



RECLAIMING WHAT WAS LOST

The Legacies of Unaccounted-For Personnel in the VIETNAM WAR

PART 1 OF 3



A soldier from the 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment (Old Guard) renders honors on October 18, 2018, in Section 55 of Arlington National Cemetery, Arlington, Virginia for a U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel who died during the Vietnam War. (Courtesy of Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency)

I'm mindful that I stand here before the families of many of the missing. I'm mindful that you gave your sons and husbands and fathers into the care of our Government when they left to fight for our Nation. You knew they might die in battle. But you had, and will always have, every right to expect that your Government will not abandon those who failed to return.

— President Ronald Reagan, 1984

Much was lost when the United States departed South Vietnam in 1975. The war, civil strife, social upheaval, and political scandal left its citizens questioning the Nation's institutions and promises. While many wished to put the war behind them, some 2,646 missing and unaccounted-for U.S. personnel had not returned from Southeast Asia.

Finding and returning these personnel required the Nation's strength and commitment. United States officials tasked with recovery had to communicate openly and honestly about a war shrouded in secrecy. On an international level, the Nation required sustained relations with former adversaries. Accounting as fully as possible for missing and unaccounted-for U.S. personnel became a process where civilians and Government officials worked together to restore trust in the nation's institutions to return the missing. Much has been accomplished; more work remains.

THE MISSION AND ITS CHALLENGE

Achieving the fullest possible accounting for personnel not returned from Southeast Asia is a time-sensitive mission. Full skeletons are no longer recovered from Southeast Asia. Many unaccounted-for personnel originally perished in aircraft crashes. The trauma of impact, exploding fuel, and resulting fires all contributed to making recovery extremely difficult. In the years following, animal and humans picked apart the crash locations. Even for those buried intact, the soil's acidity—a quality unique to Southeast Asia—eats away at skeletal remains. Years of monsoons shift and deteriorate sites and remains further still.

The United States military attempted the first recovery missions even as the war was being fought. Yet, owing to combat operations at the time, the odds of success were remote and the missions themselves were dangerous. The agencies charged with accounting for the missing and recovering remains have, over time, evolved and consolidated into the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA).

In locating remains, Jack Kull, the DPAA's former Senior Vietnam War Policy Officer, stated, "You have to build a case file." From this file, detective work begins. The work is historical and archeological in nature. For instance, case-file analysts might ask, "If the missing personnel were in an aircraft, then what type? What was the nature of the crash? Was the person able to get out prior to impact?" An F-4 Phantom impact at high speed may hurl the disintegrating aircraft hundreds of meters, whereas a helicopter may come to rest near the site of impact.

Politics and geography in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia also greatly influence investigations and excavations. Weather is a factor; excavations cannot occur during the heavy rain season. Cooperation with locals is vital. The remains of U.S. personnel now often rest in the land locals use in their everyday lives. Additionally, in many cases, it fell to the Vietnamese to bury their former adversaries. These memories are useful in locating sites that may contain remains.

Excavations are referred to as Joint Field Activities, and they are made up of multiple teams, each of which consist of civilian and military personnel with specialized expertise. Some Joint Field Activities are made up of nearly 100 people divided into three to four recovery teams working separate sites, usually in proximity. These teams are led by civilian forensic anthropologists and archeologists (called SREs, or Senior Recovery Experts/Science Recovery Experts). Their expertise is in excavating sites believed to hold skeletal remains. They work closely with a United States military officer.

The civilian scientist chooses the site while the military officer leads a specialized team of military personnel that includes an explosives ordinance expert, a photographer, a medic, a linguist, and others to ensure the documentation of a safe, accurate, and well-executed excavation. Often the team is further augmented to meet any specific needs. For instance, if remains are believed to be underwater, the team will come equipped with personnel trained in self-contained underwater breathing apparatus, or SCUBA, diving.



