

President's Corner

The Honorable Returns Ceremony

Sometimes an early morning phone call turns out well. "Hello."

"Good morning. This is the vice president's office." Wiping sleep from my eyes, "Vice president of what?" "The United States. The Vice President and Mrs.

Pence would like you to join them for the Honorable Return Ceremony in Hawaii."

"The remains from North Korea?"

"Yes."

"In Hawaii?"

"Yes."

"I'd like to do that."

Twenty-four hours later, Air Force 2 was posed behind me. There was time to settle into my seat, look out the window and appreciate what was likely going to be a once in a lifetime experience.



AF2's engines wound up, helicopters hovered protectively in the distance, and a gunboat came to the ready in a nearby waterway. The plane taxied

along the tarmac, cut the commercial planes waiting in line (Vice Presidents get to do that), then sped along the runway and lifted off sharply; the Vice President of the U.S., the Second Lady, their staffs, secret service contingent, Air Force crew, members of the media ... and me ... onboard.

As a guest of the VP, I sat with the heads of staff at two large tables, comfortable seats on each side. The VP and Mrs. Pence came out of their cabin to visit. Both were gracious and easy to talk to. His father fought in the Korean War and had shared with his son that the real heroes were the ones that didn't come home. This meant a lot to the VP, as did our reason for travel.

We stopped at Travis Air Force base in California for gas and to pick up another family member - Diana, and her husband Bob. Diana's father is also MIA. We were soon winging our way over the Pacific Ocean toward Hawaii.

Diana, Bob, and I talked of the honor, responsibility, and good fortune that came with representing the families in this unique experience.

The Vice President and Mrs. Pence came by to visit again. He asked for ideas family members would like in-

cluded in his speech. We suggested that the returning remains be considered the beginning of more to come, not simply the culmination of the successful summit with North Korea. The VP's speech writer sat across the table from us. Throughout the flight, he would occasionally turn his laptop our way to be sure that sections on our dads and the accounting mission rang true, including the message that the returning remains were considered only the beginning.



AF2 landed at Honolulu's Hickam Field late at night. We asked the heads of staff across the aisle about a ride to the hotel. The director of operations mentioned that he had that covered. A short while later, Diana, Bob and I stepped out onto the plane's stairway with the VP and Mrs. Pence. Waiting on the tarmac below were dignitaries, the media, and a motorcade. After being introduced to the dignitaries, we were guided to a car in the middle of the motorcade. Our ride had indeed been covered.

We returned to Hickam Field the next day for the Honorable Return Ceremony. An airplane hangar dating back to the 1940's was set up to receive the caskets. Diana, Bob, and I were led through a large crowd abuzz with anticipation and settled in front row folding chairs. Our side of the hangar was taken up by other family members of MIAs from all past conflicts who lived on Oahu. Veterans were dressed in formal organizational uniforms. Television cameras were mounted on a nearby platform.



Across the vast open space spanning the center of the hangar was the speaker's podium, positioned against a background of flags representing the U.S., and all the military services. VP Pence waited with other dignitaries. Outside the massive open doors, two quiet cargo planes were parked tail-to-tail, their large doors open, ramps down, ready to be emptied.

The Second Lady settled in with us. 110 support stanchions filled the distance between us and the Vice President. They were paired wide enough apart to allow for 55 caskets. The day was hot and muggy. No one seemed to mind.

(Continued, next page)

President's Corner

(Continued)

My path to the hangar at Hickam Field began two years earlier with an equally serendipitous trip to North Korea. Bill Richardson's Center for Global Engagement made that experience possible. We were a three-person delegation meeting with the DPRK's vice foreign minister, discussing a way to bring home American remains. We brought an offer back instead.

Two years later, having watched that offer follow a myriad of paths within two presidential administrations, I was sitting beside the Second Lady of the U.S., mere feet from where the remains of fifty-five men would finally make their way to American soil.

Among things that dreams are made of is to take part in the discovery of what happened to one's own missing loved one lost to war. Short of that, is an opportunity to take part in the discovery of what happened to other people's missing loved ones. This was an honor of its own.

Vice President Pence presented his moving speech. Then, one-by-one, fifty-five flag draped caskets were brought from the cargo planes' open doors and set reverently on the stanchions. Each casket held the remains of some family's loved one. They were carried by members from each military service; most of them the same young age as the unknown men inside when they were lost to war.



The moments were alternately sad, knowing the tragedy of what had happened to these men then joyous that they were now found. Smiles came then tears flowed for each reason. Vice President

Pence stood respectfully the entire time. Mrs. Pence borrowed my tissue to dab her own tears away.

Smiles prevailed in the end. After six decades spent in anonymity beneath a foreign land, the remains of fifty-five Americans would have their chance to go home.

There were open days before AF 2 headed back to Washington. The time allowed for opportunities to experience other aspects of the accounting mission first hand. One was a tour of the identification laboratory with Jennie Jin, the head of the Korean War Identifications Project.

Jennie had been with the 55 remains from the moment they were received from the North Koreans. Her own family's escape from North Korea made her work even more special. Jennie would be overseeing the next task of learning who the men were. Their remains were already set out on tables, ready for Jennie and her dedicated staff to take the final step of returning their identities.



Another side-trip was to the Punchbowl National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific. After a visit to my father's name on the memorial wall, I walked with Jim Horton, the cemetery's director, among more than 800 flat headstones of Korean War servicemen buried as unknowns since the war. As with the 55, they were waiting their time to reconnect with their identities. Jim shared the complex realities required to bring them up.



Thanks to the collaborative persistence of people like Jim and determined staff within DPAA and other agencies, outside supporters, and the family members of all the missing men, the time had come. The plan to bring them up is finally underway. (See Cover article of this newsletter)

The trappings of this journey were unique and very special. My place among them came from years of moving from one closed door to another until finding those that would open. These efforts have been inspired by, and often accomplished with, the support of others, many of them strangers, who make seemingly impossible things possible. That alone makes the process of being part of experiences like this trip so meaningful. *Leap and a net will appear* has become a guiding philosophy. Many leaps have been taken to reach where we are today. Many nets have appeared in response. Many more leaps are yet to come!

Rick Downes, President

(Lt. Hal Downes, father - MIA 1952)

The Coalition's Board of Directors

Rick Downes, President/Executive Director
Donna D. Knox, Legislative Liaison/Secretary
Paul Fees, Director
Amy Goyne, Director

John Zimmerlee, Vice President
Joan Morris, Treasurer
Jorja Reyburn, Director
Jean Waite, Director