

REMARKS OF RICHARD T. CHILDRESS
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Ann, Board members, fellow veterans and government officials, I am honored once again to be able to address you on one of the most fundamental national issues that illustrates American values at their core – our nation's dedication and gratitude to those veterans who have yet to return to our fold.

We are a year older and, hopefully, wiser and as dedicated as we were when I was first with you in 1982, and as I have been every year since. The year has brought many changes, some of which are perplexing to my generation. We have outlawed large Cokes, but legalized marijuana, 40% of households now have a females as the primary bread-winner, and while I'm unsure if it is related, young men appear to be shaving their chests more often than their faces.

Speaking of the ravages of time, this grandfather was recently reminded by a story in our local paper.....seems a grandpa was cradling his grandson on his lap when the boy looked up and was studying the wrinkles on his face and got the nerve to touch them. Then he touched his own face and looked more puzzled. Finally, the little guy asked, "Grandpa, did God make you? Replied Grandpa, "Sure did fella, a long time ago" "Well, did God make me?" asked the little guy." "Yes he did, and that wasn't too long ago," said Grandpa. "Boy," said the lad, "He sure is doing a much better job these days." This brings us to the topic.

Each year, I'm asked about government efforts. The question is "Are they doing a good or bad job?" And the answer is yes. Each year, I'm hoping to deliver all good news, a record of stellar accomplishments that we all would welcome. This year is no exception.....there is good news and bad.

At one point, I was so incensed that if I had delivered my first draft, it would have put me into the witness protection program. But, as in years past, the League Annual Meeting somehow wakes up the bureaucracy and they begin to place long overdue emphasis on outstanding issues, solvable months earlier. This year, I am going to cover these in order for you to appreciate the entire journey, rather than simply praise an action that should have been accomplished sooner and without the bureaucratic paralysis and blood-letting.

Rather than depress you at the end of my remarks, I will begin with the bad news, then settle your stomach for lunch with some better news.

The removal of the issue from the policy community with formation of DPMO in 1992 and abolishment of the POW/MIA Interagency Group continues to be a problem. Recent and current challenges that I could have solved with a short phone call to my contacts in State or Defense, or in an IAG meeting or, if necessary, with the National Security Advisor or the President, are instructive.

The continued delay for months of a White House decision on the US-Russia Joint Commission charter is shameful and should have been resolved long ago. Similarly, obstruction on menial legal grounds caused cancellation of a scheduled Cambodia field operation. I used to display a brass plaque in my office that quotes Shakespeare: "The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers." It has a lower profile in my home since my son became one of the breed. Anyway, when lawyers discover potential legal problems, then they provide a solution, not simply drop the problem in the commander's lap. Again, this problem was mundane, but became a huge issue that could have been easily solved.

Another upcoming serious challenge being appealed from below threatens to remove our veteran civilians from their jobs in-country. A personnel rule for OSD career people, such as Ron Ward, would limit in-country tours to five years. If implemented, many would simply resign, rather than rotate to a slot where their skills would not be used. We could lose language qualified specialists who have spent years building rapport with their counterparts. Again, a phone call in years past could stop it. Secretary Hagel could solve this with a call. Q should get to him before Ann does.

Last year, I outlined many of the challenges facing DPMO and JPAC. I was supportive of the new DPMO Director and was hopeful that his tenure would result in a coherent organization focused on the mission. At the time, Major General Tom, at JPAC, was in a constant battle for resources in an on-again, off-again budget quagmire and less than vigorous policy support from Washington. We faced some challenges in Laos, but a full-scale program of investigations and recoveries had resumed in Vietnam and the League initiative on archives was agreed to by Vietnam, despite the cynical attitude toward it from some in government.

This year, the budget challenges continued for the new JPAC Commander, and the cuts to the OSD budget, including the sequester, set off a series of responses within DoD to deal with the serious impact on training and war-fighting capability.

Given the public rhetoric, one would have initially believed that it was the Fall of the Roman Empire. To be sure, there were negative effects. Civilian furloughs one day a week would have crippled JPAC field operations, limiting our talented specialists from extended operations. JPAC continued to struggle with spending decision priorities. Inevitably, some of the decisions made became of real concern to those of us with years of monitoring and meddling in their business.

