

Missing in Action



As Tomb Guards walk their 21 steps every day, twenty-four hours a day at Arlington National Cemetery a solemn covenant of each soldier of the Old Guard, 3rd Infantry Regiment rests deep in their hearts: “A Soldier Never Dies Until He is Forgotten –Tomb Guards never forget”. That covenant is an article of faith and a pledge to the people of America to always remember, to always respect and to always be there for the families of the warriors who never returned to their home.

On April 23, 1951, in fighting near Seoul South Korea a young Pennsylvania soldier, Corporal Leo Thomas Buehler, was reported as missing in action to his family in Philadelphia. Elements of his unit, the 19th Infantry Division, were forced to withdraw, leaving his body behind and never recovered. In the last letter Corporal Buehler wrote to his mother, he asked her to return his body to his home if he was killed. Years later, on her death bed, Corporal Buehler’s mother pleaded with her niece to promise to bring her son’s remains home.

That dying wish fell upon the Society of the Honor Guard Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in August 2024. After searching military records, newspaper articles and historical documents, the Society found that the soldier’s unidentified remains were probably buried in the United Nation’s cemetery at Tanggok South Korea. It was further discovered that all the unidentified American remains buried at Tanggok were repatriated to the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Hawaii - the Punch Bowl. The Defense POW/MIA

Accounting Agency reports that this missing soldier's case is under active review, meaning that evidence has been found to continue with potential identification.

The Department of Defense established the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) on January 30, 2015, through the merger of the Joint POW/MIA and the Defense Prisoner of War/ Missing Personnel Agency. Also included in the merger were parts of the United States Air Force Life Sciences Lab. One of the two missions of the DPAA is to recover unaccounted Department of Defense personnel listed as prisoners of war (POW) or missing in action (MIA) from past conflicts around the world. The DPAA has labored to not only search for those who never returned but to offer in depth assistance to family members through actively searching for relatives, offering family updates on a regular basis and providing an informative internet web page that offers insight into the mission and processes of the DPAA.

The Korean War ended with 7,478 Americans missing in action and unaccounted for. By using DNA, the chances of identifying our missing warriors is enhanced through the painstaking work of more than 100 scientists at the Armed Forces Identification Laboratory at Dover Air Force Base Delaware. Since 1992, the laboratory has been actively collecting maternal family reference specimens—DNA—from family members of military personnel whose remains have not been recovered or identified.

Samples of DNA are acquired through two methods. One method is to use genealogical records to find family members. These searches are conducted by members of the service casualty office. Each branch of military service, Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force and Coast Guard, has a service casualty office. When a family member is identified by a genealogical search, the service representative mails the family a kit to do a cheek swab to donate DNA. The sample is returned to the DNA Lab for analysis. Recent advances in isolating human DNA from a vast array of bacterial, fungal and parasitic DNA that is intertwined with the human sample has enhanced the process from doing four samples a month with a 24% success rate to processing more than 100 samples a month with a 65% success rate.

Each year the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) conducts updates for family members of missing service members. At these meetings DPAA will collect DNA reference samples from eligible family members. The collected samples are entered into a family reference data base. The DPAA reports that it maintains DNA from relatives of 92% of the original 8, 157 service members missing in the Korean War.

During 2024 the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency positively identified the remains of 66 service members previously listed as missing in action during the Korean War and the work continues not only for Korean War missing in action, but also for World War II and Vietnam. More than 80,000 Americans are listed as missing in action from previous wars. The DOD estimates that approximately 38,000 remains are recoverable. The work is relentless and the commitment to those who served and never came home, and to the families who grieve inspires those who search for the missing to say in their hearts – “A soldier never dies until he is forgotten – America will not forget.” It is our Nation’s sacred promise. Though the process is long and tedious, perhaps someday that dying mother’s wish will be honored and her son returned home.

Family members of Missing in Action are encouraged to contact DPAA or to find dates for DPAA family update briefings, please visit this web site: <https://dpaa-mil.sites.crmforce.mil/dpaaContactUsNav>

Previous family updates and briefings can be live streamed and viewed here: <https://dpaa-mil.sites.crmforce.mil/Families/FamilyEvents>

Family and friends of MIA will also find this web site useful and informative for support and information <https://missionpowmia.org/>

For news and developments the Defense POW/ MIA Accounting Agency maintains the following site: <https://www.defense.gov/News/Tag/47219/powmia/>