

Statement of
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Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense
for
POW/Missing Personnel Affairs

Military Personnel Subcommittee
House Committee on Armed Services
July 10, 2008
Washington, DC

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Madam Chairwoman, Mr. McHugh, distinguished members of the Subcommittee, I want to thank you for the opportunity to appear today to update you on the current state of the mission to account for our nation's missing personnel.

As the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for POW/Missing Personnel Affairs, I am responsible for policy oversight of this mission, and carrying out those policies established by the Secretary of Defense.

Our worldwide team is made up of more than 600 specialists, men and women who are recognized as top professionals in their areas of science, intelligence, historical research and analysis, public outreach, family support, and foreign area analysis.

My team in Washington drafts the policies which will lead us to the fullest possible accounting of our missing; negotiates with foreign governments; drafts and coordinates agreements and arrangements throughout the U.S. government; declassifies and releases information to MIA families, the public, and Congress; and provides support and assistance to our field operational agencies. Our 600 team members are posted in Washington, in Hawaii, in Rockville, Maryland; in Texas; in Russia; in Thailand, in Vietnam and in Laos. Their travels take them to remote and inhospitable former battlefields, where encounters with disease, snakes and unexploded ordnance confirm that our mission today is not without risk. Nine Americans have lost their lives while pursuing the effort to account for our missing from past conflicts.

Our mission of accounting for the missing is the embodiment of this nation's commitment to those it sends into harm's way. We are keeping that promise to every soldier, sailor, airman and Marine, and to their families, that should they fall in battle, this government will make every effort to return them to the loving arms of their families.

For example, of the more than 2,500 who were once missing from the Vietnam War, our team has accounted for 889, and returned them for burial with full military honors. Another 1,757 are still unaccounted-for from that conflict, of which the remains of more than 650 are no longer recoverable.

Those, plus another 127 from the Cold War; almost 8,100 from the Korean War; and more than 74,000 from World War II comprise the nearly 84,000 from these conflicts who are still missing.

And while we may be pleased with what we have been able to accomplish, all of us constantly seek ways to improve our work, to locate, identify and return these heroes

to their families as quickly as we can.. In that regard, we face the challenges of time, the environment, disappearing witnesses and the loss of possible crash or burial sites from conflicts of more than 60 years ago.

We are always exploring options, looking for ways that we can carry out this mission better and faster. We owe that to that missing servicemembers and to their families.

You have only to visit the Central Identification Laboratory out at JPAC in Hawaii to know what advances their scientists have brought to the world of forensic anthropology. As I note in all our presentations to the families of the missing and to our veterans, this is not "CSI Miami." This is the real world where JPAC scientists and team members do not have the luxury of writing a script so that the case is solved in less than one hour.

They are the ones who are forced to work with the cards they have been dealt. While I do not pretend to be an expert in the advances in science they are responsible for, I do know they are always leaning forward, trying to do more and more -- in the name of that missing serviceman.

You will soon hear from Rear Admiral Donna Crisp, JPAC's commander, about how her unit, through field operations, carries out the Department of Defense policies. I have never met a senior officer of the United States military who has set the bar so high for her people, and for our mission.

Admiral Crisp and I confer almost daily on one issue or another, but I believe I'm safe in saying that every conversation -- EVERY conversation -- is ultimately about the family members and how we might do our work better and faster.

Even though we all speak proudly of what we've been able to accomplish with your help, it is simply not acceptable that many family members have had to wait decades for answers. I wish it were otherwise, but realities being what they are, we're pushing the envelope every day of every year.

To take advantage of the brightest minds in our field, I have formed a Senior Study Group of senior government experts to advise me on the way ahead in accounting for missing Americans. Quite simply, I wanted to be sure that every agency which had equities in the personnel accounting mission had an opportunity to periodically review where we are going, and where we have been.

The core membership includes DPMO, JPAC, the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory; the Life Sciences Equipment Laboratory; the U.S. Pacific Command; the U.S. European Command; each of the military services; and the Joint Staff.

The Senior Study Group principals -- those of flag rank -- are represented at our periodic meetings by colonels, Navy captains or senior civilians. We meet not less than twice a year and discuss issues with the goal of making recommendations to increase efficiency and effectiveness in the accounting mission.

This group gives Admiral Crisp and me the benefit of input from a wide range of experts and policymakers. More importantly, it forces all of us to look at the future and seek to make wise decisions as we move forward with this mission.

While I know the primary focus of these hearings is accounting for the missing from past conflicts, we must continue to look to the future as well to be better prepared to deal with the results of current and future conflicts.

One of DPMO's responsibilities is that of establishing and overseeing U.S. policies on personnel recovery. In the current conflicts, personnel recovery saves lives. It brings Americans home again, alive. It is far broader than just combat search and rescue, as it involves a wide range of options available to the government to bring our people out of harm's way, out of captivity, out of "isolation" behind enemy lines.