We have a sadly well-documented history of a lack of close coordination by DPMO with the League. This attitude toward League concerns or objectives was often cursory or looked upon as a public affairs challenge, rather than a serious policy issue. Inherent in this attitude was the historically provable nonsense that "I can handle Ann." Of course, Ann leads the most informed group in the nation on this issue, has the full backing of the membership and has government reach horizontally and vertically that exceeds the majority of many officials working on the issue. Sounds easy to handle to me. She is responsible for the breakthrough on archival research, the agreement by Laos to renew the critical helicopter contract with the New Zealand helicopter company which, if not agreed upon, could have ended many field operations in Laos. Not only will they not give her credit for these breakthroughs, but recently, the Deputy Director of Vietnam's Office for Seeking Missing Persons, better known to most as VNOSMP, was in Washington with a delegation and she wasn't even notified.

One individual on this delegation was present at our Hanoi discussions on archives and was influential in their decision. What planetary phenomenon would explain this omission?

But, the beginning last year was hopeful. The new Director, Q Winfield, enthusiastically tackled the communications problems between DPMO and JPAC; attempted to reconsider perceived mission overlap, formed teams and councils to address the problems and provide recommendations, initiated exchanged between DPMO and JPAC, and began a close consultative regime with Ann and the League on new proposed policy revisions. I was hopeful, as well that he recognized the past DPMO blunders, like attempting to capture the budget plus-up for an operational role that, thankfully, went to JPAC. He also reassured Ann and me at lunch in the period of last year's meeting that he had a healthy perspective on the Congressional legislation that prescribed a goal of 200 identifications per year. He was clear; pursuing this goal would not come at the expense of the Vietnam War accounting effort.

This was a vital reassurance to us as we had watched the trend of cutting analysts from JCSD and Research and Analysis in DPMO by the previous DPMO Director. Added to this was the push for expanded disinterments of unknowns in national cemeteries that, if not handled properly, could negatively affect the availability of scientific personnel for operations in Southeast Asia. The truth is that Congress had no real basis for the 200 figure, and all of the WWII researchers and historians I have consulted indicate they will never be resolved in large numbers. Further, Congress passed this law without providing adequate resources and directed GAO to see how all of this is working out. Essentially, OSD was given a partially unfunded mandate and Congress should be told forthrightly.

This truth has not deterred the bureaucracy from floating adolescent and damaging approaches – to respond to an unrealistic Congressional requirement. Unfortunately, this truth, like all truths, “leaves on horseback and returns on foot,” a true cliché in today's news.

So what was the real response of DPMO to this conundrum? The solution was inexplicable and damaging. It was to move the two most experienced senior personnel with knowledge on the Southeast Asia mission into new-positions and attempt to transfer more analysts out of the already stripped Vietnam War Research & Analysis section. And next? Abolish Research & Analysis as a separate division and rename it – you guessed it: Operations!

The Vietnam War section at DPMO has gone from 14 or more personnel to only 8 in the last few years, and WWII from 2 to as high as 22, in spite of the relative paucity of likely recoveries from that war. This becomes especially stark when one considers our less than adequate response to Vietnam's call to increase the pace and scope of operations and a master excavation list of 166 sites, some that date back to 1994. These have been derisively named “dry holes” by some in the bureaucracy. Add to this the Vietnam War remains still in the Lab and on the shelf, along with a backlog of Stony Beach reports that have not been analyzed. And we are still being told that the priority has not shifted. It is one thing, disgusting as it is, to deceive others, but self-deception is even worse. One gets the impression that many are in this toxic policy cloud – or how could they continue to define the state of the issue so erroneously in favor of overwhelming contrary evidence. Thus, the title of these remarks – “Read Carefully, Listen More Carefully.” There is little consistency with what has been written in policy documents and the words and actions that have followed.

In addition to the evident self-deception, it affects new personnel with little to no experience in the issue. What do they perceive when one of the most experienced policy persons with in-depth knowledge of Vietnam War accounting is put in an office in charge of innovation? The result is that they approach the issue like it is some endless void in Star Trek where no one has gone before.

