



Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office

POW March Routes and U.N. Cemeteries

Background: After Chinese Communist Forces (CCF) entered the Korean War in November 1950, large battles followed in North Korea, as U.S. and U.N. forces were pushed southward. Using massive numbers, the CCF was able to control the battle zones in which it fought. Later, in South Korea, the enemy still had an advantage in numbers. The CCF was finally pushed back to the general area of today's Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), but it had captured many prisoners of war (POWs) in the process. These men were typically held locally for a few days, then marched northward, often in groups of 50 to 100, and usually at night. Chinese and North Korean guards were very cautious of U.S. airpower. They feared inadvertent attack upon the moving POWs and themselves. So POWs often spent days hidden in villages, or beneath groves of trees, or in ravines, awaiting the order to march on. Routes were used recurrently. There were large battles in, what is known today as, South Korea, in February, April, and May 1951, and POWs from these actions tended to "trunk" toward the same pathways northward.

South Korea: In recent years, our investigation and recovery teams have marched along these same routes. Then dirt roads, they are now paved, villages still exist along the way, and we have been able to get many fragmentary accounts of POWs who died en route. This is often inter-generational memory, the story being passed from father to son or even grandson. Such information is not always reliable, but often it is. In the process, we have discovered human remains on several occasions, and we have mapped out evacuation routes used by the CCF and North Korean, right up to the DMZ.

North Korea: Here, we have been very limited in access to routes and villagers. U.S. recovery teams have worked from fixed base camps in limited battle zones. But at times they have been allowed to travel under watchful eyes, and have even conducted village exhumations along known POW routes. Several identifications have followed. We have tried to be very careful in our accounting efforts, to differentiate between men known to have died in major camps or well-known holding points, and those who expired along the wayside, often during rest periods in small villages. Our mapping in North Korea has been limited in terms of physical access but debriefing statements and follow-on interviews have enabled us to establish a reasonable picture of where men marched and where they died. This effort will continue and expand, hopefully, when we are allowed back into North Korea for recovery purposes.

United Nations Military Cemeteries (UNMCs): U.S. and U.N. forces buried many of their own battlefield dead (and even recovered POWs) in temporary cemeteries at several locations across North Korea. As allied forces withdrew, these sites were abandoned to advancing Chinese forces. Following the war, many human remains were turned over by the CCF and North Koreans during Operation Glory (more below). Some of the cemeteries were completely evacuated. But other turnovers were incomplete, and we still hope to gather additional human remains from sites of the UNMCs at Pyongyang, Hungnam, and Koto-ri, as well as many isolated burials whose locations are known to us.

Operation Glory (and other returns): As required by the Armistice, both sides made an effort to return war dead during September through November of 1954. The Chinese and North Koreans provided a total of 4,167 containers, with an estimated 4,219 human remains, of whom 2,944 are known or believed to be Americans. Those identified from Operation Glory include battlefield deaths, POWs from main camps, aviators, and burials from the temporary UNMCs. More recently, unilateral turnovers by the North Koreans took place in 1990-94 and in 2007, and we did recovery work of our own in North Korea from 1996-2005. But there have been no returns from any of the UNMCs since 1954.