Bodily Matters Above and Below Ground: The Treatment of American Remains from the Korean War

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Abstract: Throughout most of the twentieth century, depending on the capabilities of the military mortuary services and the time limits set by government, the bodies of the American fallen in foreign wars have been repatriated home to their families. In the Korean War the conditions of combat posed large challenges to the recovery and return of bodily remains. Almost half a century after that conflict, the American missing in Korea have become significant players within the government’s expanding efforts that were prompted in answer to demands to locate American soldiers who remain unaccounted for from the Vietnam War. The essay traces the background to U.S. military mortuary services and the operation in the Korean War and in the subsequent joint expeditions in North Korea. The analysis concludes that in most of these ventures the outlay of resources has produced few remains.

Keywords: Korean War, wartime dead, return of human remains, U.S. Mortuary Service, POW/MIAs Korea.

In 2001, during the first series of American expeditions to North Korea in search of the American missing from the Korean War, a burial site was uncovered that contained twelve sets of remains. Among them were those of Private Lowell W. Bellar from Gary, Indiana. Sixteen years of age at en-
liment, having joined up to be eligible later for GI benefits, Bellar was killed north of the 38th parallel on December 1, 1950 during the bloody retreat from Chosin Reservoir. At the time, the extreme cold had frozen the ground solid, so the dead were hastily abandoned in shallow graves. In the 1990s, when the U.S. Defense Department established a mitochondrial database of relatives of GIs missing on the Korean peninsula, Bellar’s family provided DNA, and it was through this that a match was made in March 2005. Later that year, on the day that would have been the living Bellar’s seventy-fifth birthday, he was buried in the hometown cemetery with full military honors and a posthumous purple heart. His brother, who at the time described his own emotions as “in high gear,” reported relief that at last Lowell was “back on American soil and for good.”

As the case of Private Bellar suggests, dead bodies can lead complex, peripatetic lives that influence the living in ways that could not have been foreseen during the lifetime of the deceased. Again, Bellar’s family provide a poignant exemplar of the shift that has taken place in the popular expectation of the length to which the United States government should go in order to repatriate the remains of Americans fallen in wartime. W. Lloyd Warner, writing half a century ago, pointed out that the suburban cemetery played a crucial role in the symbolic life of Americans. These special sites, the final resting place for deceased members of a community, served as the “visible symbol of an agreement among [those of that community] that they will not let each other die.”

Certainly, on a national scale, cemeteries for the American war dead are part of the same social compact. The actual corporeal remains, or their absence, however, can be highly problematic in the process of war memorialization. By its very nature, war involves large-scale killing with the collateral consequence of large numbers of dead bodies. Where the battle has ranged over extensive terrain, human remains may be widely dispersed; or when combatants have been exposed to aerial bombardment or close-range shelling, bodies may have been erased altogether. In the past, with the cessation of hostilities, warring sides have reached an arrangement about the disposition of the dead. In general, the specific ways in which the dead are handled has been a function of shifting contemporary conventions and the play of politics among the living.

4. George Mosse points out that the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles specified the responsibility of nations to care for the war dead buried on their soil and that this convention remained in force until 1966, in Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 82. As we shall see below, however, in practice during the Korean War this treaty provision was ignored.
This essay examines the treatment of bodily remains of American soldiers killed in the Korean War. The first part of the discussion outlines the history of the United States wartime mortuary service and its operation in the difficult conditions of the Korean War. The second part examines the transformation in the status of the American dead and missing from Korea almost half a century since the armistice that ended that conflict. After having been the unheralded residuum of what, in the United States, became a “forgotten war,” the American missing in Korea were recast as important players within the expanding purview since the Vietnam War of the U.S. government’s efforts to retrieve and identify the American missing from all recent foreign wars in which Americans have taken part.

Background

Since the Great War, the death of the individual soldier has been memorialized in a manner that previously had been unthinkable. According to Thomas Laqueur, this new mentality was manifest in the propensity to “hypernominalism”: the drive to record on commemorative monuments and headstones the individual names of each of the fallen. And despite the shared commitment ever since to highlight the wartime contribution of the ordinary soldier, there have been distinct national styles in handling the dead soldier’s bodily remains. Partly, these have been influenced by the battlefield logistics that determined the conditions of the death. Even more so, national styles reflect differing national conventions about the ownership of the dead soldier’s body and whether with enlistment possession passes to the state, or whether ownership of the individual corporeal entity always remains with family and next of kin.

