'Until They Are Home'

COURTESY JPAC

Behind the Doors at JPAC

The dedicated staff at the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) in Hawaii seeks resolution of the fate of America's missing in action and provides families with final closure. Part one of this five-part series gives an overview of the command today and the tasks it faces.

BY ROBERT WIDENER

Among America's WWI doughboys in the Second Battle of the Marne was Pvt. Francis Lupo of Cincinnati. The 23-year-old, along with fellow soldiers of E Co., 18th Inf., 1st Inf. Div., engaged the Germans in fighting near the town of Soissons, France. On July 18, 1918, at the end of that day's fighting, Lupo was reported missing. No witness report or circumstances of his loss appear in any records. Like other soldiers in that battle, he had just simply vanished.

Thirty-six years later and halfway around the world, a Civil Air Transport C-119 piloted by two Americans, James B. McGovern and Wallace A. Buford, attempted to resupply a besieged French garrison during the battle of Dien Bien Phu in the French-Indochina War.

On May 6, 1954, flak from a Viet Minh shell crippled the plane. McGovern struggled to keep the aircraft aloft, but after 40 minutes, it crashed short of an emergency landing strip near Ban Sot, Laos. Only two of the five crew men (French) survived the fiery impact. Feared dead, McGovern and Buford were among America's first MIAs in Southeast Asia.

These two seemingly unconnected events found the spotlight in 2006 when the Central Identification Lab (CIL) at the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Com-

Above: A recovery team in Tibet in 2004. Top Row: Sgt. Ricardo Morales, Master Sgt. Rocky Keohuhu-Bolor, Staff Sgt. Michael Harris, Maj. Karl Larsen, Staff Sgt. Gabriel Serna, Sgt. 1st Class Michael Swam, Mr. Mark Gilbertson, Capt. Geoff Kent, Dr. Andy Tyrrell. Bottom Row: Cpl. Yu Ng, Sgt. Chris Behn, Staff Sgt. Alfred Castro, Staff Sgt. Gary Beemster.

mand (JPAC) in Hawaii, identified the remains of both Lupo and McGovern. (Buford's remains have yet to be discovered.) The cases brought much-heralded attention to JPAC's efforts in recovering remains and identifying America's missing in action.

Lupo, whose remains were discovered in 2003, became the first MIA from WWI to be identified. McGovern's identification involved a complex DNA procedure. His remains were found in 2002.

The solution in providing the final chapter to these cases, and so many more of the 88,000 still missing from America's wars, lies along many lines of cooperation between Department of Defense (DoD) offices, the service branches and especially, the dedicated personnel behind the doors at JPAC, where the motto "Until They Are Home" truly resides in each person's heart.

JPAC History and Structure

Given the high-tech world we live in today, the recovery and identification work at JPAC knows few boundaries. It owes its present state, though, to an evolution through the years from earlier agencies that had one common quest—return America's missing heroes to their families. A quick review of its transformation also shows the relentless support a deeply dedicated nation has put toward that goal.

At the end of the Vietnam War in January 1973, provisions in the Paris Peace Accords led to the creation of the Joint Casualty Resolution Center (JCRC). Headquartered in Thailand, it searched for and recovered remains of Americans missing in action. JCRC worked in concert with the newly formed Central Identification Laboratory, Thailand (CIL-THAI), a relocated U.S. mortuary that had handled the remains and identification of Americans killed during the war.

By 1976, a downsizing of U.S. forces in Thailand classified CIL-THAI and JCRC personnel as military, rather than humanitarian. As a result, the operations were forced to relocate. Hawaii was chosen as the new home, and the lab name thus changed to CILHI. At the same time, CILHI's mission was broadened to include the identification of service members killed in Korea, WWII and recent operations.

JCRC continued operation until 1992 when it became Joint Task Force-Full Accounting (JTF-FA). The change was partly due to an increased interest from the U.S. government as well as the public in MIA recovery. More important, though, Southeast Asian countries were showing an increased willingness to allow access to records, files and witnesses concerning unaccounted-for Americans.

Finally, in 2002, DoD concluded that POW/MIA accounting efforts would best be served by combining JTF-FA and CILHI. On Oct. 1, 2003, the two agencies merged and were renamed JPAC.

Brig. Gen. Michael Flowers, a 28-year Army veteran, directs JPAC's 425 military and civilian personnel based at Hickam Air Base and nearby Camp H.M. Smith in Hawaii. Assisting Flowers is Deputy Commander Johnie Webb, a former commander of CILHI from 1982-1993. Webb brings a long history of involvement in POW/MIA accounting, beginning in 1975 as a search-and-recovery team leader.

The overall structure of JPAC is divided into four sections: command and support, search and recovery operations, casualty data analysis and the laboratory. Staff and personnel are a mixture of service members from the different branches, and professional civilians who provide expertise in crucial areas, such as dentistry, anthropology and historical research.

According to Webb, the most important change through the years has been replacing morticians with scientists in the lab.

"When I originally took command, the holdover from the Vietnam War was using morticians to make the identifications," said Webb. "We needed to bring key scientific staff on board to do the work that needed to be done."

Currently, the lab has 23 anthropologists, four archeologists and three dentists on staff.

JPAC's operations extend overseas, as well. It maintains three detachments in Southeast Asia to assist with command, logistics and valuable in-country support during field operations. These are located in Bangkok, Thailand; Hanoi, Vietnam; and Vientiane, Laos. A fourth detachment at Camp H.M. Smith is responsible for recovery team personnel when they're not deployed.

Operating under U.S. Pacific Com-

PHOTO BY ROBERT WIDENER / VFW

Anthropologist Dr. Derek Bendix studies remains in the Central Identification Lab (CIL) at JPAC. The largest forensics lab in the world, CIL employs 30 anthropologists, archeologists and dentists. It completes an average of two identifications each week.

Accounting for the Missing by War

Figures for the Vietnam War are current as of Feb. 15, 2007; all others are as of Sept. 9, 2006

WAR AND GEOGRAPHIC AREA	CURRENT TOTAL UNACCOUNTED FOR	UNKNOWNS BURIED AT NATIONAL CEMETERIES	BURIAL AT SEA/ MISSING BURIED OR LOST AT SEA	NO FURTHER PURSUIT OVER LAND	RECOVERIES AT JPAC-CIL TO BE IDENTIFIED[1]	POSSIBLY RECOVERABLE
Vietnam War						
Cambodia	54	0	0	4	11	39
Laos	359	0	0	39	21	292
Vietnam	1,367	0	394	217	90	665
China	7	0	3	0	0	4
Cold War	125	0	104	1	0	20
Korean War						
North Korea	5,561	414	292	N/A	480-580	4,580
South Korea	980	451	0	N/A	0	875
WWII						
Pacific	45,120[2]	8,600 (Not broken out geographically)	6,318[3] (Not broken out geographically)	N/A	576-768 (Not broken out geographically)	11,386[4]
China, Burma, India	3,585			N/A		949[4]
Europe	21,047			N/A		4,554[4]
Americas	3,166			N/A		2,087[4]
Worldwide	73,291[5]			N/A		18,976[4]

[1] Includes co-mingled remains.
[2] Estimates of WWII unaccounted-for by theater of operations are projections based on the geographic distribution of non-recovered servicemen listed by the American Graves Registration Service Roster of Remains not Recovered or Identified. Numbers are refined as new records are reviewed.
[3] WWII number includes only those confirmed "buried at sea" not all lost at sea.
[4] Estimates are based on the geographic distribution of WWII servicemen recovered and identified between 1978-2006.
[5] The total number of current WWII unaccounted-for is calculated by subtracting identifications from 1978-2006 (376) plus the verified number of servicemen buried at sea (6,318) from the total number of men listed as non-recovered on the 1983 Department of Army Rosters of the Dead for All Services (79,985).