The issue has a history of endless studies, investigations and internal panels that all represented an attempt to innovate. The results have been so destructive that the word innovation in this issue should be cause to take shelter. It has resulted in the issue being pulled from the policy level, the abolishment of the interagency group, the shutdown of the DIA POW/MIA Vietnam section and moving it under DPMO where it came under political pressure; attempts to make DPMO operational and on and on and on. Please stop innovating; think strategically of what is in the real mission and the components to seek the fullest possible accounting. The functions and job descriptions are simple and clear-cut – just stop the drama and get to work. And quit justifying mistakes by saying “Congress made me do it.” If it ain’t broke, don’t break it.

The greatest blow to the Vietnam War accounting effort in recent memory was the removal of Gary Sydow, former Director of Research and Analysis in DPMO, a post he has held since 2002. Gary spent 25 years as a senior intelligence official and analyst on the POW/MIA issue. I first met Gary in 1985 when he joined DIA’s special Office for POWMIA Affairs. The previous few years at the White House, I met regularly with the specialists in this office and provided our full, visible support by inviting them for a round-table discussion at the Old Executive Office Building, visited to their offices and arranged for the DIA Director to personally brief President Reagan on this issue.

These actions were taken in recognition of their critical contributions to the issue. They informed us of Vietnam’s knowledgability, internal relationships in the governments with which I was negotiating, along with detailed illustrative cases that I could use in negotiations. They were invaluable to me as a resource for eight years. Gary was integral to their successful contributions and continued to be recognized as a vital professional asset as the leader of Research and Analysis.

Given this record of experience and criticality to the mission, General Winfield decided to remove this senior analyst from his essential job. Incredibly, the plan was to move him into communications and public affairs – a perfect fit for an intelligence professional who detests public appearances. When the perfect fit didn’t seem right, Gary was asked to write job descriptions. Naturally insulted and demoralized, Gary saw this as the final indicator of the reduced priority on POW/MIA research and analysis and resigned his office. I can’t begin to describe the enormity of this loss. The sad fact is the absence of his contributions and judgment may not be noticed by the leadership due to their own knowledge deficit of what contributions Research and Analysis make to the mission. Essentially, the issue has lost a complete library. Recent events such as this have removed me from trust, to trust, but verify.

OK, I guess its JPAC’s turn. General Tom might enjoy this in his new role, but don’t look smug. We have a new commander in the person of Major General Kelly McKeague. I had not met him until this week, and it is his first League meeting. We have good reports of his balance and overall judgment, and he has closely consulted with Ann. He is also attempting

to truly surge on field operations with the available budget. Thus, I would say I'm still in the trust stage.

There have been a few missteps in my opinion, but they can be attributable to newness and an atmosphere of some perceived challenges to JPAC execution and priorities. First, acknowledging the budget constraints, choices were made that limited investigations and, in one case, an archival session, a critical component of achieving the fullest possible accounting.

Similarly, the goal will never be reached if investigations continue to be limited. And the human component is clearly missing in the statistical, budgetary matrixes being used. Recently, an investigation was canceled on a case with a mother who has waited patiently for 45 years for this critical step to account for her son.

Over the years, I've raised the continuing problem of the Lab's role in the mission. I've also consistently praised them for their unparalleled expertise in forensic identifications and the dedication of their talented young anthropologists who go to the field with our teams, but cautioned about the mission creep that is still evident. A common human failing is that if you excel in one job, you think you are an authority in all jobs.

There seems to be a tendency in the Lab to scale the fence of other staff directorates and influence policy decisions best left to others and the Commander. We have some of the best warhead and ballistic missile designers in the world, but their role is not to tell policy-makers where they should be deployed. Being intelligent doesn't mean you are wise. JPAC's policy priorities are a function of command judgment as to what will accelerate progress to the fullest possible accounting, to include the division of resources between excavations, investigations, archival research and support of unilateral actions by host governments. These components are all critical and, by themselves, are necessary, but insufficient to reach the fullest possible accounting. Unless pursued simultaneously, we cannot reach the goal.