The British government along with the Dominions and the British Commonwealth, whose armies made up the British Expeditionary Force in two world wars, have consistently asserted the state’s proprietary rights over the soldierly dead, burying them in military cemeteries as near as possible to where the soldier fell. In 1920, with the creation of a Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, there was a physical body to stand in for the individual absent body in


6. The British state’s proprietorial rights over the military dead always trumped the family even when petitions from a family were accompanied by a personal intercession from the English king. Laqueur, “Memory and Naming,” 161–62. By 1921, the 517,000 bodies of unknown British and Commonwealth soldiers were buried on the western front. Laqueur, “Memory and Naming,” 156. See also Jay Winter, Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). In the recent unearthing of a large common grave of British and Australian soldiers near the French village of Fromelles, both governments, with strong popular support, are reburying the remains individually under the existing War Graves Commission protocols, in a cemetery close to the original gravesite.
public ceremonies of mourning and in the family’s private grieving. By contrast, the United States for most of the twentieth century has pursued a different policy. While a tomb with a body of the Unknown Soldier was first dedicated at Arlington cemetery in 1921, the American government, ever since the Spanish American War, has favored the repatriation of the physical remains of Americans killed in combat abroad and equally has recognized the right of the next of kin to be consulted on decisions about that repatriation.

The American practice made necessary an effective mortuary service to undertake bodily identification and repatriation. And to this end, from 1917, members of the Graves Registration Service (GRS) were an essential part in the formation of American combat units. By 1920, the GRS had grown to some 150 officers and 7,000 men to oversee the identification of battle dead and the repatriation of the 47,000 American bodies whose families chose to have them shipped home. Mortuary officers also despatched the bodies of the hundred or so Americans who were returned within Europe to the original place of their birth, that is before their emigration to the United States. In addition, the GRS buried in American cemeteries in France and Belgium the American dead whose families chose to have their loved one interred in Europe. In the same cemeteries were placed as “unknowns” the 1,643 sets of unidentified bodily remains.

In the course of World War II, the lives of more than 405,000 American
soldiers were lost and at the latest estimate more than 78,000 Americans remain unaccounted for. 10 Wherever possible, the same principles that had operated in the Great War were followed. Families were given the choice of repatriation for the loved ones who had perished in battle. As before, and despite a press campaign to encourage burial overseas, most of the next of kin preferred to bring home the body of their family member. 11 But, with battlefields spread across Europe and the Pacific and military engagement that made much use of aerial bombardment and heavy artillery, individual body recognition and retrieval was often not possible. Given the complexity of the tasks that World War II engendered, the numbers in mortuary service increased so that the standard Graves Registration company on average consisted of 260 men each led by five officers. They carried out collection, identification, evacuation, and the choosing of cemetery sites. 12

Of the military dead, an estimated 8,532 bodies of American servicemen were recovered but could not be identified. 13 Much as had happened in the Great War, they were categorized as “unknown.” Those who had fallen in European battlefields were buried in one of the ten American military cemeteries in Europe; and the unidentifiable remains of Americans in the Pacific were interred in the national military cemeteries in Hawaii and the Philippines. At its dedication in 1949, the Manila cemetery was declared to be part of U.S. territory so that Americans buried there could be laid to rest in their own home soil. The other important category of dead still to be accounted for were those who had been killed in action (KIA) but in engagements in which there was a body not recovered (BNR). Douglas L. Clarke has calculated that KIA/BNRs, most of whom had died in ground combat, amounted to twenty-two percent of deaths in World War II. 14

Despite the commitment to bodily retrieval and repatriation to the hometown family, the U.S. government had always placed limits on the length of time in which the return of the deceased should take place. Until it became a contentious issue in relation to the MIA/POWs from the Vietnam War, the commitment to an expeditious tying-up of the loose ends from the wartime dead and missing was seen as a positive virtue. It reduced the uncertainty around the legal status of the deceased and the unaccounted-for and enabled families, deprived of their soldier-breadwinner, to receive the financial com-

pensation that was their due. In World War II, Congress had ordered the Secretary of the Army to complete the “return of remains” within five years of the end of the war. In accordance with the congressional direction, the servicemen who remained missing in action after a year of their having been registered as such were declared dead by a presumptive finding of death, under the provisions of the Missing Persons Act.15

The Korean War

In 1945, after the Japanese defeat, the Korean Peninsula had been partitioned between the United States and the Soviet Union. On June 25, 1950, after months of sporadic border incidents, the North Korean Army crossed into South Korea. Two days later, President Truman announced that the United States would provide military support to the South Korean government. The United Nations Security Council, affirming the American position, called for assistance from member countries. By mid-1951, the UN force included 12,000 British soldiers, 8,500 Canadians, 5,000 Turks, and 5,000 Filipinos. Other contributors in the total of twenty-one nations who sent small amounts of support were Australia, Belgium, Colombia, Ethiopia, France, Greece, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, South Africa, and Thailand. The United States provided the supreme command of UN forces and the bulk of support, some 1.78 million troops and the military hardware that sustained the brutal fighting that for the next three years laid waste the Korean Peninsula and devastated its people.16

By the time the Korean War began, the U.S. military had dismantled most of the mortuary support services from World War II.17 In 1950, the United States administration, like the others that came to make up the United Nations force, assumed that the conflict in Korea would be swiftly won. In Sep-

