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Korean War POW/MIA Accounting Efforts

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Cover Image: UN Command Chaplain U.S. Army Col. Sam Lee performs a blessing over 55 cases of remains returned by North Korea at Osan Air Base on July 27, 2018. Photo by Quince Lanford/U.S. Army.

Introduction

As of December 2018, 7,675 U.S. military personnel who fought in the Korean War remain “unaccounted for,” a term used to describe those still captive or missing at the conclusion of hostilities, or those killed in action whose remains have not been located, recovered, and identified.¹ The U.S. military estimates that 5,300 of these service members were lost in North Korea.²

The U.S. and North Korea have periodically engaged in efforts to repatriate the remains of these unaccounted for service members. These efforts have typically been characterized as a humanitarian confidence-building measure and a precursor to the potential normalization of U.S.-DPRK relations. From 1990-1994, North Korea repatriated the remains of U.S. service members it had unilaterally recovered, and in 1996 the U.S. Department of Defense began sending teams into North Korea to conduct joint recovery missions. However, the U.S. suspended these joint operations in 2005, and they have not subsequently resumed.

In the June 2018 Singapore Declaration, the U.S. and North Korea committed “to recovering POW/MIA remains, including the immediate repatriation of those already identified.” This has led to North Korea’s unilateral repatriation of 55 boxes of remains, and to the prospect of additional unilateral turnovers or joint recovery mission taking place as U.S.-DPRK dialogue continues.

Not all of the remains turned over to U.S. custody have been identified. The technical process of identifying remains is complex, and this challenge has been compounded by several factors including the commingled state of the remains unilaterally repatriated by North Korea. However, new advances in the application of DNA and forensic technology have made possible the identification of previously unidentifiable remains, and efforts to identify the remains in U.S. custody are ongoing.

In addition to its efforts to repatriate and identify remains from North Korea, the Defense Department has also conducted joint recovery activities or archival research with South Korea, China, and Russia in order to account for personnel from the Korean War.

Post-Armistice Repatriations

The possibility that some U.S. POWs were not repatriated by following the end of hostilities in the Korean War has been a sensitive and controversial subject. In 1951, early in the Armistice negotiation process, the North Koreans and Chinese reported that they were holding 3,198 Americans captive, a number below U.S. expectations given the total number of personnel missing in action.³ As Armistice negotiations picked up in April and May 1953, the two sides exchanged sick and wounded prisoners, including 149 Americans, in “Operation Little Switch.” A further 3,313 Americans were released in August 1953 in “Operation Big Switch” after the

Armistice was signed. At the time, Gen. Mark Clark, commander of the UN Command in Korea, believed more American prisoners remained under North Korean and Chinese control.⁴

In 1954, under the terms of the Armistice Agreement, North Korea returned over 4,000 sets of remains to the United Nations Command during “Operation Glory”; approximately 2,944 of these remains were believed to be American. The U.S. military attempted to identify all remains turned over by North Korea as well as those recovered from South Korea; however, 867 sets of remains, including 416 sets of remains that had been turned over in Operation Glory, could not be identified and were ultimately declared “unknown.” At the close of Operation Glory, approximately 8,100 U.S. military personnel remained unaccounted for.

The unknown remains from the Korean War were buried in the National Memorial Cemetery in Hawaii, known as “The Punch Bowl.”⁵ One set of remains was later transferred to Arlington National Cemetery and interred in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. All of these Unknowns were treated with a formaldehyde powder, which complicated efforts decades later to identify them through DNA testing. However, recent advances in DNA technology and other forensics have increased the prospect of identifying many of these remains.⁶

The issue of unaccounted-for U.S. POW/MIAs from the Korean War came under renewed public scrutiny during the 1990s, due in part to the activism of family members and POW/MIA advocacy organizations. At a 1992 Senate hearing, several researchers testified that some U.S. POWs may have been transported to the territory of China or the Soviet Union, but gave conflicting accounts as to how many Americans may have been transferred.⁷ The Eisenhower administration had reportedly accepted advice not to publicize the transfer of POWs, both to spare the families pain and to avoid a call for a resumption of military action. Declassified Pentagon documents indicate that as many as 388 Americans may have been held as POWs in North Korea and not repatriated, or that their deaths in custody were not reported.⁸

According to the Department of Defense, the U.S. has investigated “all credible reports” concerning live American POWs in North Korea, and North Korean defectors arriving in the South have been routinely asked for information about this topic. However, the Defense Department states that “this effort has produced no useful information” concerning live Americans, and that most reports of live Americans in North Korea have concerned a handful of known U.S. defectors.⁹