These were errors, but not catastrophic. They do reflect vulnerability inherent in the atmosphere at JPAC for years that can distort decision-making. General McKeague demonstrated competence, openness to other views and appreciation of the various, but separate competencies of his staff that set the stage for a quick, productive learning curve. We will remain hopeful and give him a warm welcome. But, all must recognize much of what we are seeing in the POW/MIA community is a reaction to budget and congressional pressure. It is causing violations of one of Rumsfeld's useful rules to "not let the urgent crowd out the important."

Well, there is some good news – I promised. The DIA leadership is present again and went to extraordinary lengths to ensure all of their collectors were present for the meeting. Further, the DIA leadership assured Ann that despite budget concerns, DIA has fenced Stony Beach funding, thus preventing any cuts to their numbers or activities. Stony Beach specialists are some of the unsung heroes of this issue, laboring quietly to follow leads, do document research, expose scams and try to make sense of a confusing environment of different signals. Their work, along with intelligence analysis, can make them feel they are chasing mice inside their skulls. It takes special folks, and we have them. Fortunately, they have their egos under control since their role is not recognized in any POW/MIA document and

policy papers that come from DPMO, JPAC and Congress. We certainly appreciate them and, given their unique training, they may strangely appreciate the unfair public neglect.

We should also note the outstanding support to this mission provided by the State Department, both in the Mainland Southeast Asia Bureau at headquarters in Washington, but also the respective Ambassadors and Country Teams in Hanoi, Vientiane and Phnom Penh. We are now in a transition, with a new Secretary of State and a new Assistant Secretary for East Asian Affairs soon to be named, as well as a new Deputy Assistant Secretary for Southeast Asia. In addition, Ambassadorial rotations have begun. Such transitions are sometimes fraught with uncertainties. Hopefully, the veterans at State will pass on the importance of their continued solid support. Ann, I'm sure, will be in touch with them.

Some outside anomalies have also surfaced this year. In addition to the Congressional goals of their legislation to reach 200 IDs per year, unnecessarily distracting executive branch decision-making, they struck again in a resolution by Rep. Michelle Bachmann to form another House Select Committee. This perennial resolution has no chance of passage and is simply pandering to the more extreme elements in the public with little knowledge of the issue. It also makes the public vulnerable to long-disproven conspiracy and cover-up theories. And, its introduction and accompanying rhetoric fires up misinformation and takes attention away from the serious challenges the issue faces. The introduction even resurfaced the left wing loon H. Bruce Franklin, author of the polemic-filled "MIA, Mythology in America," essentially asserting we have all wasted our time since the end of the war pursuing this issue.

Further, the resolution uses the figure "83,000 missing" from all wars. Of course the number is bogus nonsense. The League uses realistic numbers, as does the VFW and others, but despite attempts to get DPMO to use accurate figures, they refuse and it keeps being repeated in newspapers and in Congress, all attributable to DoD. I hope to be around when the government wishes to proclaim we have reached the fullest possible accounting and look at the soft-shoe bureaucratic dance when the public says you are 50,000 short. Man-up and change, or at least explain the numbers for those who follow you.

And we have a few folks who appear to be off their meds this year. Another motorcycle group was formed with a board that contained some members with a conspiratorial outlook. Their lists of demands, except one, have already been met, which demonstrates their knowledge level.

Sadly a family member decided to insert herself directly into a scheduled excavation of her father's site in Vietnam and created such a disturbance that it could not be finished. Who knows now when it can be rescheduled? We have had a few negative actions over the years by veterans and aspiring RAMBOs, but this was a first and, hopefully, the last – sad, sad!!!!

Another movie producer has struck as well. Despite clear evidence, including fingerprint analysis and DNA testing conducted years ago by the US, that his source was posing as an American and was an imposter, he went ahead with his project and caused turmoil in the family, as well as undercut the reputation of the GI Film Festival. Given his investment of time and resources, I guess he felt that stupidity deserved a payoff.

Government officials working on this issue clearly need to take a deep breath and realize what will achieve the fullest possible accounting. It was a policy approved in the 1980s – a live POWs, his remains or convincing evidence why neither is possible. These should be on a marble plaque in each office, as if written by a golden finger. It will require each agency or staff directorate to concentrate on these mission truths and their skills together in a complimentary way. You should be concerned that over the years, the convincing evidence portion of the mission has disappeared from the policy statement. It is an open door to write-off cases, and should be reinstated immediately by DPMO and JPAC.