16. Bruce Cumings traces the complicated series of cross-border incursions and the chronology of the decision to intervene in Korea’s Place in the Sun (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2005), 237–57. DPMO, “US Military Korean War Statistics from the ‘Unaccounted For Data,’” released June 1, 2000, http://koreanwarmemorial.sd.gov/U.S.Forces/MIA_KIA.htm (April 18, 2009). According to Marilyn B. Young, in the first three months of fighting, 97,000 tons of bombs and 7.8 million gallons of Napalm were dropped on Korea; by the end of the conflict civilian deaths in the North were around two million, in the South some five million Koreans were displaced with 100,000 children orphaned. In “Korea: the Post-war War.” History Workshop Journal 51 (2001): 113, 114, 116.
tember 1950, when the first Quartermaster Graves Registration Company arrived in Korea, it consisted of a single, makeshift unit of some thirty soldiers who were responsible for providing graves registration across the whole Korean Peninsula.\(^\text{18}\) The mortuary brief was to replicate previous wartime practice: soldiers killed in combat were to be tagged and buried in temporary cemeteries from which subsequently the Graves Registration Unit (GRU) would retrieve them. After consulting the next of kin at home, officers of the GRU would arrange the body’s transportation to the home destination. During World War II, a Central Identification Point (CIP) set up in Strasbourg had streamlined body identification, and in order to achieve the same efficiency in processing American dead from Korea, a Central Identification Unit (CIU) was established in readiness at Fort Lee in Texas.\(^\text{19}\)

The military engagement in Korea, however, did not go to plan. The handling of bodies became increasingly chaotic. Separate combat divisions were forced to make their own temporary burial places, often no more than a hasty drop in a foxhole or a shallow indentation scratched at the bottom of a shell crater and covered with a scattering of earth. The fraught conditions of combat allowed little time to bury the dead. Terrified civilians attempting to flee south from the war zones clogged the roads and added enormously to the chaos. There are a number of documented examples, the most well known taking place in July 1950 at No Gun Ri, where U.S. forces were responsible for the deaths of unarmed refugees.\(^\text{20}\) An attempt at the end of October 1950 to establish a central cemetery on 38th parallel at Kaesong was never implemented. As the combat fronts ranged along the length of the Korean Peninsula, so were American gravesites scattered.

When ground was lost, the graves were lost as well. In November 1950, the retreat of UN battalions from the Yalu River, before advancing Chinese forces, prevented the orderly retrieval of previously buried bodies.\(^\text{21}\) By December 1950, in the withdrawal from Chosin Reservoir, not only were five thousand or more American troops taken prisoner, but at least 1500 gravesites

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were left behind. At Inchon, the cemetery that had been established to hold the UN dead lay exposed in the direct path of the advancing communist forces. The burial ground held 870 UN soldiers, which included the bodies of 112 Americans, the latter previously having been disinterred in haste from a temporary cemetery in Kaesong in order to be evacuated with the withdrawing American units. The GRU determined to retrieve the American bodies. Starting on Christmas Day, 1950, and with the Korean police drafting in locals to carry out the digging, the bodies were unearthed in three days intensive labor. Row by row, with Graves Registration officers checking off each site, the ground was opened and the American bodies removed, hastily wrapped, and tagged. They were then loaded on trucks for the Port of Inchon to be re-stowed and shipped to Japan, the first of thousands of American bodies that would later be processed at the Central Identification Unit (CIU) at Camp Kokura.  

A new cemetery was designated for UN bodies on seventy acres at Tanggok, safe within the southern Pusan perimeter. The construction itself was a major engineering project. Between January and April 1951 hundreds of Koreans carried out the excavation, removing the soil by basket and shovel and hauling in rocks for terracing by wheelbarrow and handcart. On April 6, 1951, the UN Commander, General Mathew Ridgway, dedicated the cemetery to “the heroic dead of the United Nations who gave their lives in Korea.” Subsequently, Tanggok only provided a temporary resting place for American dead on their way to Japan where they were processed in readiness for repatriation to the United States. Several sets of remains of American “unknowns,” however, were left behind in Tanggok as symbolic representatives of the American contribution to the UN forces.  

Even when the retrieval of bodies went to plan, the recovery teams in Korea faced major obstacles. The extremes of weather created enormous problems. Vehicles to transport troops were in high demand and the living resented forgoing places set aside for the dead. Trucks were scarce and in the freezing conditions stiffened bodies were difficult to load and took up precious space.  

