The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency: Bringing Our Nation's Heroes Home

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Statement of

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With Respect To

The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency: Bringing Our Nation's Heroes Home

WASHINGTON, D.C.

Chairman Lynch, Ranking Member Hice, and members of the subcommittee, on behalf of the men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) and its Auxiliary, thank you for the opportunity to provide remarks regarding our partnership with the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) and its noble mission to account as fully as possible for America's Veterans unreturned from our nation's past wars and conflicts.

Currently, 1,587 from the Vietnam War, 7606 from the Korean War, 126 from the Cold War and 72, 641 from World War II, for a total of 81,960 US servicemen and civilians, are still missing in action, 75 percent of whom are located in the Indo-Pacific Region, and more than 41,000 are assessed as being lost at sea during World War II. Since 1929, the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) has been intimately involved in the Full Accounting Mission. Stemming from priority raised in 1982, the focus was accounting for Vietnam War missing, but it is now the mission of the DPAA to recover missing personnel listed as prisoner of war (POW) or missing in action (MIA), from past wars and conflicts in countries around the world. Within that mission, DPAA coordinates with countries and municipalities worldwide to recover missing US personnel.

Our nation's ability to bring home our fallen heroes is a national commitment, but is extremely limited by the lack of funding and the dwindling numbers of eyewitnesses who can provide information useful in identifying possible incident sites, among other factors. That is why the VFW has been partnering with DPAA and its predecessor organizations to work with foreign governments to help American researchers gain access to foreign military officials and archives and past battlefields. Since 1991, the VFW is the only veterans service organization to return to Southeast Asia, Russia, and China, and has made it our goal to not rest until we achieve the fullest possible accounting of all missing American military and civilian personnel from all past wars.

The process to bring a missing service member home often takes years and requires predictable funding. Before a field team is deployed to a potential site, highly trained specialists have to examine a counterpart nation's archives, investigate leads in Last Known Alive cases, and interview counterpart-nation military and civilian officials, as well as local citizens, who may have relevant information about a particular region or battle. Investigative Teams will follow up on leads through interviewing potential witnesses, conducting on-site reconnaissance, and surveying terrain for anomalies, as well as safety and logistical concerns.

Once a site has been located, recovery teams, which may include intelligence specialists, archaeologists, anthropologists and other specialists, are deployed to conduct field operations. Each mission is unique, but there are certain processes each field operation has in common. Depending on the location and methods necessary on-site, the standard field recovery missions last 35 to 60 days. Recovery sites can be as small as a few meters for individual burials to areas exceeding the size of a football field for aircraft crashes. When artifacts or remains are located, they are transported to DPAA's main Laboratory at Joint

Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam in Hawaii, where artifacts and possible remains are analyzed and DNA testing is conducted.

DPAA has the largest, most diverse, and admired skeletal identification laboratory in the world and is staffed by more than 30 anthropologists, archaeologists, and forensic odonatologists. Due to DPAA's efforts, 218 Americans were identified and accounted for in fiscal year 2018. However, government budgetary uncertainty prevented DPAA from identifying more fallen heroes. During a government shutdown, DPAA personnel are furloughed and forced to leave an incident site, which results in delays.

The VFW thanks Chairman Lynch for introducing H.R. 4879, *Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency Support Act*, which would exempt DPAA employees who are conducting accounting missions from being furloughed in the event of a government shutdown. The VFW urges Congress to consider and pass this important legislation as soon as possible. Congress and the White House must provide DPAA, as well as its supporting agencies, full mission funding and personnel staffing because it is the right thing to do for our missing and unaccounted-for service members and their families.

Republic of Korea

The VFW was also the only organization to engage with President Trump regarding the return of Korean War remains prior to his Singapore Summit last year. Our actions resulted in the transfer of 55 boxes of remains by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), and opened the door for Joint Field Activities to resume in North Korea in the near future. Some see DPRK's decision to do so as nothing more than an empty gesture or one meant to only placate. However, to the families of the 5,200 service members who never came home from the Korean War, those boxes represent hope and closure.

That is why the VFW asked our members and supporters to provide DNA samples to DPAA so it can continue to identify the services members who were returned home in the 55 boxes. The VFW urges Congress to amplify our call-to-action and also provide DPAA the necessary resources to expand recovery operations into North Korea and to support the remains recovery mission in DPRK.

Locating, identifying, and recovering the remains of those who paid the ultimate sacrifice in the service of our country from conflicts spanning nearly 80 years is a difficult and hazardous mission, but it is one of the most important obligations that we have as a grateful nation. It is a promise to those serving in uniform today that no matter what, we will travel to the ends of the Earth to return you home to your families. As a veteran who served in Korea, I am honored to have played a role in reuniting fallen veterans, whose remains left behind enemy lines in North Korea, with their loved ones.

U.S.-Russia Joint Commission

Just as we have sent VFW senior leadership to Southeast Asia every year since 1991, so too has our leadership visited Russia since 2004 to highlight the importance of DPAA's mission on a vet-to-vet level. Further, at the invitation of the U.S. Co-Chairman of the U.S.-Russia Joint Commission on POW/MIAs (USRJC), and with the concurrence of the Russian Co-Chairman, the VFW was invited to participate as an observer to the XXI Plenum of the Commission in Moscow, Russia, November 7-11, 2017.