Remains Recovery Operations in North Korea

As the U.S. and North Korea began negotiations over the North Korean nuclear issue and the normalization of relations in the early 1990s, progress in recovering American military personnel remains was included as one of the U.S. pre-conditions for improved relations.¹⁰ Between 1990 and 1994, North Korea turned over to the United States 208 boxes of remains that it had recovered unilaterally. Known colloquially as the “K208,” these boxes contained commingled

remains of an estimated 400 deceased service members. The commingling and poor condition of these remains has made identification challenging, but through a sustained effort the U.S. has identified 182 individuals to date from this group.¹¹

In 1993, Washington and Pyongyang signed an agreement under which U.S. military personnel would enter North Korea to undertake remains recovery missions.¹² Between 1996 and 2005, the U.S. and DPRK conducted thirty-three joint investigations, leading to the recovery of approximately 220 sets of remains.¹³ The Defense Department suspended these missions in 2005, officially because of concerns regarding the safety of U.S. troops.¹⁴ Unease over U.S. payments related to recovery operations may have also contributed to this decision – from 1996 to 2005 the U.S. provided North Korea with over \$20 million for its assistance with these operations, nominally to cover costs incurred.¹⁵ In 2007, North Korea repatriated the remains of an additional seven U.S. military personnel, in conjunction with the arrival in Pyongyang of an unofficial U.S. delegation headed by New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson.¹⁶

The remains recovery issue was raised again during the Obama administration, but without tangible results. In October 2011, representatives from the U.S. and North Korea met in Bangkok to discuss the resumption of remains recovery operations in the DPRK. These missions were scheduled to resume in April 2012, but following the collapse of the “Leap Day Agreement” on North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs, the U.S. announced that the planned remains recovery operation had been cancelled. The Defense Department also indicated that the operation did not take place because North Korea, citing U.S.-South Korean joint military exercises, had yet to implement the agreed-upon procedures.¹⁷ In October 2014, the North Korean military raised the issue again in a statement warning that American service members’ remains were being “carried away en masse due to construction projects of hydro-power stations, land rezoning and other gigantic nature-remaking projects, flood damage, etc...”¹⁸ In September 2016, North Korean officials relayed an offer to discuss the repatriation of the remains of about 200 deceased service members to the U.S.; however, the Obama administration did not pursue this offer in its remaining time in office.¹⁹

During their June 2018 summit meeting in Singapore, President Donald Trump and Chairman Kim Jong Un committed “to recovering POW/MIA remains, including the immediate repatriation of those already identified,” as the fourth point in their joint statement. In July 2018, North Korea repatriated 55 boxes of remains in accordance with this commitment, with a U.S. Air Force C-17 aircraft flying to Wonsan, North Korea to retrieve them. The U.S. and North Korea have subsequently held general officer-level talks on the potential return of additional remains and resumption of joint recovery operations.²⁰

Additionally, during South Korean President Moon Jae-in’s September 2018 summit meeting in Pyongyang, the two Koreas agreed to a joint operation to demine and recover remains within a portion of the Demilitarized Zone separating the two Koreas. The ROK Ministry of Defense estimates that the remains of 200 South Korean soldiers, 100 American and French soldiers, and

an unspecified number of North Korean and Chinese soldiers are buried at the site.²¹ The unrecovered remains of just over 1,000 U.S. service members are believed to be within the DMZ or in its immediate vicinity.²²

Remains Identification

The pace of the identification of recovered remains (from the Korean War as well as other conflicts) has been a key concern for veterans, family members, and some elected officials in Congress. In years past, the number of annual identifications was relatively limited, due to technological barriers, resource constraints, and the fragmented nature of the Defense Department agencies responsible for various aspects of the remains recovery and identification mission. From 2004 through 2009, the various Defense agencies responsible for remains recovery and identification completed an average of 72 identifications annually.²³ However, the development of new technologies as well as efforts to address these structural challenges has led to a significant increase in the rate of annual identifications.

The U.S. Congress has played an important role in facilitating reform within the POW/MIA accounting community. In 2009, Congress mandated that the Defense Department provide “sufficient resources to ensure that at least 200 missing persons are accounted for under the [POW/MIA accounting] program annually by 2015.”²⁴ In 2013, a Government Accountability Office report indicated that the Defense Department organizations responsible for accounting for missing personnel were “undermined by longstanding leadership weaknesses and a fragmented organizational structure.”²⁵ Subsequent pressure from Congress led to a comprehensive internal review of this community’s structure and practices, as well as legislation authorizing its consolidation into a single agency with the mission of accounting for and identifying missing service personnel.²⁶

The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) was formally established in early 2015, consolidating the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC), Defense Prisoner of War Missing Personnel Office (DPMO), and the Life Sciences Equipment Laboratory (LSEL). Since its formation, DPAA has increased the number of accounted for each year. In 2017, DPAA accounted for 183 missing personnel, and as of December 12, has accounted for another 199 in 2018. DPAA continues to leverage the resources and capabilities of the entire accounting community to increase the pace and scope of future operations.