For example, in the flight south from Chosin Reservoir, in December 1950, US Infantry officers clashed with the 1st Marine Division when the Marines insisted on bringing with them the bodies of their fallen. By contrast, in the heat of summer and on slow transport by sea, bodily flesh deteriorated rapidly. In February 1951, in response to the uncertainty of the outcome with the Chinese entry into the war, a new policy of Concurrent Return of Bodies was instituted. It was the first in United States combat history. Whenever possible, bodies were sent directly for identification and processing to the CIU at Camp Kokura, on Kyushu, the most southern island of Japan. Trained staff

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22. Cook, “Grave Registration in the Korean Conflict.”
23. Cook, “Grave Registration in the Korean Conflict.”
25. Sledge, Soldier Dead, 57.
were transferred there from Fort Lee in Texas. The mortuary areas worked on two shifts a day to deal with the incoming dead. Several teams of embalmers, identified from military enlistments in Far East Command or hired from the civilian funeral industry in the United States, ran the mortuary rooms where after identification the bodies were embalmed and placed in caskets for shipment home. 27 At first there were the problems of ships arriving in Kokura, “shoe-toe deep in maggots.” 28 Korean storage conditions, however, improved when the transit facility at Tanggok acquired refrigeration, and from February 1952, all evacuations to Japan were done by air. From Kokura the first shipments of coffins, many from the disinterment at Inchon, were taken by rail to Yokahama for despatch. Later caskets were sent from the port adjacent to Kokura.

From the initial disorder, the CIU, with an expanding staff, created an efficient work routine. By the end of 1952 there were four forensic anthropologists, two Americans, a European who had carried out similar work in World War II, and a Japanese university professor, as well as several dental experts and a staff of clerical researchers. The latter sped up the record searching processes by devising a template for recording cadaver characteristics: entered on individual punch cards that could be machine-sorted. 29

Mortuary teams on the ground in Korea were faced with a constantly escalating workload. By July 1952 there were five U.S. military companies in Korea overseeing graves registration. 30 However, throughout the Korean War, the teams struggled to maintain records and retrieve the bodies. The GRU had drawn up a master grid coordinate map that covered all of Korea and, with a card system, attempted to create a record detailing whatever could be gleaned about an individual death. It was tagged with a specific grid location to the spot on which the soldier had been last seen. 31 A meticulous and strenuous job, it relied on an under-trained and over-worked staff. If all went well, recovery teams returned to a battleground that had been previously identified by Marker personnel. On site, four prescribed steps were followed. Team members began by forming a “skirmish line” approximately ten yards apart to systematically walk the 1,000 square meters of the typical grid, searching for signs of graves or remains. Every foxhole, bunker, and gun emplacement was dug out and the contents checked. When a grave was located, it was

27. By the end of January 1951, 5,000 bodies had been removed from temporary burials in Korea and shipped to the CIU at Kokura. Anders, “With All Due Honors,” 4.
28. Sledge, Soldier Dead, 222.
opened, the body disinterred, and the surrounding earth thoroughly sieved through a wire screen to ensure the recovery of the total remains. A careful description of all that was found was recorded and all detritus and partial objects in and near the body soil were placed with the body parts in a pouch. The grid coordinates of the burial site were noted on the report with an overlay sketch of the area. Locals who might be able to furnish information, physical description of the deceased, or date and circumstances of death were interviewed and recorded. All this information accompanied the remains when sent on for formal identification. Finally, an embossed plate or a burial bottle, with an identification number that was tied to the coordinates on the official record, was dug under at the site, leaving evidence that a recovery had taken place. All efforts were made to avoid the retrieval and shipping of non-American remains. 32

On a good day, a six-man team—three investigators, a medical specialist, driver and interpreter—could recover a single set of remains. In early 1953 it was estimated that no less than 4,000 team days would be needed to recover the bodies known to be lost in battle in the south of Korea. 33 Added to this were the American prisoners of war who were dying at an alarming rate in captivity north of the 38th parallel. And there were those who had perished, their bodies hastily buried where they fell, as prisoners were trekked north towards China.

Armistice talks between the belligerents began in mid-1951 but constantly stalled over how to deal with the prisoners of war and the exchange and repatriation of the large numbers being held on each side. 34 When the Korean Armistice Agreement was finally signed on 27 July 1953, it included arrangements for the recovery and exchange of human remains. The Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission that was to oversee the exchange of living prisoners was designated also as responsible for the return of the deceased. 35 Whenever possible, according to the agreement, military commanders were to furnish the other side with all information about gravesites. As well, national

32. For the difficulty of separating Americans from the rest, see LTC John C. Cook QMC of the Quartermaster Unit who noted that with few exceptions, by 1953, the remains recovered were all skeletal, “Graves Registration in the Korean Conflict,” 5.


35. “Agreement Between The Commander-in-Chief, United Nations Command, On the One Hand, and The Supreme Commander of the Korean People’s Army and the Commander of the Chinese People’s Volunteers, On the Other Hand, Concerning a Military Armistice in Korea,” and “Temporary Agreement Supplementary to the Armistice Agreement,” RG 340 (Sec Air Force) Decimal File 1951, Correspondence Control Division 381–400 (3/10.50) Declass authority NW24968, 2737–57, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park (NARA), 2737–57.
teams were to be permitted access to these sites for the retrieval of their own fallen. In practice, though, neither side was willing to allow recovery teams from the erstwhile enemy to traverse their own territory. In the end, each side was responsible for the excavation of all known graves within their own space. In the shadow of the armistice and undoubtedly on both sides, there were few protocols observed in body collection. An American member of a mortuary team involved in the exchange reported that when retrieving Chinese remains: "we just threw the bones into a burlap bag any way we could and brought them down the mountain."

