

COALITION OF FAMILIES OF KOREAN & COLD WAR POW/MIAs



“We will find our own missing loved one by searching for them all, together.”

SPECIAL ISSUE / MARCH 2024

DoD Disinterment Turf War

Punch Bowl Korean War Unknowns - Phase 5 Back on Track

Good news: Phase 5 of DPAA's project to disinter unknown Korean War U.S. servicemen buried in Hawaii's Punch Bowl cemetery was resumed on March 11th. Eight more graves of that came from battlefields in the Seoul area were opened. DPAA's plan is for all 40 graves in the phase to be disinterred by the end of summer.

For those just tuning in, the delay of Phase 5 (of seven phases) came last December. Issues raised by DPAA's counterpart agency within the Department of Defense, Personnel & Readiness (P&R), have been addressed (see President's Corner). The three month delay is the latest chapter of an ongoing authority issue within DoD over which agency controls disinterments of remains from past conflicts buried in U.S. cemeteries. A turf war.

Background

In 2015, Congress mandated that DoD establish a single POW/MIA accounting office to replace the predecessor agency, DPMO. A primary intent of the legislation was to ensure that overlapping authorities undermining DPMO would not be part of the new agency. Congress therefore stipulated that the new agency be the single authority on the nation's POW/MIA recovery mission – in charge of all aspects.



Unfortunately, DoD's leadership went against the mandate and directed authority over disinterments of unknown servicemen buried in U.S. cemeteries to another agency - Personnel & Readiness. P&R oversees a subagency, Casualty/Mortuary Affairs, which handles the recovery of service personnel lost in battle during *current day operations*. With this directive, Casualty/Mortuary Affairs held control over past conflicts, as well. This was the authority used to delay the Phase 5 project in December. (Note: remains buried in foreign soil, including North Korea, are under DPAA control.)

Undoing a DoD directive is not easily done. P&R has shown little interest in letting go of its authority. To further complicate matters, Casualty/Mortuary Affairs holds a sanctity of the grave perspective that undermines DPAA's efforts to disinter and identify graves of unknown servicemen. Time consuming, resource draining requirements are imposed.

In the end, a new DoD directive will need to reinstate authority over all disinterments involving past conflicts to DPAA. Accomplishing this action will likely require Congressional involvement and the families' support. Articles in this newsletter cover the issue in further detail.

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President's Corner

Department of Defense Disinterment Authority Issue:

What the Heck is Going On?

It is baffling that a well-intended, humanitarian mission like recovering and identifying missing American servicemen is subject to unending, complicated politics. It is not enough that retrieving remains of missing Americans buried in North Korea is complicated by foreign policies, now accessing remains buried *in U.S. soil* is subjected to a policy turf war *within the U.S. Department of Defense*.



K55 Return Ceremony

The missing men must be turning over in their graves.

The DoD muddle began just after Congress mandated establishing a new POW/MIA agency in 2015. High on the list of Congressional stipulations was that the new agency be the *single authority* on recovering U.S. military personnel lost during past conflicts. The intent was to avoid issues caused by overlapping authorities operating as the former agency (DPMO). Too many cooks were in the kitchen.

DoD apparently likes having a lot of cooks, however. Despite the *single authority* mandate, DoD directed control over unknowns from *past conflicts* buried in U.S. cemeteries to another DoD agency - [Personnel & Readiness](#). This misdirection may have been a matter of DoD thumbing its collective nose at Congress. P&R's sub-agencies, Manpower & Reserve Affairs/Casualty and

Mortuary Affairs are responsible for graves involving men lost from *current conflicts*.

It is more likely that new leadership didn't fully realize Congress' intent. Leadership personnel within DoD come and go like the wind. It is possible that no one fully understood how the new agency was to be pieced together. The DoD is a labyrinth of agencies and directives. The Coalition has braved this maze and will need a trail of breadcrumbs to find our way out again.



Whatever the circumstances, control over these disinterments was misdirected to P&R, whose approval processes and over-reaching requirements slow DPAA's accounting efforts substantially. It is a Catch 22 scenario: DPAA personnel spend time and resources preparing reports explaining how they plan to conduct a project in order to get permission from another agency even though they were authorized to do the project without another agency's approval. Yikes.

Compounding the issue, the other agency then imposes pointless requirements. The process frustrates and demoralizes DPAA personnel, who must take time away from other mission projects in order to indulge the process. The Coalition is similarly drawn away from efforts to re-engage North Korea and other critical issues in order to ensure that operations in our own backyard move smoothly.

* * *

Here are *less-than-objective* perspectives on the hoops imposed upon DPAA's POW/MIA accounting mission by non-POW/MIA agencies within DoD. (Note: Remains buried in foreign soil/cemeteries, North Korea for example, are not subject to these policies.)

~ Sanctity of the Grave

A guiding principle driving many of P&R's actions is the concept that once a soldier is buried, the grave becomes sacred; not to be disturbed. This is faulty thinking on several levels. Families should be determining a loved one's final resting place, not government officials. Also, by their nature, graves with headstones marked *Unknown* are temporary holding places until the men

inside can be identified. This is doubly so with the rapid advancement of identification technologies. Families should be who determines the sanctity of a grave, not strangers.