The USRJC was established in 1992 by President George H. W. Bush and Russian President Boris Yeltsin. Its purpose is to determine the fates of missing and unaccounted-for American and Soviet service members from World War II, the Korean War, the Cold War, and Vietnam, as well as unaccounted-for Russians from their 10-year war in Afghanistan.

After an 11-year break, the 21st plenum was the second consecutive meeting to be held since the sessions resumed in Washington, D.C. Through most of the interim years, VFW senior leadership had traveled to Moscow to urge the Russian government to re-establish their side of the Commission. We had met with Russian veterans, members of their Duma, Federation Council, and Ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs to solicit their assistance and commitment to this humanitarian mission. I and my VFW colleagues were pleased to host the Joint Commission to a reception at the conclusion of the Joint Commission's 22nd Plenum last November. We are also pleased the Commission is now meeting on a more regular basis.

Vietnam

The VFW has and will continue to support the DPAA efforts to locate the 1,587 Americans who are still missing from the Vietnam War. The challenges DPAA faces in Vietnam include underwater recoveries, weather, terrain, economic development, soil acidity, and aging witnesses. Its goal is to increase the underwater investigations, identify new strategic partners, gain more access to the Vietnamese National Archives for case research, and cultivate new leads from American veterans of the Vietnam War.

The VFW has played a vital role in advancing the POW/MIA missions. Last July, during the 120th VFW National Convention in Orlando, Florida, I asked Vietnam veterans to send in documents that might help the Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam to determine the locations of burial sites in order to find their estimated 300,000 missing soldiers, and personal effects that might help bring comfort to their families.

Our VFW members and their families answered the call. On October 25, 2019, the VFW provided documents, artifacts, and personal effects to DPAA, which had the locations of battlefields and grave sites of Vietnamese soldiers. Returning these items to the Vietnamese government has helped improve the relationship with the United States. This display of diplomacy will not only help in our efforts to reach our true goal and promise to our families affected by the Vietnam War, but help us gain access to future recovery sites. Additionally, the VFW strongly believes that by maintaining a vet-to-vet relationship with Southeast Asian governments from a non-bureaucratic and non-political perspective plays a critical role in conducting humanitarian and recovery missions.

VFW senior leaders have traveled back to Vietnam every year since 1991 to help DPAA locate missing and unaccounted-for service members. During our trip last March, the VFW linked up with the U.S. Army Research and Investigation Team and the deputy commander of the Marine Corps and staff to visit active recovery sites. The VFW also met with the Defense Attache' and U.S. Ambassador Dan Kritenbrink at the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi to discuss ways the U.S. is rebuilding our relationship with Vietnam. One such way has been helping to clean up former Agent Orange sites around the country, which has been seen by the Vietnamese as a very positive development.

As a result of such efforts, the perception of America by the Vietnamese people has

improved. However, the Vietnamese government has expressed concern over China's growing military and economic influences in Southeast Asia. Vietnam is the fastest-growing economy in Southeast Asia and tourism is big –– as is U.S. investments. The Vietnamese population is young and well- educated, and transportation, energy, and information technology are growing. Therefore, the U.S. must continue to improve its relationship with Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries.

China

In 2017, the VFW traveled to China, where we joined the U.S. Army Attaché. We worked with six members of the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) Office of International Military Cooperation and the PLA archives to advance the DPAA mission of identifying and returning home the remains of WWII and Korean War veterans.

Archival cooperation began in 2008, which not coincidentally is when the VFW began adding China to its annual MIA fact-finding mission itinerary. Chinese military officials claim more than 100,000 documents have been searched, which resulted in more than 50 valuable clues being passed to U.S. researchers. In conjunction, the head of the North American and Oceania Bureau, People's Liberation Army's Office of International Military Cooperation, asked if the U.S. could provide family reference samples (DNA) of our missing near the North Korean/Chinese border to expedite their own recovery efforts.

China has always searched for American MIAs since we were allies during World War II. Everyone recognizes that returning the fallen to their families is a humanitarian, not political, mission. For the VFW, it is important the MIA mission is not impacted by political events between our two countries. We also laud the Chinese government for creating a special office with 16 officers and professionals to help with the DPAA mission in China.

With more than 83,000 U.S. service members still unaccounted-for globally, Congress must support full mission funding and personnel staffing for DPAA, as well as its supporting agencies, such as the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory and the military service casualty offices. The fullest possible Accounting Mission remains a top priority for the VFW and we will not rest until we achieve all possible missing American military service members brought home.

The VFW knows supporting this mission is something we can all agree on, and it is why we urge Congress to ensure this important mission can continue in perpetuity, and regardless of any lapse in government funding. It is insufferable that recovery missions or Joint-Field Activities, which take an enormous amount of time, energy and resources to plan and must be conducted during certain times of the year, are suspended simply because Congress cannot do its job. To that end, I once again plead for your support in passing H.R. 4879, *Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency Support Act*, which would exempt DPAA employees who are conducting recovery missions from being furloughed in the event of a government shutdown.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I am happy to answer any questions you or the members of the subcommittee may have.