



## NATIONAL LEAGUE OF POW/MIA FAMILIES

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### PERSONAL MESSAGE FROM ANN MILLS-GRIFFITHS CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD/CEO

May 19, 2022

It is imperative that you do your very best to make the 52<sup>nd</sup> Annual Meeting this year. Never has there been a more important time for the POW/MIA families to show determination and strength. The dates are June 22-25 and we've extended the registration deadline until June 1<sup>st</sup>. The Hilton Crystal City Hotel has also extended their reservation deadline to get the special rates contracted long ago.

This message is long overdue! The reason? I was trying to have more positive information to share but, in reality, nearly everything has been an uphill battle. Sadly, the challenges include getting timely updates from the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA), the organization that the League was instrumental in helping form in December, 2013, into early 2014. At that time, false allegations and misplaced assertions were running rampant, and Congress held numerous hearings in the fall of 2013. It became abundantly clear that major changes had to be made or Congress would assert itself and decide what was best. That potential caused grave concern over what the outcome might be.

As a result, the League took the lead and sought input, support and wisdom from others – in and out of government, both current and former officials – people in positions to know the challenges that needed to be overcome, including the need to restore policy and priority to what had been working fairly well. I personally handed the constructive plan to then Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel and shared with him the background of those who worked with the League to create the proposed new agency structure, asking him to direct formation within the jurisdiction of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy.

Despite our hopes and consistent support, plus pledged operational priority, the Vietnam War accounting mission slipped, due in no small measure to the COVID pandemic. What had been increasing joint field operations – both investigations and recoveries – dramatically reduced in number. Thankfully, unilateral efforts by Vietnamese personnel – some of them at least partially trained by US specialists – started to play an increasingly important role. Also, DPAA contracted partners began to produce results, but most of them focused on WWII sites in the Asia-Pacific and Europe/Mediterranean regions, not the key Vietnam War-related countries.

The relatively large DPAA scientific staff has focused significant talent, time and attention on disinterring unidentified remains of World War II losses from US cemeteries at home and abroad. The same is true in terms of disinterring and identifying remains of Korean War losses not previously identifiable, and recovered by US personnel in North Korea during earlier years, as well as those turned over by the DPRK. For this unique focus, DPAA receives tremendous praise from the media, Congress, the impacted families, the VSO community and countries around the world, especially those who were US allies in the Korean War and WWII, the “good war.”

To be clear, the League formally supports DoD efforts to recover remains from earlier wars and conflicts, so long as such efforts don't impede seeking answers on the Vietnam War missing. We also support DPAA priority on cases of unaccounted-for WWII personnel whose families never knew what happened to them, rather than the known dead and buried, but not individually identifiable at the time.

Realistically, the priority on seeking answers about, and accountability for, Vietnam War missing has been dramatically reduced. Now that the COVID pandemic has subsided, one would hope joint field investigations and recoveries would be restored to earlier levels that offered so much promise. That has not occurred, despite the DPAA/DIA MOU and pledges of full integration of DIA's Stony Beach specialists into the in-country investigation process. Decisions on planned field operations are altered by some intent on controlling the operational agenda, even rejecting excavations on Vietnam War losses as too little bang for the buck. Instead, they focus on identifying disinterred remains from WWII and the Korean War, while receiving praise and building influence within DPAA.

All of this is counterproductive for achieving Vietnam War accounting objectives that have long been known, but not to some in today's DPAA. Sadly, some are uninformed, lacking basic knowledge of Vietnam's ability to provide answers, archives and even remains that have yet to be returned. Yet, despite years of League effort urging DPAA leadership to develop a fundamental education process, it is not known to exist. In a May 12<sup>th</sup> meeting with Vietnam's long-involved Minister of Public Security, the lack of historical knowledge by US officials was recognized.

Contrary to DPAA's practice of ignoring the value of historical knowledge, the Vietnamese take very seriously the training of personnel in each ministry who will be assigned to work with the US, including all those who serve in the VNOSMP (Vietnamese Office of Seeking Missing Persons). This longstanding office is Vietnam's interagency group that handles matters pertaining to implementation of steps agreed to within the policy of pursuing accounting on a separate humanitarian basis. This is practiced by both governments despite political or policy differences that usually exist. The US no longer has a POW/MIA Interagency Group as existed from 1980 – 1992 when it was summarily discontinued, without acknowledgment.

The League also has long requested an objective assessment of current expectations on accounting results achievable. I've recently learned that the assessment now ongoing is based on later, politically motivated intelligence estimates, rather than the mid-1980s initial, comprehensive assessment on which the policy of humanitarian reciprocity was initiated and from which today's bilateral relationship with Vietnam evolved. An honest assessment of achievable Vietnam War accounting goals is absolutely necessary to enable developing policy and operational plans to reach success! Yes, common sense, and the Vietnamese leadership knows it.

The POW/MIA families and the League deserve honest communication and commitment. Today's DPAA works against openness and cooperation, even going so far as to caution employees against communicating with the League. In fact, some DPAA employees have been put on administrative leave without pay for talking outside of approved channels.....it visibly shows unwillingness to openly communicate with the Vietnam War family members, DPAA's longstanding, staunchest advocates.

Recent changes in the League Office were prompted by my long-planned move to the San Diego area, as were more active roles by Board members, to address organizational requirements. There are now eight committees comprised of Board members and other League officials, two of which focus on Membership and Outreach/Communication. These two Committees are actively working to update membership information to ensure we have current mail and email addresses, phone numbers, etc., to reach out and keep all apprised of emerging critical situations. The League must immediately re-engage all to truly be THE VOICE of our UNRETURNED Vietnam War Veterans. We MUST signal DPAA and senior US officials that we are watching closely, expecting priority on answers about Vietnam War missing and increased accounting results. Eager as we are to hear senior US officials' remarks and working level briefings, we expect them to honor promises and perform as leaders should, including listening to their constituents.

The primary reason the League was founded in 1970 was because the USG thought they knew best.....they didn't, but with President Reagan's support in the 1980s, movement finally began. That is no longer true! You are needed at our 52<sup>nd</sup> Annual Meeting! Request a case review and raise questions, also during the Q&A session after listening to official briefings, best presented honestly, recognizing that each has a different role and varied challenges. The honesty and forthrightness in presentations garners confidence and shares reality. If our Annual Meeting is poorly attended, the chances for achieving the fullest possible accounting for our missing men will be severely undercut. I urge you to PLEASE make every effort to attend, listen and speak out respectfully. If you can't attend due to health or other viable reasons, ask someone in your family to join the League and represent you and your missing loved one. If you don't, who will?

I'm not one to be overly dramatic or emotional, but your presence is urgently needed, and earnestly sought. PLEASE DO YOUR BEST TO ATTEND, and contact your Service Casualty Office (SCO). COIN Assist transportation is approved and available. If you have not yet received information from your SCO, call them and tell them you need information to make flight arrangements. We are counting on you to stand up for your missing loved one .....never more urgently needed than NOW! As ever and onward.....Ann