not consist of much, just six bones. But they also brought back other evidence, an uninflated life raft with serial numbers, a parachute, part of Michael's flight suit and critically, his wallet.

Chris: And that was in good shape. Pictures of him, pictures of his family, pictures of his sister.

Roman: There was no question, the remains were Michael's.

Joe: Chris then handed the bag with everything in it off to the crew chief of the week's one outgoing helicopter.

Chris: But he got the bag. The crew chief got the bag.

Joe: When you saw the remains go away in the chopper, what was your-- [crosstalk]

Chris: We were sending him home to his family, we were doing what was right. And of course, those South Vietnamese risked their lives to get his body from that wreckage, and he deserved to go home.

Joe: After that, Chris had just assumed that Michael's remains would be returning to his family.

Roman: But according to Vince's documents, that's not what happened. The remains along with the survival gear would eventually arrive at the army central identification laboratory in Hawaii, but not before the wallet containing the ID that could link the bones to Blassie went missing.

Joe: Even though he knew about the missing wallet, the head of the lab, using now outdated techniques, determine that the remains did not match Michael Blassie's physical description. Instead, they were simply designated as BTB, Believed-To-Be Michael Blassie. Without a positive match, due to Army policy, the Blassie family could not even be told that any remains had been found.

Roman: Meanwhile, pressure began to mount in the Pentagon to place a veteran from Vietnam in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

Joe: It was politics, but it was also patriotism.

Vince: While there was a crass political angle to do this, to make nice with the Vietnam veterans, there was also a feeling of, "We need to get someone in that tomb so the nation can heal around this issue."

Roman: But by the 1980s, there was only one set of unidentified remains left.

Joe: The one's labeled Believed-To-Be Michael Blassie. In 1980, the lab was ordered to strip the remains of their formal connection with Blassie and give them the anonymous designation, X26. In 1984, with the Reagan administration eager to put someone on the tomb before election day, they were told to prepare X26 for burial.

Vince: I spoke with technicians at the army lab later who said we gave them every answer possible to say, "Don't do this. The technology is coming. This is not an unknown set of remains."

Joe: The lab technicians told the Pentagon that new DNA-based technology was being developed, that would allow the remains to be conclusively identified. They also pointed to the artifacts, like the flight suit and the life raft and record of the missing wallet, all of which suggested that the remains were most likely Blassie's.

Vince: But the push to put a Vietnam Unknown in the tomb overrode that. A general from the army was sent to tell them, "Everybody better get the hell out of the way." That's when Michael Blassie went into the tomb.

Ronald Reagan: My fellow Americans, Memorial Day is a day of ceremonies and speeches. Throughout America today, we honor the dead of our wars.

Roman: And it's when President Reagan, who may not have known that any of this had happened, gave a speech at a burial in Arlington, invoking a powerful mystery.

Ronald Reagan: Did he marry? Did he have children? Did he look expectantly to return to a bride? We will never know the answers to these questions about his life.

Joe: The file that Vince discovered 13 years later in 1997 showed that there had never been any mystery at all. Armed with the documents, he teamed up with veteran CBS correspondent, Eric Engberg. They talked to anyone they could find who was involved in the unknown selection process. And when they felt they were ready, they presented their findings to Patricia Blassie.

Patricia: I asked my mom to call a family meeting. We sat down and we looked at the documents together, and we discussed, "What should we do?"

Joe: Patricia wanted to go public with Vince and CBS. Her older sister, Judy, if anything, was even more eager to blow the lid off the whole thing. But George, the youngest brother, balked. "Michael is buried in a place of honor," he pointed out, "Maybe he could stay there and serve as the unknown for everyone else whose loved ones have never come back." But the tiebreaker was Michael's mother, Jean.

Patricia: She's a very patient woman. She listened to all of the opinions of, her living children and waited until we were done with our bantering or whatever. She just looked at us and she said, "I want to bring my son home."

Presenter: This is the CBS Evening News.

Anchor: Tonight, the results of an Eye on America investigation lasting over half a year. Is it possible the government knows the identity of a Vietnam War casualty buried at the Tomb of the Unknowns in Arlington National Cemetery, but deliberately kept it secret from the public and even his own family?

Reporter: A seven-month CBS News investigation has found evidence of a long running cover up.

Joe: What followed wasn't just one story on the evening news. It was more like a blizzard of stories.