The living prisoners, including some 4,418 Americans, were exchanged in two steps. The ill, some 684 men with 149 Americans, were handed over at Little Switch at the end of April 1953, and the remaining prisoners were transferred in Big Switch in August and September of the same year. The exchange of war dead, dubbed Operation Glory, took place in the demilitarized zone almost a year later. In the interim, the Quartermaster Graves Registration Committee held meetings with their Communist equivalents to comb through the details of transport between railhead and reception center and the authorization and checking of signatures at the point of handover. Ground rules for press reporters and photographers, who had clamored for access to news stories during Little and Big Switch, were hammered out.

The field recovery teams delivered their last swags on August 31, 1954; the exchanges, which took place in the reception center in the demilitarized zone, began on the following day. At 1 p.m. on September 1, the North Korean representative handed over the first despatch of 200 remains of deceased UN personnel. Henceforth, on every day except Sunday, the exchanges continued until September 21, when North Korea presented what they indicated was their last 123 sets of remains. The officials of the U.S. Graves Registration, on behalf of the UN forces, continued their daily deliveries of the enemy deceased until October 11, 1954. At the final formal handover both sides agreed to continue searching in remote areas and to exchange any remains subsequently discovered. Between that date and November 9, the North Korean committee handed over, in two lots, a further 144 UN military remains. Overall, a total of just under 4,200 remains of deceased members of the United Nations forces were passed to the U.S. Graves Registration. As far as could be estimated, the packets included nearly 3,000 Americans. In turn the U.S. Graves Registration provided more than 14,074 enemy deceased, disinterred from UN-held territory.

American remains were sent south by train to Pusan, where they were shipped to the Central Identification Unit in Camp Kokura. There, trained military officials and anthropologists carried out tests, photographed bodies, checked dental records and where available, matched them with existing information. The CIU’s report on each body was forwarded to a Military Board of Review on the mainland that made the final decision on whether there had been a successful match. In that case, the soldier’s next of kin were notified and their advice taken as to destination and disposition of the casket. Sent by the Military Sea Transport Service, it was landed either at San Francisco or New York and from there placed on a special mortuary car provided by the appropriate railroad company. San Francisco was the distribution point for bodies to be shipped west of the Mississippi and New York for those heading home to the East Coast. At the end of Operation Glory the Department of Defense announced that, of 1,868 Americans whose remains had been returned, there had been successful matches for 1,020 of them. The 848 bodies that had not been identified were interred with military honors as “unknown” in the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Hawaii. It was from this group in 1958 that the bodily remains were placed in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery.

In the most recent calculation, of American troops sent to Korea between June 1950 and July 1953, the total battle dead accounted for 54,246 American soldiers of whom the unaccounted-for (that is of bodies not identified and bodies not recovered) totalled 8,126 individuals. Among them were 2,849 prisoners of war who were presumed to have perished in captivity. The official distinctions in the categorization of men missing carried little salience at that time. The differences between the assessment of Unaccounted-For, that is of “Missing,” “Missing in Action,” and “Killed in Action, No Body Recovered,” that evoked so much acrimony after the Vietnam War between veterans’ families and the U.S. government were bundled together in the 1950s to be dealt with under the Missing Persons Act. A month after the end of Operation Big Switch, the Secretary of the Department of Defense announced that for those soldiers who remained unaccounted for, the government would
deal as promptly as possible with their documents in order to bring individual cases before the review boards. These would set in motion the process for a finding of Presumptive Death under the Missing Persons Act. By law, the Secretary of Defense at the end of the review process could make an official declaration of death after a year’s absence from the date at which the disappearance of the nominee was presumed to have happened. In early 1955, more than 4,000 U.S. military men who had been in combat in Korea were declared presumed dead and their families compensated. By the end of that year with a very few exceptions, all unreptatriated U.S. military personnel were declared dead. In early 1956, the Central Identification Unit in Japan was disbanded.

At the time, the possibility that living American prisoners of war may have been left behind in North Korea or in China was not a pressing concern. The families of the missing, by and large, accepted without comment the government’s findings of presumptive death. Their response is notably different from those activist families in the Vietnam War. It is not the place, here, for a detailed comparison of the two groups except to note the dissimilarity in demeanor that reflected different social backgrounds. The American prisoners in Hanoi were mainly flyers, older, well educated, and endowed with articulate and politically savvy wives and parents. Americans prisoners in North Korea were young, the median age when taken into captivity was twenty-one years, and most had little education. Their families, overwhelmingly poor, rural, and working class, were unused to speaking in public let alone challenging pronouncements of senior government officials. In any event, the government’s invocation of the Missing Persons Act in the 1950s was standard policy in dealing with Americans presumed killed in combat overseas. At the same time, as Paul Cole has pointed out, while the U.S. administration in the aftermath of Korea consistently affirmed a commitment to account for all American citizens, there was no specific policy articulated to achieve the objective.