A U.S. Army Sergeant 1st Class assigned to the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency SCUBA dives in the Gulf of Tonkin off the coast of northern Vietnam in May 2017 in search of two aviators believed to have crashed in the area during the Vietnam War. (Courtesy of the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency)



An Armed Forces Medical Examiner System analyst collects a DNA sample during a POW/MIA Accounting Agency Family Member Update in Louisville, Kentucky, May 19, 2018. DNA can be used to support the recovery of skeletal remains or directly aid in remains identification. (Courtesy of the Armed Forces Medical Examiner System)



Members of the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency and local villagers conduct excavation operations in Khammauon province, Lao People's Democratic Republic, on March 28, 2017. (Courtesy of the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency)

Once remains are located, they are given a joint forensic review by U.S. and host nation experts to determine whether remains belong to United States personnel, indigenous persons, or even animals. Following review, remains are transported to a forensic laboratory in Hawaii for scientific identification. (The United States also maintains a forensic laboratory at Offutt Air Force Base in Nebraska which analyzes and identifies remains recovered from Europe and other parts of the world.) These state-of-the-art laboratories are manned by scientists skilled and experienced in identifying human remains.

The DPAA's Deputy Director of Outreach and Communications Johnnie Webb explained that once repatriated remains reach the laboratory, "previous medical records gathered while in the service prove essential to their identification." Forensic anthropologists and odontologists—otherwise known as forensic dentists—use advanced equipment to remove any commingling of animal and human remains. The odontologists use dental records and dental history to identify persons based on teeth and jaws.

To further narrow the results, these laboratories use stable isotope analysis, which has provided one of the most novel means of identifying human remains. Stable isotope ratios examine elements found in human bones to determine what foods make up their structure. This science identifies and distinguishes bones made up of high concentrations of corn (found in U.S. diets) or rice (found in Asian diets). Stable isotope examinations are also able to identify the geographic location where drinking water was found. As it turns out, you are, in fact, what you eat.

With the examination narrowed, remains are then securely sent to the Armed Forces Medical Examiner System (AFMES) in Delaware for identification. As seen on television, laboratories rely upon Deoxyribonucleic Acid (DNA) testing to identify remains. AFMES uses both nuclear (auSTR or YSTR) and mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) testing during the identification process. Testing is dependent on having an appropriate family reference available. The mtDNA test can use any family member along the maternal line, YSTR testing can use any family member along the paternal line, and auSTR can use mother/father or siblings as references.

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Ronald Reagan, 40th President of the United States, speaks before delegates on July 20, 1984 at the inauguration of National POW/MIA Recognition Day. Reagan made unaccounted-for personnel a national priority. He proclaimed, "Until the P.O.W./M.I.A. issue is resolved, it will remain a matter of the highest national priority. On July 20, 1984, the POW/MIA Flag will fly over the White House, the Departments of State and Defense, and the Veterans' Administration as a symbol of our unwavering commitment to achieve the fullest possible accounting for the servicemen and civilians." (Courtesy of the National League of POW/MIA Families)

The League's single, threefold mission supporting our POW/MIA [s] and KIA/BNR from the Vietnam War is to obtain the release and return of all prisoners, the fullest possible accounting for the missing, and the repatriation of remains of those not yet recovered who died while serving our nation.

— The National League of POW/MIA Families

On January 27, 1973, the United States and South Vietnam signed the Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam with representatives of North Vietnam and the Viet Cong. The agreement stipulated the return of 591 U.S. Prisoners of War from South Vietnam and Hanoi, nine from Laos, and three from China. Regarding unreturned missing and unaccounted-for personnel, the Department of Defense, working through the Service Secretaries, convened review boards and issued presumptive findings of death. Following the Nation's complete withdrawal from South Vietnam, these personnel were now listed as Killed-in-Action/Body Not Recovered. To return to Southeast Asia and account as fully as possible for these personnel, the United States required direct cooperation from its former adversaries.

Senior officials initially worked to normalize relations with Vietnam to repatriate unaccounted-for personnel. Vietnam's leadership understood U.S. aims and carefully planned its strategy: Vietnam would grant access to unaccounted-for personnel, and in return, asked the United States to end economic sanctions against the nation and pay reparations. The talks stalled. Meanwhile, in Washington, DC, the National League of POW/MIA Families, a nonprofit organization, advocated to the U.S. Government on behalf of families of missing and unaccounted for personnel. From inception, the organization's goal has been the return of all prisoners, the fullest possible accounting of the missing and repatriation of all recoverable remains of those who died serving our nation during the Vietnam War.

ESTABLISHING RELATIONS AND A RECOVERY PROGRAM

In the years following the war, the National League of POW/MIA Families made inroads within the Federal Government. By the late 1970s, its Executive Director was a founding member of the POW/MIA Interagency Group. This group consisted of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Asian and Pacific Affairs, the National Security Council Deputy Director for Asian Affairs, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Central Intelligence Agency, and other Federal agencies with a stake in normalizing relations with Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.