Note: Not included are three unaccounted-for from the Persian Gulf War; USN Capt. Michael Speicher is "missing-captured', and USN Cmdrs. Barry Cook and Robert Dwyer are "KIA, body not recovered." Also, the 1986 Libya attack, *Operation El Dorado Canyon,* has one MIA, USAF Capt. Paul Lorence.

Source: Defense Prisoner of War/Missing Personnel Office

mand, JPAC depends on direct assistance from other DoD offices to complete its mission.

The Defense Prisoner of War/Missing Personnel Office (DPMO) in Washington, D.C., is responsible for policy and oversight of U.S. POW/MIA efforts. DPMO communicates with other U.S. agencies and the public, especially families, on overall progress. In addition to other planning and research, it also coordinates talks with countries where missions are proposed, helping to pave the way for JPAC to work out final details.

The Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory (AFDIL) in Rockville, Md., conducts DNA analysis. CIL sends samples from skeletal remains to AFDIL for DNA processing, then evaluates the results.

The Life Sciences Equipment Laboratory (LSEL) at Brooks Air Base in Texas analyzes some of the artifacts recovered during field operations. Its experts can tell, for example, from what plane a piece of glass may have come, or determine the origin of a patch of fabric.

Also playing an essential role are the military service branches. Soldiers, Marines, airmen and Navy personnel, most with combat experience and many who are recently from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, can volunteer for JPAC as one of their rotated duty stations. The mixture of the different branches creates a joint military force, giving the service members a unique opportunity to work as a team.

The casualty offices at the branches also work closely with JPAC, DPMO and AFDIL, but primarily serve as a liaison to families of the missing. They provide updated information on particular missions, serve as conduits to and from other agencies and coordinate DNA family reference samples.

As the years have progressed, so have the procedures and communication roles between the agencies and JPAC. The resulting finely honed system enables it to operate smoothly in not only resolving the fate of the missing, but more important, giving closure to the families who have waited so long for answers.

Mission Priorities

When JPAC was formed in 2003, the transition plan dictated that a certain number of joint field activities (JFA) be conducted each year. The missions are divided between Southeast Asia—which includes Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand—and worldwide, which sends teams to such places as Europe, South Korea, China and even New Guinea.

Southeast Asia missions are mainly focused on the Vietnam War, while those worldwide cover losses that occurred during WWI, WWII, Korea, the Cold War and other operations. JPAC follows a 10-5-10 formula in breaking down the JFAs: 10 in Southeast Asia, 5 in Korea and 10 worldwide.

Each JFA contains multiple search-and-recovery operations that can last 30-45 days each. For instance, in fiscal year 2007, which began on Oct. 1, 2006,

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one JFA in Southeast Asia includes four recovery, one investigative, one underwater search and one combination investigative/recovery teams.

Flowers follows established policy and prioritizes missions by the following criteria, not necessarily in this order:

- *Last known alive:* This refers to the point that an MIA was last seen alive.
- *Existing site:* Recovery operations sometimes require more than one visit, or remains were found at the end of an operation.
- *Developments in countries:* A nation may be planning construction in an area where MIAs may be located.
- *Weather:* Seasonal patterns can hamper a team's field operation, resulting in the loss of precious time.
- *Equilateral turnovers:* Artifacts or bones are discovered and turned over by a country.
- *Host nation limitations:* Some countries have a cap on the number of personnel involved.
- *Best case for a specific time frame.*

were getting ready to develop the harbor area in 2009," Webb said. "So, we have two years to get in and complete that recovery."

Flowers pointed out that "no one case is more important than any other," and they follow a strict adherence to the points above.

"We get congressional inquiries, but we don't move people to the head of the line because their senator writes to say 'I'm interested,'" he stressed. "We tell them exactly what we told the family—that this is where they're at in the line, and we're working on it."

And that list grows shorter each year—the lab now averages two identifications each week, or 100 per year.

Meeting with Other Countries

Negotiations with host nations about upcoming missions are an enormous diplomatic undertaking coordinated by DPMO. These meetings occur one to three times annually and center on investigations and recoveries planned in the country. When working with Southeast Asian countries, government officials are

access to restricted areas are normal topics. In addition, host nations want to know the length of the mission, the number of personnel involved and the type of equipment and vehicles to be used. The talks also cover how much local workers and landowners will be paid, and what compensation will be given to local officials assigned to the site.

Flowers says "they work well with all countries" on these matters, and "none have kept them from doing missions." He adds that Cambodia has been the easiest country to work with, while Vietnam's rules and regulations tend to complicate matters.

(North Korea did head the "most difficult" list, but missions there have been suspended since spring 2005 over concern for the teams' safety.)

In Vietnam, for example, an underwater investigation was proposed, but Vietnamese officials objected to U.S. flagships within their waters. Similarly, missions for the longest time have been barred in the western highlands where the Vietnamese cited problems in the area. However, last year, one mission

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> —Brig. Gen. Michael Flowers

JPAC determines which MIA cases ultimately become missions. For instance, when an investigation team returns from the field, an executive decision board that includes Flowers, deputy commanders and other key JPAC personnel determines if the findings warrant a recovery operation. An analyst or historian from the casualty data section also weighs in with records research. After all the evidence is evaluated, Flowers makes a final decision on whether to proceed with a recovery.

An example of how a proposed development in another country can change the priority of a particular case recently occurred after a trip to South Korea by Webb.

"During one of our underwater investigations, we found out that they

involved, whereas worldwide operations deal more with local officials.

Usual participants in the meetings include staff from DPMO and a DoD intelligence agency, as well as JPAC's commanding general. A representative from an overseas detachment, if the mission falls within its domain, and a U.S. ambassador also sit in on the discussions.

According to Larry Greer, director of public affairs at DPMO, the talks are "generally a give-and-take event, where both sides are working toward the same goal—getting our teams out into the field with the full support of the nation."

Once the groundwork has been laid, JPAC takes control of the meeting. Specific cases are discussed as well as future activities. Difficulties in terrain, communications and inquiries about

was allowed to be carried out, and JPAC has permission to return again this year.

VFW Averts Funding Crisis

As if courting Communist countries were not enough, the missions were threatened from another angle. In fiscal year 2006, part of the crucial funding for JPAC, which falls under U.S. Pacific Command's budget, was cut.

VFW stepped forward and demanded that JPAC be fully funded. According to Michael Wysong, VFW's national security and foreign affairs director, "VFW launched this initiative and led the charge. A couple of other groups weighed in, but not to the extent that VFW did."

Though $3.6 million was restored to offset the shortfall, it was too late to

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reschedule some of the missions.

At the time, Bob Wallace, executive director of VFW's Washington Office, said, "It was unconscionable that during a time when our service men and women are risking all to protect our freedoms, our government does not see fit to fund a program to find our prisoners of war or those missing in action."

Says Wysong, "As a result of our efforts last year, Congress, in the FY '07 Defense budget, asked to see where and how all organizations involved in POW/MIA issues are budgeting and spending their allotted resources."

VFW further calls for JPAC's budget to be a dedicated single-line item in the larger Defense budget.

"We appreciate VFW's support as veterans," Flowers said. "We work very hard to find and bring their comrades home. This is a relationship built on trust, and we try our best to live up to it."

Continuing the Effort

Working a four- to five-year plan, Flowers looks for ways to keep the operations as efficient as possible.