Reporter: There are significant new developments tonight in the exclusive story that CBS News first broke on this broadcast in January.

Reporter: CBS' Vince Gonzales uncovered new evidence.

Reporter: An update tonight of our exclusive Eye on America investigation.

Vince: I think we did 15 or 18 pieces on this. It just was nonstop.

Reporter: And tonight, as Eric Engberg tells us, there's more.

Joe: Because CBS and the Blassie family didn't just want the world to know that Michael Blassie was in the tomb. They wanted the Pentagon to do something about it.

Reporter: Michael Blassie's sister, Pat, says the family wants the remains tested, even if by some chance they aren't identified as Michael.

Reporter: Now, Congress wants to investigate.

Patricia: If it's Michael, we want to bring him home.

Vince: At a certain point, they called us up and they said, "You're killing us." A day or two later, they announced the tomb would be opened and the remains were going to be tested.

Roman: On May 14th 1998, the Department of Defense disinterred the remains of the Vietnam veteran from the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

Joe: DNA samples were taken from Michael's mother, Jean, and his sister Judy, and tested against the remains. They were a match.

Patricia: After the scientists were finished talking to my mother, we were wrapping things up because then my mother had to sign some papers and things like that. And then all of a sudden, a man walked up and said, "Well, when we opened the tomb to do the DNA tests, Michael's artifacts were in the tomb with him. And what would you like us to do with them?"

Roman: The life raft and other items had been found at the crash in 1972 had been the only physical evidence, aside from the missing wallet, that could have tied the remains to Michael Blassie.

Joe: Whether it was to preserve the artifacts or to hide them, someone at the army lab in Hawaii had put them where no one would ever think to look, in the casket with Michael. They had been sitting in the tomb underneath the guards and the crowds in the Arlington soil for 14 years.

Patricia: They were in a box. After we buried Michael in St. Louis, there was a reception. And then once everyone left, we stood around the table and my brother, George, opened up the box and started pulling out the life raft, portions of his parachute, portions of his flight suit. I have them with me today. I keep them with me, but I'm really glad to have them.

Roman: Today, there is no body representing Vietnam at the Tomb of the Unknowns. Thanks to improved forensics, there will likely never be an Unknown from Iraq or Afghanistan, or any future war.

Joe: The military is now in the process of using the DNA from the families of missing veterans to identify over 650 sets of unknown remains from the Korean War. It's conceivable that they could use the same techniques on the Korean Unknown inside the tomb. The Unknowns from World War I and World War II are safe for now. But in the era of 23andMe, well, let's just say anything's possible.

Roman: If you go to Arlington today, the Tomb of the Unknowns is still there minus the remains for Vietnam. The tourists still take pictures on their phones, and the guards still make their rounds in perfect, silent precision day and night, even when no one is watching. And it really is beautiful. You should go see it. But the heyday of this unique form of remembrance has come to an end.

Joe: Does it sadden you that there is no Unknown for Vietnam anymore?

Patricia: I can't say that it saddens me. I can't say that. I respect the Tomb of the Unknowns. But in order to have an Unknown, they made one. They took Michael's name away from them to satisfy

something that I understand it was very important to our nation. But the first thing that you and I did when we met one another over the phone, "Hi, I'm Patricia." "Hi, I'm Joe." A name is very, very important.

Joe: Patricia still visits the tomb. She says she's not sure why she does it. But it means that she's gotten to know some of the guards. One of them once told her that their mission guarding the Unknowns is never really over. But then in Michael's case, just this once, their mission was completed. They were just looking out for him until he could go home.

[music]

Glynn: After the break, we're going to take a trip to the Tomb of the Unknown, present day, where a very particular ceremony is taking place right this very moment when Snap Judgment, "The Known Unknown" 99% Invisible special continues. Stay tuned.

[music]

Glynn: Welcome back to Snap Judgment, "The Known Unknown" 99% Invisible spotlight [unintelligible [00:38:27] Washington. And next, we're going to explore the real Tomb of the Unknown in Arlington, Virginia. Producer Joe Rosenberg walks Roman Mars to the very specific ceremony taking place right now.

[music]

Joe: Okay, Roman, when I was a little kid, my parents and, I think, my grandparents who live just outside of Washington, DC, they took me to Arlington Cemetery to see the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. I remember it really well. I have to say the reason I remember it so well and the reason I became interested in the tomb again more recently, is not the mysterious soldier in the tomb projecting whatever you want on to his anonymity.