Joint Field Activities and Archival Research in South Korea, China, and Russia

In addition to efforts to repatriate and identify remains from North Korea, the DPAA and its predecessor agencies have conducted operations to recover the remains of Korean War service members in South Korea and China. Additionally, since the 1990s the U.S. has taken steps to access archival records from China and Russia that may contain information about the fate of missing service personnel from the Korean War and other conflicts. According to DPAA Director

Kelly McKeague, even though U.S. relations with China and Russia may be tense, both countries “view POW/MIA cooperation as their humanitarian duty.”²⁷

South Korea From 1951-1956, U.S. Army Graves Registration teams searched battlefields in South Korea for the remains of U.S. service members, but were unable to recover all of those unaccounted for. With support from U.S. Forces Korea and the South Korean government, the DPAA continues to conduct annual investigation missions in South Korea to locate sites that may contain the remains of missing U.S. service members. Recovery missions at times result in the discovery of remains or personal effects. The DPAA estimates that about 950 unrecovered remains of U.S. personnel from the Korean War are located in South Korea. Since 1982, over 25 sets of remains from South Korea have been recovered and 17 identified.²⁸

China The U.S. has conducted research, investigation, and recovery operations in China involving aircraft crash sites from the Vietnam War, World War II, the Korean War, and the Cold War; these missions continue today.²⁹ Fewer than 20 unrecovered Korean War-era remains are believed to be located in China. Beijing last permitted the Defense Department to conduct recovery operations for Korean War-era remains in China in 2011 for an aircraft crash site which resulted in no recovered remains. In 2014, China conducted its own unilateral recovery operation that resulted in the return of remains believed to be associated with an unaccounted-for American.

Chinese military archives are believed to contain information about unaccounted-for American POWs, as Chinese forces typically administered POW camps in North Korea during the Korean War. After years of negotiation on access to Chinese military archives, the Defense Department and the Archives Department of China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) signed an agreement in February 2008 under which Chinese archivists would review classified documents on U.S. POW/MIAs from the Korean War and provide relevant information to the United States. While progress under this agreement has been slow, it has nonetheless yielded some new information, and has been periodically renewed.³⁰ In July 2018, a DPAA delegation led by Director Kelly McKeague visited Beijing and met with senior leaders of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the PLA Archives Bureau to bolster cooperation between the United States and China on the accounting mission.

Russia In 1992, the U.S. and Russia established a Joint Commission on POW/MIAs (USRJC) to provide a forum for both nations to seek information about their missing service personnel. The DPAA has stated that information obtained from this forum has clarified the circumstances of 336 Korean War personnel who were unaccounted for.³¹

Through the Joint Commission, U.S. analysts have been able to access Russian government archives and to interview Soviet veterans of the Korean War and other conflicts. In 2006, this initiative began to fray, with Russia disbanding its side of the USRJC and suspending U.S. archival access. However, U.S. President Obama and Russian President Medvedev revitalized the work of the USRJC in 2009, reaffirming their respective countries’ commitment to

strengthening bilateral cooperation on POW/MIA issues. The most recent Russian Presidential Decree on the USRJC, issued in 2014, appointed General-Colonel (retired) Valeriy Vostrotin as the Chairman of the Commission's Russian side. Retired Air Force General Robert Foglesong has served as Chairman of the U.S. side since 2006.

In 2017, following President Vladimir Putin's demand that U.S. diplomatic missions in Russia reduce their staff by 755 people, DPAA's Joint Commission Support Division – the logistical and research support component to the U.S. side of the USRJC – lost its positions within the U.S. Embassy in Moscow. However, DPAA retains a full complement of staff at its Washington headquarters and has continued to support the USRJC. Additionally, DPAA continues seeking ways to resume and expand access to and conduct research in Russian archives concerning the fate of unaccounted-for personnel. For example, DPAA is pursuing a contract vehicle to hire experienced Russian researchers to conduct substantive archival research, including through seeking higher-level authorization for declassification and unilateral provision of sensitive intelligence and military records of the former Soviet Union.

¹ The author expresses his appreciation to several Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) staff members who provided helpful comments and information for this Issue Brief. Any errors, however, remain entirely his own.

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