Two aspects of recovery operations, for example, were adjusted to reduce the number of visits to a site, yet still yield reliable results. A scientific testing stage in the field was streamlined. And, missions in Vietnam were lengthened from 30 to 45 days, allowing teams ample time at a site.

Overall, progress is proceeding well. Recoveries in Cambodia have reached a point where nine sites are ready for excavation. Flowers says they should be finished there in two years with the cases they know of now, cautioning that new evidence could change that.

In addition to Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, missions through September 2007 are being conducted in New Guinea, Palau, China, Thailand, South Korea and Europe.

For Flowers, the overall success of the missions carries a huge responsibility—one that is most evident when an identification is made and he comes face-to-face with the family.

"Something that you're not prepared for when you come here is the families, the emotions," he said. "There is nothing more rewarding to us than when we do make an identification, and the family comes here to pick up the remains. We get to talk to them and see the impact that we made on them."

JPAC has one core goal—bring home those who remained behind on foreign soil so they can be reunited with their families. With its committed staff and personnel working alongside U.S. agencies and the military service branches, and adequate funding in place, that goal is reached time after time.

McGovern's nephew, James McGovern III, explained it best to The Associated Press: "All those years were enough of a separation. It's closure for my family, and a great feeling." ✪

PART II (JUNE): *Casualty Data Analysis: Where Cases Begin*

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Editor's note: The author visited JPAC offices and the Central Identification Laboratory in December to get a first-hand view of operations there.

INSIDE JPAC PART II

Casualty Data Analysis:

At the Forefront of MIA Cases

Mining a vast array of military records is a crucial first step in determining MIA missions.

BY ROBERT WIDENER

Tall, slender archival boxes, all neatly labeled, sit solemnly on shelves at the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) in Hawaii. Inside the boxes are folders, each with its own story about a soldier, or perhaps an airman. They contain personal medical data, letters from a wife or father, and sometimes even a photo. As different as each story may be, they all have one thing in common—the person was reported missing in action in one of America's wars.

To the analysts and historians within the casualty data analysis section at JPAC, the files are a treasure trove. Much like historical detectives, the staff turns to these files and a multitude of military records to determine two main factors in the overall MIA accounting process: the feasibility of sending out an investigation team, and providing historical and scientific background to help identify remains.

Lt. Col. Dale Norris, a 21-year Air Force and Persian Gulf War veteran, heads the casualty data staff. Assisting Norris is Deputy Director Rob Richeson, a retired Air Force master sergeant who started with Joint Task Force-Full Accounting in 1993.

Because of the varied nature of each war, staff researchers are specialists on different wars. The section has three divisions—Southeast Asia, which is concerned primarily with the Vietnam War; the Korean War; and worldwide, which includes WWI, WWII, the Cold War and other operations, even some dating back to the Civil War.

"Most of our people are involved in Southeast Asia," Richeson explained. "That's in line with the strategy coming from Washington. There is a requirement to investigate and to come to some resolution for every one of the guys unaccounted for."

In Southeast Asia, cases rely more on field investigative work where teams visit suspected crash or battle sites. Here, team personnel have the opportunity to conduct interviews with eyewitnesses who may have been children at the time of the incident.

Worldwide cases turn to historical records analysis due to the lack of such firsthand accounts. Only in a few cases have veterans contacted analysts with vital information about a buddy who was missing during a battle.

Sometimes information can come from unusual sources. For example, amateur relic hunters in Europe who plunder WWII battle sites for profitable artifacts have stepped forward in the past to cooperate and disclose their findings.

According to historian Heather Harris, whose specialty is the Korean War, they receive a number of leads each day. "Not all information leads to a case, but all of the discoveries have to be checked out," she said.

Regardless of the source, a "discovery" is where new cases begin at JPAC. The find sends the analysts and historians mining their resources, hopefully, to uncover the "who, what or when" in order to warrant further action.

IDPFs Are Indispensable

Military personnel records top the list of reference materials used by the casualty data researchers. Unfortunately, the 1973 fire at the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, Mo., destroyed 80% of the 22 million records for Army personnel discharged between Nov. 1, 1912, and Jan. 1, 1960. Also destroyed were about 75% of the records for Army Air Forces and Air Force personnel discharged between Sept. 25, 1947, and Jan 1, 1964.

Lacking that resource, utmost in the analyst's arsenal is individual deceased personnel files (IDPFs)—information compiled on every military person during his or her service dating back to WWI. The files, regardless of what branch the person served in, are housed at the Washington National Records Center in Suitland, Md. The Army

PHOTO BY ROBERT WIDENER / VFW

Stephanie Young assists in the records department within the casualty data analysis section at JPAC. The files provide analysts with military personnel information for warranting an investigation mission, and later, to scientists in the identification of remains in the lab.

holds executive oversight of them due to its role in the graves registration process during WWII.

"IDPF files are the single most complete document for us," said Harris, "in terms of combining information about the individual that we need for identification, with information about the way in which they were killed."

The files are rich in details. Some records, stamped out with WWII-era typewriting, are on fragile onion-skin paper. They contain items such as the most recent medical and dental records, letters from family members concerning the loss, and sometimes photographs of the missing person. Airman files contain a "missing crewman report" with information on the loss, the aircraft and its serial numbers.

Also included are reports on investigations by the service branch that were done at the time of the incident to locate and identify the missing serviceman. In addition, records may hold correspondence concerning the disposition of personal effects, yielding clues such that an individual smoked a pipe—valuable information if one is recovered among the artifacts in the field.

Foremost, Korean War records deal primarily with the loss itself and provide more information on the service member than records from any other war period.

IDPFs are photocopied after they are received at JPAC, then digitally scanned and stored in a computer database. This method allows the data to be easily shared by not only the researchers, but by teams in the field. JPAC has already processed 95% of Korean War MIA files; WWII numbers 3,000. And for Southeast Asia, every file on every MIA is already processed.

IDPFs are not the only source of record data for the researchers. Battlefield loss documents give details from daily morning reports of units operating in the area. Also, the National Graves Registration Service, which at one time devoted resources to resolving WWII and Korea MIAs, has records that show how far they proceeded with their own investigation, or where in the National Archives to look for such things as unit histories.

"Also, depending on what theater you're talking about," said Harris, "there were historians deployed in the field at the time who did combat interviews. We use those interviews to see if certain people are mentioned."

Overall, the casualty data analysts find they are most successful with air crashes due to the missing crewman's report and correlating debris found at the crash site. Battlefield losses are the second most successful.

When all data has been collected and evaluated, a "loss incident case file" is created. These compilations prove indispensable to investigation and recovery teams in the field, and later, to scientists in the lab for final identification.

'No One Wants to Let Go'

Still, despite all of their efforts and resources, accounting for the remaining MIAs, particularly in Southeast Asia, frustrates Richeson.

"We've been looking for those guys since the '70s, and the answers aren't in those files," he said referring to the IDPFs. "We've been through them a hundred or more times trying to resolve these cases."

Harris says the files hold more promise for worldwide cases. "It's different for conflicts other than Southeast Asia," she said. "There's still a lot to be gained from the records we have, and

from the archives on the mainland."

Their efforts are sometimes augmented by the diligence of private individuals working on their own. In the past, these dedicated people have provided JPAC analysts with vital research.

One such researcher, Ray Emory, a Pearl Harbor survivor, has researched since 1968 records of those listed as unidentifiable from the WWII Japanese attack. About 2,000 such remains are interred at the "Punchbowl" National Cemetery of the Pacific in Honolulu.

Emory is able to obtain five IDPFs each year through the *Freedom of Information Act.* He then painstakingly compares those files to the records of the remains at the time of burial, focusing mostly on dental records.