A notable feature of the conflict, and one that had significant postwar consequences, was the high proportion of American soldiers who had become


47. For the questions asked see Cole, POW/MIA Issues, Vol. 3, Appendices, 59–110. Post 1990 there have been frequent intergovernmental contacts with Russian and Chinese officials. See also “The Last Casualties (International Prisoners of War Left in Korea),” Newsweek, June 19, 2000, 44.

48. Detailed biographical data on American ex-Korean POWs is contained in voluminous files, RG153 JAG (Army) RECACP-K Program, [Alphabetical Files] NARA. For a discussion of ex-Korean POWs based on this material, see Judith Keene, “Participators, Middlemen and Resisters: Re-envisioning POWs from the Forgotten War of Korea,” presented at Nation Empire Globe Research Seminar, University of Sydney, November 2006.

prisoners of war. More than 7,245 GIs were taken into North Korean captivity, and in terrible conditions, nearly 40 percent had died. Although the press at the time carried outraged reports about communist cruelty, there was also public and private unease about the behavior of these men. The American Monitoring Service had picked up more than 250 broadcasts made by American POWs praising communism and castigating their homeland. Others signed peace pledges and wrote articles that named America as the prime cause of the Korean War. Immediately postwar, some studies suggested that as many as 70 percent of returned POWs had collaborated with their communists captors. Popular commentators described American soldiers in Korea as having been infected with “give-up-itis,” a condition that was manifested in a tendency to buckle under fire and to succumb to communist propaganda once in captivity. The popular explanation for the phenomenon was that they were a failed generation, lacking the American virtues of loyalty, patriotism, and “Yankee can-do.” Although a number of military experts and civilian psychologists denied that Korean POWs had been brainwashed, in the popular press and in cinematic representation, brainwashing and the Korean War POWs became synonymous.

The Americans freed at Big Switch confronted a battery of interrogations on the ships that brought them home. Panels of military and civilian psychologists and army intelligence officers questioned the ex-POWs about their political beliefs and required detailed information on the behavior and “attitudes” of every other prisoner with whom there had been contact during captivity. Back on home ground, the files were reviewed by teams from the Military Judge Advocate General for possible further prosecution and FBI agents collected additional witness statements. Many returning POWs, chagrined at their treatment on board ship and resenting the official intrusion in their post-war lives, adopted the strategy of reticence: by “sealing over” their Korean past, these ex-POWs avoided the opportunity for possible negative public comment and a potential trigger to painful personal feelings. While the psycho-

51. For example the study by military psychiatrist, Julius Segal, Factors Related to the Collaboration and Resistance Behavior of US Army PW’s in Korea (The George Washington University Human Resources Research office operating under contract with the Dept of the Army, Hum RRO Technical Report 33 December 1956).
53. For the comments by clinicians at a Florida Veterans Administration hospital that dealt with patients who are ex-Korean POW patients, see Lewis H. Carlson, Remembered Prisoners of
logical toll of maintaining silence was often heavy, their POW experience was rendered invisible in what in the United States became the “forgotten war.”

**The Retrieval of American Dead in Korea Post–1985**

In July 1985, as a result of the energetic efforts of a small number of them, a specific veterans’ organization was formed that was devoted to the Korean War. Even though many remained chary of joining up, the existence of the National Korean War Veterans Association signalled a shift in the public visibility of American veterans from this war. A decade later, the inauguration of the Korean War Veterans Memorial on the National Mall provided proof of official recognition of the contribution made by American veterans in Korea. This is not the place for a detailed discussion of either of these events, except to note that beginning in the late 1980s, Korean veterans and ex-POWs were the beneficiaries in the flow back to them of political power generated by groups whose activism was forged around the demand for more information on American prisoners of war and the missing in action from Vietnam. The rehabilitation of the unheralded Korean veterans, by the fact that many of them were POWs and MIAs in a war fought on foreign soil, had brought them within the purview of the extraordinarily powerful pressure group for the Missing in Action and Prisoners of War from the Vietnam War. As a consequence of the connection, the government included Korean veterans and ex-POWs in the commitment to find and retrieve the bodily remains of Americans left behind in the recent foreign wars in which Americans served.

