

The Coalition: Twenty-One Years and Counting...A Look Back

By Donna D. Knox

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Twenty-one years ago, I founded the *Coalition* along with two other family members, Irene Mandra and Gerry Montgomery. The three of us had a vision of how best to advocate on behalf of our missing men and their families; how best to bring about the fullest possible accounting. It was a daunting task back then: to get up and running; to pave our way into leadership on the issue. We felt small and overwhelmed.

It's been a busy two decades. Irene and Gerry are no longer with the *Coalition*. We now have our third President/Executive Director in Rick Downes. The Board of Directors has taken on new names and faces over the years. We have an advisory Board of interested professionals who, though not family members, bring valuable perspective and experience to our efforts.

I thought it would be inspiring to pull together a summary of the projects we have undertaken together, the hurdles we have mounted as an organization of families. We have had but one goal in mind: to find out what happened to the men who gave themselves in service to this country and never came back...all too often without explanation. I write this to remind us all that, though at times it might seem we are mere families—too insignificant to tilt **at** windmills that power the federal government—as organized advocates we can and have made a difference. We have breathed life into what was once empty space. And, whatever we learn, we will know in our hearts that we never gave up trying to find our guys. We did not move on from their sacrifices as though they were leaves in the wind.

With all of this in mind, here are some highlights of the difference an organized and determined effort can make. Though this summary is not comprehensive and lacks many details (none of it happened easily—too much to recount), it will at least remind us that the collective voice does matter, and we should never let it fade into the margins of unattended history. So...

~**Diplomatic Missions:** Three of our Directors have been to North Korea on missions to promote relations between the two countries. One trip involved direct negotiations with Pyongyang on the recovery and return of U.S. remains and investigating air loss sites.

~**Remains Recovery Operations:** In 2011, the Coalition worked in concert with the Defense POW/MIA accounting office and others to move negotiations toward resumption of JROs (joint recovery operations with DPRK) in an effort to locate and recover remains of American servicemen still buried in North Korea. The operations were approved and ready to launch but were pulled back when relations between the U.S. and North Korea erupted anew.

~**List of the Missing:** In what seemed like a process that would never yield results, we pressed, argued and all but stomped our feet for the creation and release of a list of all men missing from the Korean War. For some reason the government was reluctant. But persistence paid off and, in February of 1999, DPMO (Defense POW/MIA Office...predecessor to the current accounting office, DPAA) released *PMKOR*—Personnel Missing Korea. *PMKOR* is the grandfather of the current day government list of who went missing, and when, from which state and which branch of the military. The list is now available on the DPAA website as a central resource in the accounting effort. Let's not forget that, without determined advocacy, the list would not have been forthcoming.

~**Legislation:** The *Coalition* has spearheaded and drafted three pieces of legislation, two of which were enacted; the other is making its way through Congress now. The first, years ago, was to amend the McCain Act such that family members could have access to documents that mentioned a missing man other than their own relative, even when that man's PNOK (primary next of kin) could not be located to

give permission.

The second legislation dealt with the so-called *generic list*, a list of documents that contained information about POWs. DPMO would not release these documents to family members because the documents did not name individual men. We pressed for, and got, a Congressional mandate for DoD to release the files if they were declassified, and to summarize their content if they were not.

The current Bill is the *Bring Our Heroes Home Act*, which will mandate comprehensive declassification of records related to POW/MIAs from WWII forward. We have seen enough to know many more records exist that remain classified, especially when it comes to the myriad reports that American POWs were held back and taken to the Soviet Union.

~**The Transfer Issue:** An important side note about that. In 1994 I testified at a congressional hearing on the effort to account for missing servicemen. At that hearing, I met and talked with Lt. Col. Phillip Corso. He then testified that, as President Eisenhower's advisor on matters of National Security after the Korean War ended, his report to the President had been that to press for the release of POWs who had been held back would be to risk going to war with the Soviets, a risk that Corso advised should not be undertaken. Eisenhower agreed and effectively abandoned the men. Once that decision was made, a systemic decision to hide the truth from the families and the public took root and never gave up its turf. To do otherwise would have been to incur catastrophic political consequences.