Emory contacted Harris in November 2003 concerning a possible match. Harris saw potential in Emory's evaluation and after further research, came to similar conclusions.

The remains were exhumed and examined by JPAC's Central Identification Laboratory which confirmed the identity—Seaman 2nd Class Warren Paul Hickok, a crewman of the *USS Sicard.* Evidence suggests he most likely perished while helping others aboard the *USS Pennsylvania* during the attack.

Dealing with battle reports and personnel files on a daily basis can take its toll on the researchers, though. For Harris, the daily pace of poring over records of POWs who died in the bombing of a Japanese hell ship, or the missing from Pearl Harbor, or POW camps in the Philippines, can be emotionally draining.

"After a while," she said, "you feel like you're dwelling on death and destruction so much it can weigh on you."

In the end, giving closure to the families makes it all worthwhile. The challenge is trying to stay passionate about the work without getting psychologically exhausted. And sometimes, it gets personal.

"When things go well, it's very rewarding," Richeson said. "Nobody likes to give up on anything, or have a case that you can't do anything on … no one wants to let go." ✪

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PART III (AUGUST): *Teams in the Field.*

MIA Teams in the Field:

'Every Day is Like Memorial Day'

PHOTO BY CPL. RICARDO MORALES, U.S. MARINE CORPS

MIA teams traverse jungles and mountain peaks in the relentless search for and recovery of America's missing in action. For team members, 'there's no better job in the world.'

INSIDE JPAC PART III

BY ROBERT WIDENER

Navy veteran James Pokines remembers the intensely cold nights, the intermittent rain that fell through the day and the snow that thawed right after falling, saturating the gravelly earth where he dug. He also remembers working bare-handed because any gloves would be soaked after 10 minutes, freezing his hands. He especially remembers the hail.

"I stood and stared for a full 30 minutes as it hailed on us, and I wondered, 'What next?' " he said.

Pokines recalled his role as anthropologist and recovery team leader in a 14-man MIA mission that in August 2002 ventured into the southeastern Tibetan Himalayas in China. Operating at nearly 16,000 feet, they were determining if remains of four crewmen could be recovered from a WWII C-46 that crashed in March 1944.

Their mission was twofold: While eight team members worked the crash site, six others trekked across a glacier to investigate another C-46 crash site for a future mission.

The Tibetan operation proved to be a test of physical endurance, not to mention the mental toll of isolation on a mountaintop. In the end, the mission's extreme nature proved how dedicated the team members of the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) can be in their noble task of accounting for America's MIAs.

Sacred Obligation

Some 200 active-duty personnel make up JPAC's 18 recovery and three investigation teams headquartered in Honolulu. MIA teams can be found operating most anywhere in the world, from the frozen

Left: Members of a JPAC team search through wreckage of a WWII aircraft in the Himalayan mountains of southeastern Tibet on Sept. 3, 2002. The team recovered four sets of remains, two of which were identified in 2006.

landscape of Alaska to the dense jungles of Laos, and even on the WWII battlefield of Iwo Jima. The scope of searches now spans WWII to the Persian Gulf War. Currently, however, nearly two-thirds of the missions are focused on Southeast Asia and the Vietnam War.

The first joint MIA recovery operation occurred in 1985 when Johnie Webb, JPAC's current deputy commander, led a team in Vietnam. For years, Webb had lobbied the Vietnamese to allow U.S. teams into the country, but each time his request was denied. Finally, a breakthrough in relations opened the door.

"Being a Vietnam veteran and seeing men killed in battle, and knowing we had left people behind," Webb said, "I thought it was very important to bring some of those men back home who had made the ultimate sacrifice."

In the end, the successful mission paved the way for the U.S. to return time and time again in the following years.

Getting Teams into the Field

Imagine scheduling several hundred people on 21 different teams that make up 51 separate missions at different times of the year to nine nations. Next, coordinate with each service for extra personnel for those teams, and ask the military for the aircraft necessary to get everyone and everything to its destination and back. Did we also mention that each country has its own maze of requirements and regulations governing such expeditions?

Welcome to JPAC's Operations Department—a vital and often overlooked hub in the MIA effort. The responsibility rests here for putting all of JPAC's missions into action by planning every minute detail. In addition, the Operations Department oversees deployment, monitors the teams' progress in the field and provides daily briefings on their status.

Within the 24-person department is Deputy Director Joe Patterson, a longtime operations taskmaster. Patterson, a Marine Vietnam vet, began similar duties in 1989 with the Joint Casualty Resolution Center, and later with Joint Task Force-Full Accounting.

"We estimate cost and manpower requirements and put them all in an operational schedule," said Patterson, who is a VFW life member of Post 2485 in Angeles City, Philippines.

Planning takes into account a multitude of details such as weather patterns, the length of the mission and any host-nation holidays that might interfere with a local labor force. High on the list is the use of helicopters, which sometimes is the only way to reach a site.

"Blade hours are extremely expensive," Patterson said. "If they're sitting on the ground and not flying [due to bad weather], that's a whole lot of money just to sit there."

Patterson also has tasking authority under U.S. Pacific Command to ask the services for extra personnel, or augmentees, with specific skills—such as medics and communications specialists—to fill out the teams.

Once an operation plan is finalized, further preparations and training are put in progress. Augmentees generally are required to undergo specialized training for their roles.

In the case of the 2002 Tibet mission, team leader Capt. Daniel Rouse created a strenuous physical training program to prepare all team members for the arduous expedition.

For four months, according to Pokines, they'd start working out in pre-dawn hours with cardio exercises, weight training and swimming.

"Those were the easy days," he said.

On the hard days, they made two- to three-hour hikes with 80-lb. rucksacks up mountains on Oahu. In addition, team members performed high altitude training at 14,000 feet on Mauna Kea on the island of Hawaii. They also spent time in Alaska at the Army's Northern Warfare Training Center where they learned glacier and mountaineering techniques.

A 'Lewis and Clark Relationship'

Two important roles on every team are played by the team and recovery leaders. An anthropologist from JPAC's Central Identification Laboratory (CIL), like Pokines, is designated as the recovery leader and is in charge of the excavation. Team leaders play a more managerial role.

As team leader Air Force Capt. Judd Stiglich put it: "It's kind of like a 'Lewis and Clark' relationship between the anthro and the team leader. The anthro is in charge of the actual site, and the team leader makes sure the team is on

STAFF SGT. VALDA G. WILSON / U.S. AIR FORCE PHOTO

Team members dig at a site in Kirchgandern, Germany, in August 2006, hoping to recover remains of a P-51 pilot of the 368th Fighter Squadron whose plane crashed during a bombing run in February 1945.

site and equipped."

Army Capt. Jeremy Taylor, an Iraq War veteran who was a team leader on a 2006 recovery mission in Laos, added: "When there are issues with host nation workers, the team leader works with local officials to resolve the situation so work can continue."

Navy Lt. Leslie Alexander, a pilot who accompanied Taylor in Laos to learn more about the team leader role, told of a worker who had been injured when a tall tree fell onto the site.

"It was Taylor who called the detachment, got the medevac going and talked to the pilot," she said. Alexander will become the first Navy member to become a team leader, as well as JPAC's first female team leader.

While team leaders are crucial to ensuring that the mission proceeds with as few setbacks as possible, recovery leaders need a different skill set. According to anthropologist Dr. John Byrd, the best background is experience in both forensic anthropology and archaeology.

"The methods we use are a blend of crime scene and archaeological procedures," said Byrd, who has been on more than 25 missions since joining JPAC in 1998.