In order to mollify the POW/MIA movement from the Vietnam War, a succession of administrations showered special attention on American prisoners of war and the families of the missing in action. Korean ex-prisoners

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of war have serendipitously shared in this cascade of national honors. For example, President Nixon declared January 25, 1974 a national day to honor the missing in action. President Jimmy Carter in 1978 created a national POW/MIA Recognition Day. Ronald Reagan in 1985 presented a US POW Medal to “all living American soldiers who had spent any time as a prisoner of any war since 1917.” In 1988 George H. W. Bush proclaimed that the third Friday of every September would be “National POW/MIA Recognition Day” and during the same administration The U.S. Postal Service issued a stamp with the inscription, “POW/MIA Never Forgotten.” George W. Bush proclaimed on April 9, 2006 that henceforth this day would mark National Former Prisoner of War Recognition Day to honor POWs who had returned home safely. While this focus on POWs has been provoked by the very effective lobbying of the National League of Families and the Vietnam POW/MIA movement, Korean veterans have also been the recipients of the public recognition bestowed by these national commemorations. The status of POW in the Korean War, a cause of uncertainty and shame after that war, now invests the combat and captive experience of these veterans with a legitimacy that hitherto they had never enjoyed and which they could never have achieved on their own.

The National League of Families from the Vietnam War has become increasingly radicalized since its formation in 1969. The League and the constellation of groups that now orbit around the POW/MIA issue carry enormous political clout across the nation, so that politicians on both sides of the House have been wary of the inevitable political backlash that they face if they fail to support policy that the movement is promoting. An apposite example has been the watering down of government control over the application of the Missing Persons Act in favor of a new act in 1995 that entrenches the determining power of the next of kin. The vehemence of the movement’s opposition to all efforts by the Department of Defense to set in motion presumptive findings of death from the Vietnam War using the previous Missing Person’s Act prompted the new legislation. The U.S. government has pledged “the fullest possible accounting” of American servicemen unaccounted for in the Vietnam War, and as a sign of good faith has created several agencies solely devoted to this end, like the Department of Defense Prisoner of War/Missing Personnel Office (DPMO). The POW/MIA movement, however, has increasingly placed the living bodies of the Missing in Action from Vietnam at the forefront of their demands. Since all of the eighty-three


58. For Hawley, the drive for the recovery of living and lost bodies is a complex political and psychological process to erase the American defeat in Vietnam and restore the body politic. “Bodies and Border Practice: The Search for American MIAs in Vietnam,” Body and Society, 8,
Congressional hearings held since 1970 have reached the same conclusion, that there are no more living POWs from Vietnam in Southeast Asia, the focus of official policy has been redirected to the retrieval of bodily remains. As the political pressure from the MIA/POW movement has escalated, the enterprise of bodily retrieval has grown apace. The effect has been to expand the reach of bodily retrievals to include World War II and the Gulf War and all the conflicts in between.

In early 1975, the Central Identification Laboratory (CIL), closed since 1956, was re-opened at an American military base in Thailand. In 1976 it was moved to Hawaii. Thirteen years later, and much expanded, it was rehoused in new quarters in a purpose-built facility in Hickam Air Force Base in Honolulu (CILHI). Within the US Department of Defense, a designated section was created to over see all matters relating to the discovery and retrieval of living and dead American servicemen and in October 2003, the CILHI and the Joint Task Force-Full Accounting were merged under the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC). By April 2006, in JPAC’s own description, it oversaw the “world’s largest forensic anthropology laboratory” and dispenses an annual budget of $100 million over a staff of 500.\(^59\)

CILHI employs military and civilian forensic anthropologists and odontologists supported by teams of field staff, ordinance and heavy equipment experts, archaeologists and forensic scientists that carry out investigation and excavation wherever there is a likelihood of finding American wartime remains.\(^60\) Sites are chosen from information provided by amateur and professional historians, civilian and military, and MIA families. Indeed the DPMO Web site provides a portal for families and servicemen to suggest sites that they think might reveal remains or MIA traces. According to JPAC information, they have currently a “queue of over 200 sites” worldwide that have already been investigated and are considered in a state of being “ready for recovery.” The CILHI describes their mission as ”worldwide in scope, ranging from the steamy rainforests of South America to the arid deserts of the Middle East, from the icy glaciers of Tibet to the tropical jungles of Papua New Guinea.”\(^61\)

The average recovery expedition lasts from thirty-five to sixty days, depending on the degree of remoteness of the region. Two field investigative teams are initially dispatched to an area when a site is being identified. They are followed by one or more of the eighteen recovery teams on hand con-
sisting of ten to fourteen specialists. The sites in which they are involved operate as highly professional archaeological digs with sections divided into grids with string and stakes marking out the places for excavation. In turn, this usually entails massive soil removal and can involve many dozens of local laborers. They carefully hand sift all dirt to separate out the smallest bone chips and the fragments of personal effects; watches, buckles, fragments of fabric are highly prized by the families at home. Everything that is discovered is shipped by U.S. military aircraft to the JPAC facilities in Hawaii.