The *Coalition* has worked over the decades to make sure this travesty, this knife to the gut for families of missing men, is never laid to rest...not until we know what really happened.

~**Informing the Families:** Over the years, we successfully pressed the Powers That Be (affectionately referred to herein as the "PTB") to inform families when artifacts associated with an individual MIA were found with remains, even though those remains had not yet been identified. Similarly, with assistance from the Army Casualty Office, we convinced the PTB to release the so-called X-Files which contain all sorts of information associated with unidentified remains buried at the Punchbowl in Hawaii. This information, when coupled with information from families and other sources, can be instrumental in making identifications.

~ **Punchbowl Remains:** Another longstanding issue was disinterment of ALL remains of unknown servicemen interred at the Punchbowl in Hawaii since the Korean War ended so they could be put through the rigors of current identification technology. We families could see that this needed to be done, but politics, bureaucratic inertia...maybe budgetary concerns...*something* gave rise to an infuriating refusal to do so. The previous policy was that a man's identity had to be pretty much established (by more limited technologies which missed a lot) before his remains could be brought up for analysis. Forgive the crassness, but we believed that policy to be ass-backwards. I am happy to note that DPAA has finally adopted a seven-stage plan to disinter all Punchbowl remains for identification review. Kudos!!!

Quiet, Ongoing Advocacy

Many of the *Coalition's* efforts have been tucked away behind the front lines; not flashy but still important to the crafting of progress on the many levels it must be made. Here are quick references to some of the things we've undertaken over the years:

- Cooperative efforts with members of Congress and NGOs (non-government entities) to bring about progress and, when necessary, change. One significant example is the collective effort that culminated in a Congressional hearing, the dissolution of DPMO and creation of DoD's current accounting agency, DPAA.

- Behind-the-scenes meetings, letters and dialogue with Executive Branch officials (NSC, State Department, White House, etc.) about policy, both domestic and foreign.

- Outreach to media for coverage of issues and response to media requests for information and interviews.

- Creation of a website and a newsletter to keep families and others informed about Korean and Cold

War POW/MIA issues.

- Built a presence on social media to broaden awareness of the accounting issue.
- Attendance at government briefings, asking hard questions, sometimes having to press for reluctant answers.
- Speaking at various public events.
- Working behind the scenes with interested individuals to develop artistic projects as a means of making headway, both in terms of awareness and actual breakthroughs in policy or doctrine. One example is the documentary video *Forgotten Men of the Forgotten War*.
- Pressed for more comprehensive access to Chinese and Russian archives.
- Assisted family members with investigation of their individual cases.
- Conducted extensive research at the National Archives and other repositories. The *Coalition* was also happy and proud to have facilitated funding for a period of time that supported the incredible work *Coalition* Vice President John Zimmerlee has conducted over the years through his separate research entity, the *Korean War POW/MIA Network*. John has singlehandedly led countless families to information they did not have about their missing loved one. His data base is unrivaled.

In Conclusion

I will mention the *Coalition's* participation with other individuals and entities in efforts to bring about more diplomatic interaction with North Korea. There are remains to unearth and bring home. There are missing flyers whose crash sites are known but whose whereabouts are not. Last seen alive reports need to be resolved. Much work needs to be done before the window of opportunity closes. Sometimes it will be creative thinking and inventive projects by unlikely outsiders that will gain traction and make a difference.

Other times, it will be the two governments finding their way to the same place, as when President Trump and Chairman Kim Jong Un held their first summit last year and arranged for 55 caskets of American MIAs to be returned to their homeland. We worked to make sure the remains issue was included on the Summit agenda. *Coalition* President, Rick Downes, flew onboard Air Force Two with Vice President Pence and attended the repatriation ceremony in Hawaii. It was a somber yet inspiring moment in the reach of time that has now spanned more than six decades.

There it is. All of this, and much more, is what it has taken...what it will continue to take...to get answers; honor the men who served; and bring closure to those who have been tormented by the uncertainty of not knowing. And so, we carry on.