Earning his graduate degree in anthropology from the University of Tennessee, Byrd had done numerous archaeological excavations in North Carolina. His roommate from college, who later joined the military as a Special Forces medic, had been part of several recovery missions. He convinced Byrd that he might find the work interesting—and rewarding.

Byrd eventually joined JPAC. After being there only two days, he was ordered to leave on a mission.

"It was the 'trial by fire' method of orientation," he said. "I didn't even unpack."

Not Like TV's CSI

Once a team is on site, Byrd says he first decides how to excavate it and the methods he'll need to follow. As the excavation progresses, it's his responsibility to ensure the work is done systematically and to high standards. CIL is an accredited crime laboratory and adheres to strict guidelines as to how remains are handled.

Byrd, who refers to remains or artifacts as "evidence," says there is a "protocol for bagging and sealing it, just like an investigator would at a crime scene."

Part of the process involves initiating a "chain of custody" document. It accompanies the remains throughout the entire process of recovery, transportation and storage at the lab, until final identification is made and the remains are transferred to the family.

Writing the chain of custody documents and keeping track of the remains are tasks performed by the anthropologist long after the work is finished at the end of each day.

"The hardest thing to deal with is all of the little details," Byrd said. "You have to make sure all the bags are properly labeled and sealed, and that all of the items you're bringing back are on the chain of custody document. It's what TV

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Ensuring Safety in the Field

Medical expertise and reliable communications are two absolute necessities when teams are deep within a foreign country. A medic and communications specialist are part of nearly every mission. Above all, safety is the keyword.

Since operations are overseas, regulations require that everyone be treated as though they were heading to a war zone, according to Capt. Tom Hettich, who heads up the medic section. Medics run team members through a barrage of medical exams and screenings. Also, to avert problems in the field, a psychological exam may be in order since a number of team members have served in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

"I've seen guys who have had signs of PTSD," said Hettich, a 17-year Army veteran and Special Forces medic. "Our outfit includes Army mortuary affairs techs who dealt with the dead, and they're coming from Iraq, and some show problems."

Prior to most missions, medics receive supplemental training about diseases they might encounter in regions that have different climates. For missions conducted at high altitudes, special equipment may be in order. Knowing how to use a pressurized bag to counter a team member's altitude sickness while on a 14,000-ft. peak can avert a serious situation.

Communication specialists have their own set of priorities immediately after reaching a site. Before a mission can proceed, two communication requirements must be in place. The team must be able to contact Red Cross and International SOS (ISOS) for emergency help or medical evacuation. With ISOS, a medic can speak directly to a medical specialist who can walk him through a procedure that is outside his training.

Host nations have restrictions, though, when it comes to communications equipment being brought into the country, especially in Southeast Asia. Requirements demand that all radio gear conform to their specifications—or it won't be allowed.

"Whenever we go to Communist countries, they actually monitor us so they know there's no espionage or black ops going on," said Air Force Tech Sgt. Andy Hurst. "All equipment is listed on diplomatic notes as to whom we're talking to and how we're talking to them."

Communications gear includes a variety of satellite radio equipment, both stationary and handheld. Some radios have data and text messaging available. And for investigation teams that may track deep into a jungle, handheld units have global positioning systems capability.

Patrick Thompson, a Navy electrician tech who handled communications on several missions, two to remote areas in Alaska, finds the challenge of negotiating terrain and weather hardly a factor when he considers the rewarding purpose of his work.

"There's no better job you can give me in the world," he said.

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shows like *CSI* don't capture—spending hours in your hotel room filling out paperwork."

Sometimes weeks can go by without any remains being found, and some missions come up empty-handed, according to Alexander. But when a find does occur, excitement races through the entire site.

"It's always a huge morale boost when you find something," she said. "Even if it's the last day, and all of a sudden—there's a tooth in the screen. And with every one, you can feel the site change."

Under rare circumstances, a veteran with special information concerning an MIA can accompany a recovery team into the field. Byrd said that during the fall of 2006, a Korean War POW went along with his team into South Korea to search for the grave of a fellow POW who had died during captivity.

"We were out there excavating the site with the veteran right there with us while we're looking for his friend," Byrd said. "He told us what happened to them as POWs. It was a very rewarding experience."

Of all the missions, Byrd said that those in North Korea were the most difficult due to the authorities and the restrictions required of the team. In the spring of 2005, he was with a team excavating a large site where soldiers of the 3rd Bn., 8th Cav Regt., 1st Cav Div., had made a futile last stand resulting in several hundred Americans killed.

Unfortunately, North Korea has barred any missions since then. But Byrd says that JPAC is not giving up, and that "eventually we'll get back to the site."

(North Korea handed over six sets of remains to JPAC in April 2007 as a result of a U.S. diplomatic mission.)

Hazardous Duty

Some missions can prove difficult due more to the terrain than politics. During a 1999 WWII recovery mission to Irian Jaya, the country forming the western portion of the island of New Guinea, Byrd's team was working at a high altitude to excavate a site where a B-25 had crashed with eight crew members aboard.

"That site was at 13,000 feet," Byrd said, adding that he had to learn how to rappel. "The wrecked aircraft was perched on the edge of a cliff, and we had to be tied in to work there. One of the team members had altitude sickness and went into shock."

Team members can be exposed to a multitude of dangers in and around a site. Typical of most missions, a work force from the local population is employed to do much of the digging. These willing workers provide another benefit with their knowledge of the area's hazards, such as the treacherous "two-step" snake in Vietnam—a green pit viper so nicknamed because when it strikes, that's as far as you get before you die.

But a much larger threat is unexploded ordnance. Laos in particular has a high number of such explosives, making missions there especially dangerous. In fact, it's estimated that 200 Laotians are killed each year by ordnance left over from the war.

"During the first mission I was on, there was a bomb crater with two 2.75-inch rockets just lying there by our LZ and work site," Taylor said. The team was pulled back while the explosive ordnance disposal tech moved the rockets to a safe area.

Some missions test the mettle of team members more than others. During the Tibet operation, team members did all the digging because the site was in a remote area, far from any local population. As a result, fatigue hampered the team, but taking a break was out of the question.

"There was no point in giving anyone time off because all you could do was sit there in your tent with wet clothing," Pokines said. With the snow line moving further down the mountain each day, the team decided to push hard to wrap up the mission as quickly as they could, he said.

Safety for team members is always a top concern (see sidebar), but tragedies can occur. On April 7, 2001, a helicopter transporting team members crashed 280 miles north of Hanoi. Seven Americans and nine Vietnamese were killed. The group was an advance party investigating possible excavation sites. It's a wound still felt today by those at JPAC.

Rewarding Work

Despite long hours and sometimes living out of a pup tent at a base camp, or putting up with rain that may last most of the day, team members find the work extremely rewarding. For Byrd, it was just as his Special Forces friend had suggested.

"Every one of these cases involves a story about a serviceman who is missing, and there's a reason why they're missing," he said. "And for every one of them, there's someone out there who wonders what happened to him."

One of the air crewmen whose remains Byrd had helped recover from the Irian Jaya mission turned out to be from North Carolina. The airman's sister wrote to him after reading a local newspaper account of the recovery for which Byrd was interviewed.

"I still have the letter … it means a lot to me," he said. "She wrote that people might think that after 70 years we have forgotten about them, but it was just as real now as it was then. She said they never stopped wondering what happened to him, and if he was ever going to come home."

For Taylor, doing his part to help resolve the fate of MIAs helps him connect to men in his command who were killed during his time in Iraq, as well as a classmate who died there.

"My unit got back from Iraq in August 2004," he said. "I lost soldiers I commanded, and it means a lot to do these missions."