The task before the League and the Nation seemed formidable and recovery statistics immediately following the war offered little hope. By 1979, of the 2,646 originally unaccounted-for personnel, only 78 remains had been repatriated.

While the Nation's efforts to improve relations with Vietnam lagged, the Federal Government began construction of a laboratory in Hawaii to identify recovered remains. In 1978, following the lab's completion, a team of specialists conducted a recovery operation in Papua New Guinea from World War II. The lab was originally staffed by morticians, who typically worked with soft tissue and flesh. However, experts quickly found recovered remains possessed neither. By 1983, the lab hired its first forensic anthropologists and forensic dentists, also called odontologists.

President Reagan's election in 1980 spurred efforts to develop working relationships with Vietnam and Laos. Reagan made the Vietnam War accounting effort a priority. President Reagan's appointment of U.S. Army General John Vessey to the role of special envoy to Vietnam was instrumental to breaking the impasse. Gen. Vessey brought to Vietnam several delegations from the Interagency Working Group to forge a path ahead for both nations. He also recruited military and civilians who specialized in investigation and recovery and made every effort to ensure they or their successors were made a part of the accounting mission in the long term. Gen. Vessey believed familiarity bred understanding and the opportunity for progress. It was important that discussions between Vietnam and United States officials maintain continuity in the accounting effort.

By 1984, the United States and Vietnam had agreed that accounting recovery efforts of unaccounted-for U.S. personnel remains would be pursued as a humanitarian matter separate from other considerations between the two nations. In 1985, ten years after departing from South Vietnam, American specialists returned to Vietnam to conduct the first joint recovery. Diplomacy proved the essential step to repatriating remains of unaccounted-for personnel. It remains an integral part of the process to this day.

BUILDING UPON PROGRESS

The National League of POW/MIA Families acted as an intermediary and honest broker between the Federal Government and its constituent families. As efforts to build the Nation's account mission evolved, a significant number of League members remained skeptical of Government claims concerning their loved ones. During the war, the United States had conducted secret operations in Laos and Cambodia and several personnel were killed and went missing during those missions. Yet, due to their secrecy, family members with loved ones unaccounted-for in Laos and Cambodia were misinformed about the country of loss.

The League provided a single source for its constituents to exercise their voice to an ever-expanding Federal bureaucracy tasked with locating and



An Armed Forces Medical Examiner System analyst sands a vertebra in February 2019. Sanding the bones helps to remove any external contaminants such as dirt or oil that could contaminate DNA samples. (Courtesy of the Armed Forces Medical Examiner System)



Ann Mills-Griffiths, then Executive Director of the National League of POW/MIA Families, with Colonel Khamla Keopithoune, head of the Lao Ministry of National Defense Team at a U.S. crash site as part of the first League Delegation to Laos and Vietnam in 1982. (Courtesy of the National League of POW/MIA Families)

repatriating remains of unaccounted-for personnel. As the painful events of the Vietnam War receded from public memory and focus, the League fought to keep accounting and repatriation in the national spotlight.

Evolving science changed the nature of the mission as well. By the 1990s, advancing DNA identification technology made an impact. In 1992, for the first time, DNA was used to identify recovered remains; however, the process was far from perfect. When a DNA test result failed to persuade a skeptical family, they turned to the University of California, Berkeley, for a second opinion. The University's results contradicted the Federal Government's results. The Government placed a temporary moratorium on DNA's use while having an independent laboratory perform testing. The independent laboratory validated the Government's results.

THE MISSION EXPANDS

Following on the National League of POW/MIA Families' successes, similar organizations lobbied the Federal Government to repatriate remains from other global conflicts. For its part, the U.S. Government has gradually allocated greater resources to the mission and centralized its efforts into a single agency, the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency. Despite substantial increases in the DPAA's resources, its mission is monumental. More than 72,000 remain unaccounted for from World War II alone, and 7,567 from the Korean War. Of the original 2,646 from the Vietnam War, as of October 2020, 1,585 personnel were still unaccounted-for.