(Continued on page 3)

*Organizational Chart of DoD Offices Involved in Disinterment Issue
(Primary Offices are in Blue)*

Secretary of Defense

/

Deputy Secretary of Defense

Under Secretary / Policy

*Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency
(DPAA)*

Under Secretary / Personnel and
Readiness

Asst. Sec. Defense for Manpower and
Reserve Affairs

Office of Casualty/Mortuary Affairs

(President's Corner Continued)

~ Pointless Requirements

P&R requires DNA samples, dental and other substantiation indicating that 60% of *all* remains associated with a group burial can be identified ... including men identified decades ago, returned to their families, and *are no longer in the grave*. This needless requirement adds valuable time to the approval process.

~ Time

A time limit is then imposed on completing the requirements. When it expires, which is inevitable since it is impossible to predict how long many of the requirements will take, the project is halted until DPAA submits reports explaining the circumstances. This is, in part, what created the Phase 5 delay.

~ Are They Even Listening?

The motivation behind many of these counter-productive actions is difficult to understand. Prior to initiating Phase 5, DPAA announced the project to all relevant DoD agencies. A waiting period was then established for questions/concerns. When the period passed, the project began. Midway through, however,

P&R halted the project with concerns that should have been raised during the announcement period. Three months were lost while DPAA submitted reports reestablishing that it had enough lab space for the remains, explained how unidentified remains were too fragile to reinter, and that they needed to be available for sampling as DNA technology develops. These issues could /should have been raised prior to the project getting underway

~ Insult Added to Injury

DPAA must contend with these issues knowing that the Congressional mandate designated that it "establish policies, which shall apply uniformly throughout the Department of Defense, for personnel accounting (including locating, recovering, and identifying missing persons from past conflicts or their remains after hostilities have ceased)". This is key to all other issues. DPAA is responsible for establishing policies, not P&R or other agencies within DoD. P&R needs to be removed from the approval chain.

*Rick Downes, President
(Lt. Hal Downes, father, MIA)*

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Our Collective Voice

The Coalition and the Disinterment Authority Issue

The Coalition’s history with the DoD disinterment authority issue dates back to DPAA’s predecessor agency, DPMO. The initial effort to disinter and identify Korean War Punch Bowl Unknowns was held up then, as it was recently, by Personnel & Readiness/Casualty Affairs. Years passed before the seven-phased Punch Bowl disinterment plan was approved and underway. To date, sixty-eight Unknowns from the phased plan have their names again and have been returned to their families. Hundreds more await their turn.

By 2021, DPAA personnel were at their wits end over delays and unreasonable requirements imposed by P&R, especially on WWII group disinterment projects. The Coalition enlisted the assistance of a U.S. Senate office to sort out the issues. A meeting with DoD legislative affairs determined that an official inquiry was in order.

Meanwhile, DPAA pursued internal options that

suggested the matter could be handled within the DoD. All parties to the Senate office inquiry, including the Coalition, elected to step back and allow the internal process to proceed.

This turned out to be a mistake. The turf war flared up at the end of last year and Phase 5 of the project to disinter Punch Bowl Korean War Unknowns was stopped. The Coalition again enlisted assistance from the same Senate office. An inquiry went forward this time. We are monitoring its progress and will share

the results. A congressional hearing looking into the overall issue may be in order.

The effort to finally resolve this disruptive issue will continue until control over all policies relating to the recovery and identification of missing U.S. servicemen from past conflicts is assigned to the POW/MIA agency Congress mandated as being responsible—DPAA.



One Family Member’s Thoughts

My father has been missing in action my entire life. He fought in the Korean War as an Air Force navigator/SHORAN operator. Over the years, I waited for him to show up at the door, but he never did. Gradually, I came to accept that he’d most likely been killed.

But *most likely* is a poor substitute for the peace that comes with certainty. For me, the only thing worse than losing my dad has been not knowing what happened to him. That has haunted me since I was old enough to understand the pain of not having him in my life.

If I could have asked my father before he went missing whether he would prefer to remain in an anonymous grave or be disinterred, identified and brought

home to his wife and children, I have no doubt what his answer would have been. He would have wanted his final resting place to be marked “Here lies Hal Downes, loving husband and father, who died in service to his country.”

There is sanctity in bringing a serviceman home, returning his identity and allowing his life journey to come full circle. There is sanctity in allowing his family to find closure and to express their love in ways other than through uncertainty and the pain of not knowing. There is no sanctity in lying as an unknown soldier in eternal anonymity.



North Korea

*Donna Downes Knox
(Lt. Hal Downes is MIA/North Korea.)*

Membership

The *Coalition of Families of Korean & Cold War POW/MIAs* is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, dedicated to accounting for the thousands of American servicemen still missing from the Korean and Cold Wars. Their stories should be told and closure found for their families.



The *Coalition* relies on membership donations to pursue the issues that need to be resolved in order to learn what happened to the missing men. Please join us in this effort.

We will find our own missing loved one by searching for them all, together.

All donations are tax deductible.

Thank you!

Coalition of Families of Korean and Cold War POW/MIAs
National Membership Application

New

Renewal

Name: _____ Date: _____
Address: _____
City, State, Zip Code _____
Email: _____ Phone: _____
(Associate Membership / Nonfamily member – please check here:)
Relationship to missing service member: _____
Service member's full name: _____ Service # _____
Branch of Service/Unit or Group: _____
Date & Area of Loss: _____

Annual Membership Donation - \$25

Washington, DC Travel Donation - \$ _____.

Make checks payable to: **Coalition of Families**

Mail to:

Coalition of Families (Attn: Treasurer) P.O. Box 4194, Portsmouth, NH 03802

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