Alexander related her feelings about the missions to her Navy aviation background.

"Being a pilot, and my husband is a pilot, and a lot of the people we're looking for were air crew," she said. "I would want to know someone was looking for me, or my husband, as long as it took. And I think that's awesome that we can do that for the families."

Stiglich says every day he would remind team members at a site why they were there: "These guys we're looking for have been laying there for 30 to 40 years, and we're only out here for 45 days. We owe it to them, and to their families."

Summing it up simply, he said: "Every day is like Memorial Day." ✪

PART IV (NOVEMBER): *The Central Identification Laboratory and mtDNA.*

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INSIDE JPAC PART IV

CIL and DNA:

Last Leg of a Journey Home

Armed with high-tech equipment and DNA analysis, the scientists at the Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii are unsurpassed in identifying MIAs.

BY ROBERT WIDENER

When Dr. Robert Mann first came to the Central Identification Laboratory (CIL) in 1992, every day he had to walk past a photo hanging in the hallway leading to the lab. The photo was of a WWII serviceman's skull that had a gold-capped tooth.

"It's like seeing a friend every day that you walk by and notice," said Mann, a Navy veteran who is currently the deputy director of CIL within the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) in Hawaii.

The serviceman's remains had been recovered from a cemetery in Hungary. They were stored in a box in the lab because a lack of dental records had so far kept his identity a mystery.

"Each day I passed it, I wondered: 'When would he ever go home? What are we going to do to identify him?' " Mann recalled.

The answer would not come for another 12 years. A Hungarian researcher in 2003 forwarded information to JPAC that suggested a possible identity. A mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) sample was extracted from the remains and compared to two known maternal relatives.

In December 2004, the results confirmed the suspected identity. The photo on the wall now had a name—Staff Sgt. Robert McKee, a B-24 crewmember who had been reported missing in action when his plane was shot down on Dec. 17, 1944.

Solving McKee's 60-year-old case exemplifies the success that scientists at CIL achieve in identifying about 100 MIAs each year. It's a feat attributable to the largest staff of forensics anthropologists anywhere in the world. The scientists, together with modern advances in

PHOTO BY STAFF SGT. DERRICK C. GOODE, USAF

Dr. Robert Mann, CIL's deputy director, begins his examination of an airman's body that was recovered encased in ice from the Sierra Nevada Mountains in California in 2005. The "Iceman" was later identified as WWII pilot Leo Mustonen.

forensic DNA, give hope that America's servicemen, who may have gone missing in action decades earlier, may at last make the journey home.

Lab Background

CIL's staff of 40 includes 30 anthropologists and archaeologists who have an arsenal of high-tech equipment at their disposal. Over the years, they have pioneered techniques for determining age, race and sex that are used all over the world. At the helm is Scientific Director Dr. Thomas Holland, who began at the lab in 1992 as an anthropologist.

"I have often said that I have the greatest job in the world," said Holland, who has supervised numerous MIA excavations in China, Korea, Southeast Asia and Iraq. "There is the intellectual satisfaction of solving complex puzzles from 30, 40 or 60 years ago, but there also is the emotional satisfaction of doing a job that is almost sacred."

Unknown to most people, CIL is a full-fledged crime lab with accreditation from the American Society of Crime Laboratory Directors, a prestigious recognition that took three years to gain. It requires the lab to adhere to strict guidelines in all aspects of its work.

On occasion, CIL assists local, state and federal authorities on cases. They also played a role in identifying victims of the World Trade Center terrorist attack of September 2001. Stepping outside the world of military MIA identifications has an important purpose, according to Mann.

"We have to stay current in the forensic community—with the police and medical examiners," he said. "If you only look at dry bones that are 35 years old, you're not going to be up on what's being done in the mainstream."

CIL also has a fully-equipped autopsy suite that in 2005 aided in identifying the "Iceman," a 22-year-old WWII pilot named Leo Mustonen. Mustonen's AT-7 navigation plane disappeared in the Sierra Nevada Mountains of California during a training mission on Nov. 18, 1942. His well-preserved body, encased in ice, was brought to the lab for examination.

Still in his Army Air Forces uniform with his parachute unopened, Mustonen had died immediately, according to Mann. In March 2006, the Brainerd, Minn., native finally was laid to rest.

PHOTO BY ROBERT WIDENER / VFW

Dr. Elias Kontanis, an anthropologist at CIL, reviews a report on an examination performed by another of the lab's anthropologist. Anywhere from seven to 10 people at the lab review findings to ensure reliable data toward making an identification.

Multiple Lines of Evidence

A solemn quietness exists behind the glass wall of the lab's examination room where a number of skeletal remains are laid out on tables. Anthropologists are busy examining remains with little or no talk. It's as though a respectful "moment of silence" is forever in the air.

Family members of an MIA who visit the facility are not allowed to enter the room for fear of mixing their DNA with the remains. In fact, thorough procedures in handling and analyzing remains are followed at every phase of the identification process to ensure validity in the final analysis.

The forensic anthropologist and dentist who perform preliminary examinations when remains are first received at the lab are excluded from doing the actual examination later on. Their main purpose is to prioritize the case.

"They also assess if the bones are sturdy enough to obtain DNA, or if the teeth warrant a dental examination," Mann explained.

Once an examination begins, the anthropologist is not allowed access to any records to avoid skewing the results. The dentist, on the other hand, works independently from a short list of dental records based on the location where the remains were recovered.

Their finished report is reviewed and critiqued by seven to 10 anthropologists, some of whom compare the findings to the remains.

"You need to do a pretty thorough job because somebody is going to sit there and read everything you did," Mann pointed out. "They're going to do their own comparisons and come up with their own results."

Skeletal remains are not the only items considered in the final identification.

"We use multiple lines of evidence to reach a conclusion," Mann said. "We don't just use the tooth, the bones or DNA. We also look at where the remains came from … did they come from Laos or Vietnam?"

Artifacts recovered along with remains are important factors, too. In a case concluded in January 2007, the wallet of WWII soldier Harold Fechter, who was reported missing on Oct. 3, 1944, near Mt. Battaglia in Italy, helped anthropologists confirm his identity. According to *The Kansas City Star,* a plastic fragment of the wallet sleeve held the barely discernible image of a felt Catholic medallion. The image transfer had formed on the sleeve over the six decades he had

Family Reference Samples Are Needed

Providing a DNA family reference sample tops the list of ways in which you can help the scientists at JPAC. Reference samples from Korean War MIA family members especially are needed. Another way to help is by organizing a drive in your area to locate MIA family members.

To search a list of MIAs requiring a family reference sample, go to: *www.jpac.pacom.mil/FRS_public/FRS_public.aspx.*

If you feel you are a suitable donor, contact the appropriate service casualty office listed below.

Air Force
USAF Missing Persons Branch
HQ AFPC/DPWCM
550 C Street West, Suite 15
Randolph AFB, TX 78150-4716
1-800-531-5501

Army
Department of the Army
U.S. Army Human Resources Command
ATTN: AHRC-PER
200 Stovall Street
Alexandria, VA 22332-0482
1-800-892-2490

Marine Corps
Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps
Manpower and Reserve Affairs
Personal and Family Readiness Division
3280 Russell Road
Quantico, VA 22134-5103
1-800-847-1597

Navy
Navy Personnel Command
Casualty Assistance Division
POW/MIA Branch (PERS-624)
5720 Integrity Drive
Millington, TN 38055-6210
1-800-443-9298

State Department
Overseas Citizens Services
U.S. Department of State, 4th Floor
2201 Pennsylvania Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20037
(202) 647-5470

"This country called, and they answered that call. This country sent them into harm's way, and many didn't return. There is an underlying nobleness in returning these men home that is reaffirming."