A 2009 League Delegation to Laos. This photo includes League Chairman Ann Mills-Griffiths and a Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) Det. 3 Recovery Team. JPAC would later be folded into the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency. (Courtesy of the National League of POW/MIA Families)

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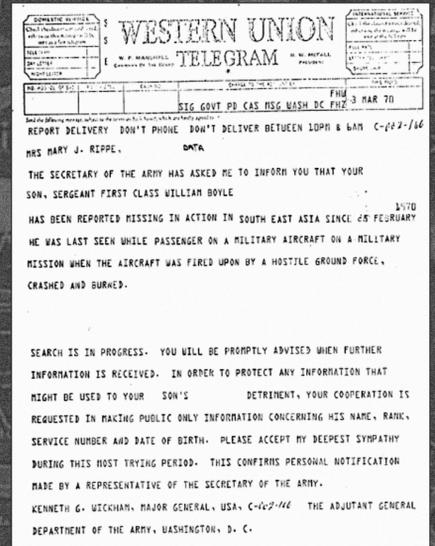
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The POW/MIA flag visible atop the White House in December 2019. The flag flew over the White House from July 20, 1984 to Flag Day, June 14, 2020, when it was moved to the South Lawn. Beginning on April 9, 2021, the flag once again flew over the White House. (Courtesy of Patrick J. Hughes)



U.S. Air Force Colonel Mellor survived his ejection and attempted to evade the enemy. Initial radio contact with friendly forces was established; however, contact was lost, and, despite a two-day search, neither Colonel Mellor nor his aircraft were found. (Courtesy of the Mellor Family)



A photographed copy of the Western Union Telegram sent to U.S. Army Sergeant First Class William Boyle's mother after his helicopter was shot down. SFC Boyle's Missing in Action board proceedings and notices of his death may be viewed at LOC.gov. (Photo Courtesy of the Library of Congress)

Positive identification was made of Fredric Mellor's remains by the Armed Force Medical Examiner System on July 13, 2018.

— Obituary for Colonel Fredric Mellor

The remains could not be located and it is the finding of the investigation that [Sergeant First Class William Boyle] could not have survived the crash. Please accept my deepest sympathy.

— Telegram to Mrs. Mary J. Rippe

COLONEL FREDRIC MELLOR, ACCOUNTED FOR

U.S. Air Force Colonel Fredric Mellor's remains returned home on September 28, 2018. On the nature of his mission and death, the DPAA wrote:

On August 13, 1965, Colonel Fredric Mellor was the pilot of an RF-101 Voodoo (tail number 56-0186, call sign "Wolf 41") that was one of two aircraft on a photo reconnaissance mission over North Vietnam. His aircraft was shot down during the mission, but Colonel Mellor survived and made initial radio and beeper contact with friendly rescue aircraft. However, helicopter crews sent to rescue him could not locate him, and Colonel Mellor was killed by enemy militia members a short time later. He was initially buried near Pu Khou Stream and Nang Stream in Vietnam.

From the moment his remains touched down at T.F. Green Airport, Mellor's home state of Rhode Island honored him. The funeral home placed U.S. Air Force emblems on his hearse. The processional was provided a full escort from Patriot Guard Riders, as well as local and state police. Police officers saluted at every intersection. Local motorists pulled to the side of the road, and many stepped out of their cars to pay their respects as the processional passed. Children and teenagers from local middle and high schools lined the roadways to solemnly watch. Mellor had died before many of their parents were born.



Members of the Patriot Honor Guard from Hanscom Air Force Base, Massachusetts, carry the remains of U.S. Air Force Colonel Fredric Mellor as he is laid to rest at Rhode Island Veterans Memorial Cemetery on September 28, 2018. (Courtesy of the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency)

Finally, the procession arrived at Veterans Memorial Cemetery in Exeter, Rhode Island. Veterans stood in the rain and saluted. They included young members of Mellor's Air Force unit who had traveled from Nebraska to pay their respects. The family were overwhelmed by the outpouring of support. One cousin recalled, "Freddie would have liked this."

More than 53 years following his death, Fredric Mellor's journey home was complete. He was laid to rest with full military honors.

On October 11, 2018, the city of Cranston dedicated a plaque to Fredric Mellor on its MIA Vietnam War Memorial. His status on the memorial was changed from "missing" to "killed in action."