Most teams are accompanied by up to 10,000 pounds of survival and excavation equipment and have at their disposal four-wheel-drive vehicles, helicopters, and heavy earth-moving equipment. The JPAC also maintains storage facilities in Hawaii, Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, North Korea, and Papua New Guinea. These strategically placed facilities, according to the JPAC Web site, enable the organization to save the cost of acquiring local supplies. Instead, the organization maintains generators, wet-screening stations, tents, medical supplies, batteries, bottled water, eating utensils, and various stores of non-perishable food. It is a quasi-military operation requiring the sorts of logistical skills and infrastructure that supported the military units to which the dead soldiers originally belonged.62

North Korea became part of this expanding world of potential remains awaiting recovery in 1994. Until the early 1990s, there had been little change in official dealings on Americans missing in Korea.63 Between 1990 and 1994, with the slight warming in relations and as a way to promote direct bilateral relations with the United States, North Korea handed over 208 boxes of what were claimed to be single sets of American remains. Examination by specialist forensic scientists at the CILHI, however, concluded that there was substantial commingling of the bodily fragments, and none belonged to US servicemen. Indeed, the Scientific Director of CILHI opined that probably the remains were from nationalities other than American and they had been stored above ground in North Korea for many years.64 In June 1994, in a policy directed at defusing North Korea’s nuclear ambitions and in return for generous aid from the United States, President Clinton signed a memorandum of understanding with the North Koreans. In the associated talks, President Kim Il Sung agreed to allow joint field expeditions with American mortuary recovery teams working in North Korean territory.

Between 1996 and the suspension of relations with the North Korea in May 2005, CILHI recovery teams made thirty-three joint field forays into North

64. Thomas D. Holland, “Problems and Observations Related to the Forensic Identification of Human Remains Repatriated to the United States by North Korea” (Santa Monica, CA, Rand Corporation, 1993 [P-7820]), p. 17. A table from the DPMO, “Personal Accounting Progress” October 20, 2008, indicates that twenty-five of the suspect 208 sets of remains have been identified.
Korea, where possible, focusing the searches around previously known battle sites. The logistical complexity of the operations in North Korea was enormous. The teams and their gear entered the territory by circuitous travel via China. The enterprise overall and the day-to-day operations called for stupendous planning and hard-nosed bargaining about costs and the details of travel and the compensation to be paid to the North Korean government. In light of the outlay in funds and effort, one could only conclude that the return in identifiable remains from North Korea was very small indeed. The first expedition, near Uson in July 1996, involved an eight-man CILHI search and recovery team that was accompanied by DPMO liaison officers and with North Korean overseers. They used sixty local labourers and spent three weeks “dismantling” a hill where a Korean peasant had reported that, in 1950, his father had buried an American pilot. With the hill demolished and a deep test pit dug, a single set of remains was discovered. In three expeditions, in July, August, and October 1996, and with DPMO archivists at the same time searching the North Korean National Library and the main military museum for information on POWs, six sets of bodily fragments were recovered. The five operations that took place from April to November 1998 produced twenty-two sets of remains and in 1999, by then working in teams with ten and twelve CILHI experts and up to one hundred laborers, six bodies were unearthed. In the last expedition of that year, another three were uncovered.

In total, between 1982 and 2008, from all sources including recovery in South Korea, Japan, China and the disinterment of previously buried “unknowns” from the Korean War in the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Hawaii, 491 bodily remains were unearthed; and of them 102 have been identified. These figures, however, include the 208 suspected non-American remains, handed over unilaterally by North Korea between 1990–1994, of which 25 subsequently have been identified. If both categories from this uncertain exchange are excluded, the total successful recovery of remains between 1982 and 2008 constitute 283 sets of assumed Americans who were deceased between 1950 and 1953. Of them, 77 have been identified and, in turn, 61 returned to their families for burial with full military honors. Among these was Lowell W. Bellar.

Conclusion

For more than a century the bodies of Americans fallen in foreign wars have been repatriated to the United States. The U.S. Mortuary Service has been charged with this difficult task in the twentieth-century wars that in-

volved American servicemen. The American convention of bodily repatriation reflects the fact that the next of kin have always retained ownership of the soldiers’ body even when he or she was killed serving the country abroad. While family custodianship has remained unchallenged, American governments always retained the power to set limits on the period of time in which bodily returns would take place. Similarly, there were official limits on the period of time after which the government would invoke a presumption of death. The Vietnam War brought a major shift in this policy. In addition, the technological development of DNA has been matched by an official willingness to expend funds in applying that technology to the identification of military remains. At the same time, the American state, in response to the political pressure exerted by the Vietnam MIA/POW movement, has foregone its power to declare the missing and unaccounted for as officially dead. The outcome has been a revamped and re-expanded search for American wartime remains. In turn, the consequences of the new policy for the previously unheralded missing, officially presumed dead, from the Korean War, have been remarkable. Not only have they come to share the limelight shed by the highly visible movement for the Vietnam missing and unaccounted for, but as Private Lowell’s family discovered, after more than half a century the missing from Korea can expect to be returned home, re-united with their loved ones, and laid to rest in the family burial plot.

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