— Dr. Thomas Holland, scientific director, Central Identification Laboratory

been missing.

Analysts knew which soldiers were listed as missing in the area, and after examining records, they discovered that Fechter was Catholic. CIL officials contacted family members for an mtDNA sample. The test results were conclusive—Sgt. Harold Fechter had been identified, and would finally come home.

All final lab reports eventually end up on Holland's desk, where he performs the last review. He scrutinizes every piece of evidence and weighs a verdict on the identification proposed by his staff—a responsibility he shoulders with great concern.

"While we can debate the rights and wrongs of war, what is not open to debate is what these young men did," Holland said. "This country called, and they answered that call. This country sent them into harm's way, and many didn't return. There is an underlying nobleness in returning these men home that is reaffirming."

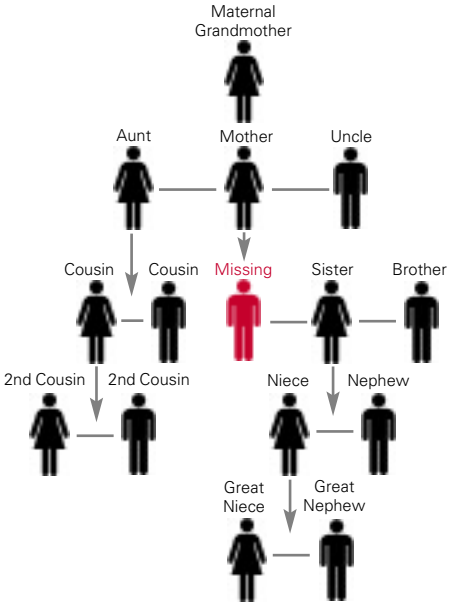
DNA: The Key to a Cellular Lock

So important is DNA analysis in the lab's process that 78% of all identifications include it. CIL's anthropologists all agree DNA is the single most important development in forensics in modern times.

All DNA analysis is performed by the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory (AFDIL) located in Rockville, Md. Results are forwarded to CIL.

Two kinds of DNA are most important—nuclear DNA, which is located within the nucleus of the cell, and mtDNA, the genetic material that surrounds the nucleus. A third type, yDNA, refers to the male chromosome and is used more in recent MIA cases.

Nuclear DNA is an exact copy, but requires a previous sample from the person in order to do a comparison. Scientists at AFDIL are able to extract DNA from saliva, hair, combs, rings, eyeglasses, toothbrushes and other personal items. Current TV forensic crime shows are fashioned around nuclear DNA.



Only relatives along female blood lines can donate mtDNA samples.

MtDNA, on the other hand, is passed on maternally from a mother to her children. Male mtDNA is destroyed during egg fertilization, but female mtDNA survives and mutates very little through successive generations, giving scientists a reliable identification tool (see chart).

"We try to determine if the mtDNA from the remains being examined are from the same matrilineal source," said Dr. Elias Kontanis, an anthropologist and DNA expert at CIL. "If there are five or six differences in the DNA markers between the bone and the family sample, then they are not maternally related."

Using mtDNA is confounded, though, by the fact that 7% of all caucasians have the same mtDNA, even though they are not related. This aspect became a hurdle when scientists were trying to identify James McGovern, the CIA's Civil Air Transport pilot who had been shot down in 1954 during the French-Indochina War. His remains were recovered in 2002.

McGovern and another person

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aboard the aircraft shared the same mtDNA. Scientists used a complicated analysis involving several mtDNA samples from female relatives, plus the DNA of a paternal nephew in order to confirm McGovern's identity. It was only the second time CIL had used paternal DNA in identification.

"It was a very complicated genetic problem to piece together McGovern's profile from distant relatives," Kontanis said.

In some cases, the nuclear DNA of a missing serviceman has fortunately been available to compare directly to the remains, according to Holland. One case depended on locating a DNA sample from the family. But the serviceman had been adopted at birth, and his biological parents were unknown.

"What seemed like an impossible case was finally resolved by obtaining an aged envelope in the possession of the man's widow," Holland said. "It had been handed down to her from the adoptive mother."

Inside the envelope was a lock of hair from his first haircut. It provided the DNA necessary to confirm his identity.

"In another case, we obtained a DNA sample from the envelopes of love letters written by the serviceman to his wife 40 years ago," Holland said.

"It is somehow fitting and complete that what began as an act of love and tenderness—the snipping of a baby's first lock of hair or the expression of longing a fidelity—should be the key to binding up the unhealed wounds of war," he said. "Those are the cases that change you."

As much as DNA's role in MIA cases has had great success, it also has led to great controversy. In 1998, the remains of Lt. Michael Blassie grabbed national headlines. Blassie, an Air Force pilot lost during the Vietnam War, was thought to be the Vietnam War's Unknown Soldier within the Tomb of the Unknowns.

Enough artifact and record evidence existed, along with the availability of a family mtDNA reference sample, to force the Department of Defense to exhume the remains and perform a test. The results confirmed that the remains indeed belonged to Blassie.

The case set a precedent, leaving Vietnam vets in a vacuum: How could any set of remains ever fill the Unknown Soldier space when some evidence might surface later enabling identification?

'No Longer a Name in a Book'

One thing is evident in identifying MIAs—the DNA of family members can greatly aid in identification. Presently, a number of unidentifiable remains are stored at CIL, due partly to the lack of adequate family reference samples. Sgt. Robert McKee would still be a nameless photo on the wall had a reference sample not been available.

And male contributions are not out of the question.

"The technology is advancing to the point where we will be using nuclear DNA from paternal descendants in the future," Kontanis said. "All we had been doing in the past is looking for maternal reference samples, but now, science broadens our scope of it."

As for the lab, Holland sees it as a national resource that someday could be expanded.

"What it does, the capabilities it has, and the research it advances, have the potential to pay substantial dividends to the people of this country—regardless of whether or not you have a family member missing from a past war," he said. "In today's world, with our global war on terror and the concerns for homeland defense, the laboratory has the real potential to be a tool of national scale."

For Kontanis, solving a decades-old case is an amazing process of watching all of the lines of evidence fall in place.

"It gives you a good feeling when it all comes together to produce an identification so that somebody can go home to his family," he said.

Mann agrees and adds that his work at CIL is "his way of contributing to the people who went off to war and didn't come back.

"Once you work a case, you get to see what his photo looks like, or you get to meet his wife," he said. "It really brings the humanity into it, and it's no longer a name in a book."

Or, a nameless photo on the wall. ✪

PART V (JANUARY): *Families of MIAs*

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INSIDE JPAC PART V

Families of MIAs:

Keeping the Candle of Hope Burning

Families of MIAs are on a quest for answers that can lead to closure. But in some cases, it raises even more questions. Beyond a doubt, the loss felt by the family is everlasting.

BY ROBERT WIDENER

At night after her children were put to bed, Sharon Taylor would read one of the hundreds of love letters her father, 1st Lt. Shannon Estill, had written to her mother during WWII. She savored each one, hoping to understand a father she never knew.

"I was three weeks old when he was killed," said Taylor. "I don't remember a time when my mother and grandparents didn't talk about him. I knew the story."

Estill's P-38 Lightning fighter was struck by anti-aircraft fire while attacking targets in eastern Germany on April 13, 1945, just a few weeks before the war ended in Europe. But because the crash site was within the Russian-controlled sector of occupied Germany, U.S. military personnel could not recover the 22-year-old's remains after the war.

"No one knew for sure what happened to him," Taylor said, "so there was that lingering overlay that he would show up because some men did after the war. It was always an unspoken possibility."