SERGEANT FIRST CLASS WILLIAM BOYLE, UNACCOUNTED-FOR

On or about March 3, 1970, Mrs. Mary J. Rippe received a telegram from Western Union. It stated:

The Secretary of the Army has asked me to inform you that your son, Sergeant First Class William Boyle has been reported missing in action in South East Asia since 28 February 1970. He was last seen as a passenger on a military aircraft on a military mission when the aircraft was fired upon by a hostile ground force, crashed and burned. Search is in progress. You will be promptly advised when further information is received. In order to protect any information that might be used to your son's detriment, your cooperation is requested in making public only information concerning his name, rank, service number, and date of birth. Please accept my deepest sympathy during this most trying period.

Boyle was aboard a CH-34 Choctaw helicopter that took off to conduct a resupply/medical evacuation in Attapeu Province, Laos. Boyle had just finished loading the injured onto the aircraft when it was hit by an enemy rocket. The explosion cut the helicopter in two, separating the pilots from the crew. The pilot and copilot successfully escaped the aircraft. The rear half absorbed the bulk of the explosion and caught fire. Boyle and the wounded were in this portion when the rocket struck.

On or about April 22, 1970, Mary Rippe received a second telegram from Western Union. This telegram informed her that a "board of officers convened in Vietnam which carefully investigated the circumstances

surrounding [her son's] missing status. The crash was witnessed by those who knew your son and they immediately conducted a search of the area as soon as the wreckage had cooled enough." The soldiers who bore witness to the explosion knew Boyle. They diligently searched for him. Yet they also knew he could not have survived the explosion and subsequent flames. Boyle's remains could not be found.

In October 1995, a recovery team was dispatched to Laos to search the crash site but was unable to find his remains. His mother died two years later.

Service Member **SFC WILLIAM BOYLE** CHINA Return to Service Member Profiles

Conflict **VIETNAM WAR**
Service **UNITED STATES ARMY**
Status **Unaccounted For**



SFC WILLIAM BOYLE
Unit SDA CCC 5TH SFG
Country of Loss
Lose
Home of Record PA

On February 28, 1970, a CH-34 Choctaw tail number 55-4324, call sign "King Bee" took off on a resupply/medical evacuation mission in Attapeu Province, Laos. While picking up wounded personnel in the vicinity of GCY YB 586 188, the aircraft was hit by an enemy rocket, causing it to explode and catch fire. The crash site was later thoroughly examined, but no remains could be located or identified.

Sergeant First Class William Boyle, who joined the U.S. Army from Pennsylvania, was a member of the 5th Special Forces Group. He was a passenger aboard the Choctaw during its mission, and had just finished loading injured troops onto the aircraft when it was hit on February 28, 1970, and was thought to have been trapped in the wreckage. Attempts to identify his remains have been unsuccessful. Today, Sergeant First Class Boyle is memorialized on the Courts of the Missing at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific.

Based on all information available, DPAA assessed the individual's case to be in the analytical category of Active Pursuit.

If you are a family member of this serviceman, DPAA can provide you with additional information and analysis of your case. Please contact your casualty office representative.

The DPAA's page for U.S. Army Sergeant First Class William Boyle. Note his status notated above. (Courtesy of the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency)

William Boyle has a memorial marker in his memory at Knowlton Cemetery, Tioga County, Pennsylvania. A bridge over Pine Creek in Watrous, Pennsylvania is named for him. He is listed as unaccounted-for.

CONCLUSION

The legacies of the mission to account as fully as possible for unreturned Vietnam War personnel lost in Southeast Asia may best be understood by examining what the Nation lost and what it has reclaimed. In working together, civilians and the U.S. Government have accomplished a great deal. They made the effort to account as fully as possible for those captured, missing, and unaccounted-for a matter of highest national priority within Federal policy; they established and maintained formal diplomatic relations with former adversaries; they built Federal agencies, programs, and advanced the science of recovering and identifying remains of those lost serving our country; they institutionalized the accounting mission, thus signaling all who serve today and will serve in the future that the Nation and its people will not abandon them if captured, missing, killed, and not recovered at the time of loss.

These accomplishments are significant; yet there is much still to be done and time is of the essence. Soil and weather conditions in Southeast Asia are causing rapid deterioration of the remains of more than 1,500 unaccounted-for personnel. Dr. Timothy McMahon, director of DoD DNA Operations at the Armed Forces Medical Examiner System, concluded, "The acidic nature of the soil in Vietnam has damaged the DNA within the remaining long bones and teeth, making it necessary for AFMES to develop new forensic testing methods as traditional testing methods will not work."

The Nation must continue to put forth this effort. Without it, the United States may never find those lost in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War.

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