Roman: Mm-hmm.

Joe: It's actually the guard.

Roman: Huh.

Joe: It's not so much the idea of the guard keeping vigil, the solemn duty, as much as it is what the guard is physically doing. What they're doing most of the time is just taking 21 steps to the left, turning, stopping for 21 seconds, then turning and stopping for another 21 seconds, then taking 21 steps to the right, then stopping again, turning again, stopping again, stepping again, over and over and over until there's a guard change every 30 minutes to an hour.

Roman: That sounds very, very precise.

Joe: Yeah. Actually, that's the thing. You say that, but you have no idea.

[laughter]

Joe: Let me sell you on this by showing you a video of what this looks like. This is from a guard change.

Guard: Forward march! [footsteps] Guard, halt!

Joe: Nice design touch, the stripes on the legs really sell the synchronization.

Roman: As regimented as I was imagining it, it is even more so. It is like the innards of a Swiss clock, the way that they move together and then they move in time is stunning.

Joe: Yeah. One of the things I kind of really appreciate it is just if you have a Swiss clock that is ticking away with precision, it has this way of magnifying the silence around it. There's a kind of weird silence to it. Apparently, to get this right, they train and practice for months in a separate facility.

Roman: Wow. It's almost meditative. Like you said, inside of the silence where you hear the clicking of their shoes and their heels together, you do get this space that's created inside of it. That's very meditative.

Joe: The word that just instantly came to mind is Zen. You watch the marching back and forth. The guards when they're doing it, they don't seem lost in the performance. Instead, at every step, they are totally present. They are completely aware of their surroundings. They are truly doing nothing, but this. Unless, you start laughing.

Roman: Oh.

Guard: It is requested that all visitors maintain an atmosphere of silence and respect at all times.

Roman: [chuckles] Holy moly! I wouldn't want to cross that guy at all. [laughs]

Joe: No. He really terrifying, bursts out of nowhere. This is what happens if you get too rowdy or you laugh at the Tomb of the Unknown. There's more. There's this whole subgenre of YouTube videos of tomb guards yelling at visitors.

Roman: [chuckles] Oh, good. They deserve it. Let's hear it.

Joe: Let's find another one.

Guard: It is requested that all visitors remain behind the chains of grails.

Joe: It is requested that all visitors remain behind the chains of grails.

Roman: Oh, my God.

Joe: They can vary it up. They can vary their tone. They can switch up the words a little bit. I think it depends on the guard. It depends on maybe their mood that day.

Roman: Holy moly!

Joe: Here's a more curt one.

Guard: Get behind the rail!

Roman: Oh, I love it. Just let them have it.

Joe: This is one where they reprimand some parents.

Guard: Visitors must keep their children behind the chains and and rails. Thank you.

Roman: Little Billy being yanked back real fast. That happened to me.

Joe: There's other videos where you see people trying to sneak in behind the rails. You get a view of them, and then they're yelled at and then they freeze like chipmunks who have been caught [Roman laughs] out in the open, and then just bolted. It's terrifying. My favorite comment though is from a YouTube user who said, and I quote, "When I was 10 years old, I made the mistake of sitting down during the changing of the guards and I almost shat myself."

Roman: [laughs] Does any other national monument have something like this where there's this 24/7 ritual? Why in particular, is it happening right here?

Joe: Well, yeah, that's a good question, because the thing about the tomb is that the way it is now is not the way it always was. It evolved into all of this kind of pomp and ceremony and spectacle. When it was first commemorated in 1921, it was a big moment. I think it was the first nationwide radio address that the President ever gave, was from the commemoration of the Tomb of the Unknown.

Roman: Wow!

Joe: But back then, it was just this low stone slab. There was no big edifice or anything like that. It kind of became a second-rate monument for a while. People would picnic there. Photographers would like-- because it has a great view of the surrounding area, because it's up on this hill, photographers would actually set up shop there and people would pose on the tomb, almost just like a roadside attraction. But apparently, veterans caught on to this and started complaining about it, because they saw that

people were just treating it like entertainment and they were putting out their cigarettes on it, things like that. They complained about to Congress, and eventually, the government cobbled together the money to post a guard. And then starting in 1937, the guard was 24/7. I've seen competing records on this. Some say since 1937, others say since 1948, the guard has never left. Even for hurricanes. It's stayed there.