At some point in the not-too-distant future, we must make a transition from current conflict accounting -- to include personnel recovery -- to **post** conflict accounting.

If we do not make the right decisions, the right policies, now.....then I do not believe we are living up to the promises to our men and women in uniform, and to their families.

I would like to now address briefly our work across the globe. In a general sense, I believe our work in Southeast Asia goes well.

We enjoy a continued positive relationship with Cambodia, with their senior leaders and other officials cooperating in every way possible to help us accomplish our mission. We are at a point where we will gradually begin reducing operations there because we have exhausted existing leads. As always, we will continue to review individual cases to reinvestigate any where additional leads offer new information.

We would like to see a faster pace of progress in Laos, but we will not be deterred. Recent changes in some key personnel have not appeared to impact our work.

We note the 25th anniversary this year of joint U.S. - Lao cooperation. It is theoretically possible that some of our younger team members were not even born when the first U.S.-Lao team carried out its first mission. To some, that may be the embodiment of our motto, "Keeping the Promise." Both the families and the government teams are now drawing from a younger generation, but the commitment and the determination remain firm.

Both the U.S. and Laos have now agreed to exchange Defense Attaches, a step in our relationship which I believe will contribute positively toward the effective use of our resources there. Of course, there still exists a backlog of cases in Laos, but we are working to address this with the Lao on a continuing basis.

Our working relationship with Vietnam is showing steady progress. The economic relationship between the two countries continues to grow, yet, as we saw last month, the POW/MIA issue remains a key area of discussion in every meeting with Vietnamese officials. Military-to-military exchanges continue to evolve, offering yet another avenue to improve the bilateral relationship. This can only benefit our mission.

This year we will hold a 20-year assessment of U.S. and Vietnamese cooperation. We will continue to work to bring the benefits of the evolving bilateral relationship to bear on the accounting mission, to make it more effective and efficient.

So what does the future hold? To put the Vietnam War in context, it has been more than 40 years since the first U.S. losses there. By comparison, 40 years after World War II we were in the Reagan administration. The world changed dramatically in those years. Former enemies became allies. We see that same evolution in Southeast Asia and as our relations improve, it should aid our accounting efforts.

As dramatic as those changes were following World War II, since Vietnam we have seen profound movement in our issue, including the rising profile of World War II and Korean War families and -- more recently -- the direct threats to our national security from terrorism.

You are certainly aware that the competition for resources within our government is fierce and something we have to deal with on virtually a daily basis.

While I think sometimes we exceed their expectations, the founding fathers intended that there be constraints on the executive branch and that all branches function more effectively when there is coordination and cooperation among them. We do recognize and appreciate the longstanding interest and support for this mission by your subcommittee.

This coordination is especially important in activities relating to security and foreign affairs. While ours is a humanitarian mission not linked to other activities directly, we are affected by, and affect them.

Our activities, then, must be coordinated fully within the interagency community so that we proceed with full awareness of any impacts across the entire government.

So, though we ARE a humanitarian mission, we do not operate without limits. Some of those limits are legal and constitutional, and some are bureaucratic, but like budgetary constraints, they do shape our actions.

Our work continues in seeking to account for the missing from the Korean War and World War II. We negotiated an arrangement with the DPRK to begin recovery operations there in the summer of 1996. Since that time, and as a result of annual negotiations, in 33 joint field operations our teams have recovered remains believed to be those of 229 Americans. Of those, JPAC scientists have identified 61 and returned them to their families. The Department temporarily suspended remains recovery operations in North Korea in the spring of 2005 and JPAC redirected more teams to South Korea and to other parts of the world. The forensic identification work in the laboratories continues, however, with those remains already recovered.

JPAC's teams continue to locate and identify the remains of servicemen lost during World War II in the South Pacific, in central Europe, in South America, and even in North America. To the families of those missing from this war and others, we often see shock and amazement that this government has not forgotten their loved ones' sacrifices.

I will close my formal statement today by reaffirming our commitment to keeping our MIA families fully informed of the work we are doing on their behalf. All of our investigative case files are available to family members for review, in person or by mail. Where certain intelligence information may be classified, we declassify it for them. Each month, we send a team of 30-40 of our specialists into hometowns where these families live, update them on their cases, and make our scientists and analysts available to them. Additionally, we meet annually in Washington with Korean and Cold War families, and with Vietnam War families. Through both of these programs, we have met face to face with more than 14,000 family members since 1995.

We take very seriously our obligation to keep the families, the American public and the Congress fully informed about what some consider our sacred mission. I appreciate the opportunity you have given us today, and I will be pleased to respond to your questions.

Thank you.