



Until They All Come Home: The Defense Prisoner of War/Missing in Action Accounting Agency

As important as it is to return the fallen to their families, it's equally if not more important to the nation. This is our sacred promise that we make to our sons and daughters when we put them in harm's way and ask them to do the most difficult tasks around.

Brigadier General Mark Spindler,
Deputy Director, DPAA

Introduction

With more than 83,000 personnel still missing from past and current conflicts, the Defense Prisoner of War/Missing in Action Accounting Agency (DPAA) will not rest until all American servicemembers are recovered, identified and returned to their families. DPAA's mission is to provide the fullest possible accounting for missing personnel to their families and the nation. Over the past year, DPAA, which employs more than 600 military and civilian personnel, was created by consolidating the three organizations that were previously responsible for the accounting mission. The merger of the Defense Prisoner of War Missing Personnel Office (DPMO), the Joint Prisoner of War/Missing in Action Accounting Command (JPAC) and the Air Force Life Sciences Equipment Laboratory (LSEL) has led to better oversight of case research, recovery operations and family communications.

The Search

Over the past 20 years, DPAA has been able to locate, account for and identify more than 1,530 missing personnel. The agency conducts research and analysis and travels worldwide to investigate losses; disinters gravesites of unidentified American personnel; excavates crash sites; and meticulously pieces together evidence found at these sites. Once remains are found, the agency uses several techniques to accurately identify individuals. The collaboration of effort from the Armed Forces DNA Identification Lab at Dover Air Force Base, Delaware, and the DPAA laboratories

in Hawaii and at Offutt Air Force Base, Nebraska, analyze DNA, dental records, medical records and skeletal remains to identify missing personnel.

Of the more than 73,000 missing persons from World War II, only 4 percent have DNA family reference samples (FRSs) to find a potential match. FRSs are DNA cheek swabs from family members that could provide a probable link to the individual when recovered remains are tested for DNA. Of the missing Cold War personnel, 83 percent have an FRS on file; FRSs for the Korean War total 89 percent; and FRSs are on file for 81 percent of missing personnel from the Vietnam War. While DNA testing is an integral part in the identification of remains, each case requires the investigation of material evidence, such as airplane parts and uniform pieces; odontology; witness accounts; and anthropological analysis of the skeletal remains.

In 2015, Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work released a memo allowing Department of Defense (DoD) to include remains from the USS *Oklahoma*, which was attacked on 7 December 1941 in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, in its identification efforts. In November, DPAA completed the disinterment of 388 sets of remains from the USS *Oklahoma*. The remains were originally commingled into 61 caskets at 45 gravesites marked "UNKNOWN, USS OKLAHOMA" at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Hawaii. With the persistent efforts of DPAA, it is estimated that 80 percent of the remains will be identified and returned to their families within the next three to five years.



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Recently, a 13-person team from DPAA conducted search-and-recovery efforts on the Himalayan Mountains in the Arunachal Pradesh region in India, searching for eight U.S. Army Air Corps members who crashed in a B-24J aircraft in 1944. The recovery team hiked through 10 miles of treacherous terrain to set up their basecamp. Each day, they walked more than a mile and a half, climbing upwards of 1,000 feet to the excavation site, which was a mountain slope with a 60-degree incline. After nearly two weeks of excavation, the team unearthed potential evidence of the aircrew for whom they were searching. With thousands of people still missing, recovery efforts like this will continue for the foreseeable future. Teams have also recently returned from search-and-recovery missions in Vietnam and the Solomon Islands, where they spent nearly two months completing their missions. Additional searches resumed in January 2016.

For the families

Since 1995, DoD has held annual briefings around the country for family members of the missing. These government briefings keep families informed of the agency's worldwide mission to account for those still missing. During

the briefing held in Portland, Maine, in mid-November 2015, nearly 200 family members attended, representing almost 100 missing personnel. Families shared stories of their loved ones, provided DNA family reference samples, learned of new DNA technology and gained information on site excavations. The next briefings are scheduled for 20 February 2016 in Atlanta, Georgia, and 19 March 2016 in Seattle, Washington. As long as American personnel are missing, the DPAA will continue to search and identify missing personnel and return them to their families.

Conclusion

The DPAA, formed from the consolidation of the DPMO, JPAC and LSEL, is committed to locating, identifying, and returning the remains of the 83,000 missing personnel to their families. To identify remains, DPAA requires FRSs from family members of the missing personnel and continued funding. The families of the missing are encouraged to contact DPAA at <http://www.dpaa.mil> to provide a FRS and stay informed about their search efforts. Americans owe a great deal to the servicemembers who gave the ultimate sacrifice to protect their freedom; DPAA is dedicated to ensuring that they are not forgotten.

Key Points

- The resolve of servicemembers and civilians serving abroad is strengthened by knowing that America, through the DPAA, will do what is necessary to bring them home.
- As the nation adjusts to a security environment plagued by persistent conflict, Americans cannot forget the personnel that made the ultimate sacrifice in defense of their freedom.
- DoD must ensure that DPAA is adequately funded despite the decline of resources to fulfill the promise to bring everyone home.