Roman: Wow!

Joe: Then the other thing that happened during that time is that they always intended for there to be a more updated had fancy tomb, but it just took them forever to get around to getting the funding. Eventually, they did. They built the giant sarcophagus in 1931. For that, they went to this quarry in Colorado, actually, to ensure that they got the exact same marble as the Lincoln Memorial. Although it wasn't designed by these guys, it was sculpted-- the actual physical sculpting is by this famous set of brothers called the Piccirilli Brothers, who were these Italian brothers who sculpted everything. They sculpted the Lincoln Memorial. My favorite is they sculpted the two lions in front of the New York City Public Library. And then in 1956, that's when we started adding these further Unknowns from World War II, Korea, etc. So, just built and built and built.

Roman: Into this more and more reverent place. It has the image of an almost timeless tradition when you see it like this. But I actually enjoy the fact that this is something that was iterated upon and improved, and given a little more weight over time.

Joe: I doubly appreciate it, because I love when something's iterative in the direction of honing towards austerity and elegance, as opposed to iterative and feeling like clutter.

Roman: Getting more casual or something like that. It's a fascinating place, particularly because of this ceremony makes it all the more special. Have you ever had a chance to speak to one of the guards when you're doing the reporting?

Joe: I confess I did not manage to reach a guard in time for this quote. [chuckles] I had bigger fish to fry. I had a story to work on.

Roman: Totally. There was a 20-year mystery to solve.

[laughter]

Joe: But I got the next best thing, which is I found that one of the guards did, of course, a Reddit Ask Me Anything.

Roman: [laughs] Yeah, that's the next best thing.

Joe: Of course, one of the things is when you're a reporter and you see an Ask Me Anything thread, you go through it hoping someone's going to ask the questions you would ask. The only question I

wanted to ask is, like, "What is going through your head when you are marching back and forth?" Particularly not during the changing of the guard, but just during the long 30 minutes of the long hour marching back and forth during this meditative state. Finally, someone asked this and the guard responded, "I wish I could say that while we were doing this job, we are just meditating on what it means to guard the Unknowns, but we are human and we are on duty for long hours. So, our minds do wander quite a bit," which just was so disappointing to read.

Roman: Oh, but it's really human.

Joe: I know. Well, here's the irony, which is I realized that when I was doing the story, and I was like, "Oh, people are free to project whatever they want on to the mystery of the Unknown Soldier." That's, of course, my reportorial way of being really conceited and thinking like, "I'm above that, and I don't fall prey to projecting anything." [crosstalk] -symbolism, but the minute I see the guard, I'm like, "What do I want to see?" I'm a reporter at 99% Invisible who lives in San Francisco. I see Zen meditation, it's immediately what I project onto this guy.

[laughter]

Joe: And then, of course, in the Ask Me Anything thread, he's just like, "No, no, no, our minds wander. We think about whatever, what we're going to cook for dinner. Who knows?"

Roman: Totally.

Joe: I guess, the tomb has worked its magic on me as well.

Roman: Yeah. Thank you, Joe.

Joe: All right. Thank you, Roman.

[music]

Roman: 99% Invisible was produced this week by Joe Rosenberg, mix and tech production by Sharif Yousseff, music by Sean Real. Katie Mingle is our senior producer. Kurt Kohlstedt is the digital director. The rest of the team is senior editor Delaney Hall, Avery Trufelman, Vivian Le, Emmett Fitzgerald, Taryn Mazza, Sofia Klatzker, and me, Roman Mars.

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We are a project in 91.7 KALW in San Francisco and produced on Radio Row in beautiful downtown Oakland, California. 99% Invisible is a member of Radiotopia from PRX, a fiercely independent

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[music]

Glynn: To Joe, Roman, and all our friends at 99% Invisible, thank you so much for sharing this piece. If you haven't yet subscribed to 99% Invisible and their universe of incredible stories, you know what to do. We'll have links to all that is 99% Invisible on our website, [snapjudgment.org](#). As you know, this is not the news, no way is this the news. In fact, you could move Snap Judgment studios into the same building as 99% Invisible, the very same time, they suddenly decide to move down the street. True story, and you would still, not be as far away from the news as this is, but this is PRX.