For as many MIAs still unaccounted for today, there are a similar number of families just like Taylor's seeking answers. Tasked with fulfilling that mission is the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) in Hawaii and the Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office (DPMO) in Washington, D.C.

Through these agencies' combined efforts, wives, mothers, brothers and sisters come closer to knowing the fate of their missing loved ones. Some families are fortunate to find resolution when identifications are made. But others must keep the candle of hope burning for answers that may never come.

"IN MY THOUGHTS" PAINTING BY JAMES B. HARTEL

Love letters from Sharon Taylor's father, 1st Lt. Shannon Estill, to her mother during WWII took her on a quest to resolve his fate. Her effort led to the discovery of his crash site in 2003.

Love Letters Initiate a Quest

The letters from Taylor's father became her only tangible link to him over the years. In the course of reading them, Taylor came across the names of his crewmembers. In the early 1990s, she tracked down her father's crew chief, Henry

Hamm, who told stories about her father during their service together. The experience sparked the thought that with further research, she might find clues to his crash site.

"I always did everything on my own," said Taylor. "I pieced together everything because that's the way I operate. It was a process that I had to do myself."

Hamm provided Taylor with the name of a German WWII researcher, Hans Guenther Ploes, who also was an expert on WWII crash sites. Taylor traveled to Germany in 2001 and met with Ploes who took up her quest. In 2003, when examining a possible crash site in a farmer's field near Elsnig, Germany, Ploes discovered an aircraft part that matched her father's P-38. Human remains also were found.

With such strong physical evidence and Taylor's research, JPAC sent a recovery team to the site in August 2005. Taylor was allowed to join the team because of her relations with the German government over the years and her overwhelming drive to find her father.

"I spoke to team members the first day and said 'I'm here to do whatever I can,' " she said. "They loved that and handed me a shovel and said 'Here you go.' "

She had special caps made for each member along with a flag that was posted at the site each day. The caps and flag read "Team Estill." She also gave a photo of her father to each of them.

The team had two items it hoped to recover—Estill's dog tags and a baby shoe.

"My father carried one of my baby shoes in his plane," Taylor said. "The team started to get emotionally upset that they couldn't find it for me." Despite their efforts, neither item was found.

JPAC's Central Identification Lab identified remains from the recovery as Estill's in 2006. He was buried in Arlington National Cemetery that October.

Closure, however, is not a word Taylor uses to describe the end result.

"I don't think that circle ever closes totally," she said. "You always have your missing dad. When you're sitting in your house and it's all over, and everything is in boxes or files, it feels the same—except you know more."

PHOTO COURTESY PATRICIA SCHARF

Capt. Charles J. Scharf went missing in action in 1965 during the Vietnam War.

Love Letters Provide Final Proof

"Mayday, Mayday, Mayday!" came the transmission from the F4C Phantom II in flames. Piloted by Capt. Charles J. Scharf and co-pilot 1st Lt. Martin J. Massucci, the jet had been hit by antiaircraft fire on Oct. 1, 1965, while on a reconnaissance mission over Son La province, North Vietnam.

Squadron members remember seeing only one chute, later determined to be a drag chute, before the plane crashed. No further contact with the downed pilots occurred, even though search efforts were made that day and afterward. Scharf and Massucci had simply vanished.

"I hoped that he was alive," said his wife, Patricia, when she heard about the shootdown. "He was a survivor, a hunter and a fisherman. And I just couldn't conceive that he would go."

When he was not among the POWs repatriated at the war's end, doubt of her husband's survival loomed for Scharf.

She took solace from the hundreds of love letters he had sent her. They had sometimes arrived two or three at a time. He wrote of a new life for the two of them, especially about starting a family when his military service was over.

The pair had met when they were 16, and married at 18. During their 11-year marriage, they had one baby girl, but she had died shortly after childbirth.

JPAC sent three recovery teams to the site between 1992 and 2004 that yielded human remains and other artifacts indicating Scharf had been found. Among the recovered items was a Catholic scapular, a religious cloth.

"We were married in 1953, and the priest gave each of us one at the altar," said Scharf. "Chuck carried his in his wallet."

That particular scapular was unique to the time period and helped to provide one layer of confirmation. Positive identification was hampered, though, when a mitochondrial DNA sample from one of Scharf's maternal relatives came back inconclusive. The scientists then approached Scharf for any personal items she may still have of his.

"I said 'How about the envelopes from the love letters he had sent me?' " she said. "I had a box full of them."

The experts at the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory were able to extract DNA from the saliva on the stamps and envelopes Scharf had licked. It was the proof they needed.

"When I got the word that Chuck had been identified, I had great relief," said Scharf, "because in the back of my mind, I knew he never suffered."

Scharf visited JPAC in October 2006 to claim her husband's remains. In a chapel at the facility, she had time to be alone with the casket.

"He was buried with a new uniform and his medals," she said. "Inside the casket I placed a few of the love letters, a note from me and a picture of when we were last together in Hawaii."

Her trip took another emotional turn when traveling back to Virginia. The plane landed in Texas, but before passengers were allowed to leave, the stewardess announced that they were bringing back the remains of a Vietnam War MIA. The passengers listened quietly, and then applauded. That's when the stewardess pointed out Scharf, who stood and spoke to them.

"I am so honored that you feel proud that you have men fighting for you," she told them. "And we do bring back our

men. There will be other men brought back and please honor this. They are there so that we can sleep at night and be at peace."

DPMO's Family Update Program

A large number of families are not as fortunate as those of Taylor and Scharf. For them, the answers will be a lifetime in coming, if at all. In order to keep them apprised of developments, DPMO has hosted briefings for family members since 1995.

Annually, eight such gatherings are conducted in cities across the U.S., and two in Washington, D.C. They afford the families an opportunity to hear firsthand from representatives of Department of Defense agencies and the service casualty offices involved in the MIA effort.

Helen Famuliner, a VFW Ladies Auxiliary member, attended one of the meetings in Kansas City in August 2007. She had questions concerning her first husband, Pfc. Ralph K. King. The 24-year-old was reported missing during the Korean War when he and another soldier were helping a wounded buddy back to their lines. None of them made it back, though.

"They found no trace of my husband or his equipment, so I was led to believe he was taken prisoner," said Famuliner. She found out in 1998 that the wounded soldier her husband had helped was a POW repatriated at the war's end.

"I didn't get to talk to him because I didn't learn about the details until after he had died," she said.

King's brother, Don, along with nine other family members, also attended the update program. Several of King's children are interested in continuing to seek answers because King was lost in North Korea, which has barred MIA searches since 2005.

King says the update program "gives some hope that someday they might find him."

Thomas Klingner, also at the Kansas City meeting, keeps hope, too, that someday they'll find his brother, Capt. Michael Klingner, an F-100 jet pilot. He was shot down over Laos on April 6, 1970.

"Other people don't come back—but not my brother," said Klingner.

JPAC has been to Klingner's crash site several times, but other than his identification card, no remains were found. His blood chit, an aviator's personal information scarf, curiously turned up in Vietnam's Hue Military Museum in 1992. Officials there, however, are not cooperating.

According to the deputy assistant secretary of Defense, DPMO, Ambassador Charles Ray, the family update programs are "a creation of the desire of people in America to have answers.

"The one thing that might not seem obvious to people is despite how long ago a loss took place," Ray said, "the emotion and sense of loss is greater with the passage of time when they don't have answers.

"It's important for those who don't have missing family members to understand the importance of this mission. The freedoms that we enjoy and take for granted were built on the sacrifices of these men and women. Our freedoms were paid for in blood." ✪

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