The recent cutback on investigations and archival research due to budget pressure is short-sighted, but I understand some restoration is taking place. Similarly, simplistic solutions to the Master Excavation List (MEL) will set back, not advance, toward the ultimate goal. Any family member whose loved one is on that list should be vigilant if their case is removed. They should ensure that a full and exhaustive investigation has been conducted followed by a complete narrative of the investigations, along with assurances that all pertinent forensic tools have been exhausted before acceptance.

In the spirit of achieving this difficult mission, I have a few recommendations.....

The following are for DPMO. Q, last year you said you owed me one – I'm calling in the chips and, given the events of this past year, I'm adding two. .

- Be realistic about WWII recoveries. Everyone knows they need to be pursued, but be honest about what can actually be expected in recoveries and gear your resources to this reality. Drop the mantra of operations – it distorts the perception of your mission to the staff, your counterpart organizations and the families.
- The Director of DPMO has a narrow window to recover his credibility with the Vietnam War families and their veteran supporters after the disastrous attempt to downgrade DPMO Research and Analysis, move SEA personnel to WWII and the crushing removal of Gary Sydow. First, admit the error openly. Ensure all know about your recent actions to not take more personnel, and pledge to R & A more resources if needed. Reiterate to all the complete original definition of the fullest possible accounting. Inform the DoD chain of command you cannot fulfill your WWII mandate until vacant slots are filled and resourced. A signal of complete resolve to fulfill your mission obligations and promises to the Vietnam War families will signal the bureaucracy, JPAC, Congress, and veterans, as well as Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia of your seriousness. This trust has taken a body blow that needs urgent repair. And I know trust breaks easier than it mends.
- Such a course will also help to educate the low information personnel in the issue about the critical role of Research, Analysis and investigations to achieve the fullest possible accounting. The absurd ignorance of those who carp about overlap between the functions of JPAC/J2 (now RA) and DPMO R&A (now Ops), needs to be silenced decisively. By their logic, the presence of a Division G2 in the Army negates the need for a Chief of Staff for Intelligence on the Army staff or, indeed, why a DIA or CIA? If they are so ignorant so as not to understand the difference in functions, one wonders why they are still around.

As to JPAC, let's first warmly welcome General McKeague, the brave new commander that followed in Steve Tom's place. I want you to know that despite errors, the families can be very forgiving, especially given the trek they have endured for over four decades. Your success is their success, and they pray for your success, but have learned they need to be an integral part of it. I learned this beginning in 1982 and never regretted their deep and constant intercessions. But a couple of recommendations:

- Do what is needed to restore the balance between excavations, investigations and archival research. The latter two are less expensive, but the payoff over time is great and required if we are ever going to reach the fullest possible accounting. Archival research needs full, permanent financing as long as needed. Investigations need to be restored and increased for each in-country JFA and between JFAs as needed. We know you are trying to surge on excavations to catch up and have recently added some investigations, but these investigative elements need to be permanent and all elements need to work in parallel and simultaneously.
- Do not hesitate to make clear that the mission is defined from the top to your "iron colonels" – I used to be one – as well as the Lab or others who encroach on your long-term mission requirements.

The community as a whole should know that radical solutions are floating to resolve these questions. Given the attack on R & A at DPMO, some are proposing to go back to a successful model and provide the slots to DIA and move the R & A function to the intelligence community. Some have looked at the Lab encroachment on policy and said the only solution is to remove them from JPAC and place them under the Armed Forces Medical Examiner which would re-orient them to their specialty.

I personally have seen the chaos that accompanies reorganization in this issue and most have not lived up to the hype; thus, I'm not in favor of either of these proposed solutions, but all should be aware of the frustration below the surface that is generating such discussions.

Be patient, I'm about finished and will retreat back to the mountains of North Carolina, still blissfully without a computer, or smart phone, or Walkman. Elli will return to feeding all the wildlife she determines are not dangerous, except me, who she feels she is required to feed due to a legal obligation. And, let us be grateful to the League for providing this meeting each year. I understand the IRS used 35 people to scout their convention hotel. And Ann did it with one employee and her dedicated volunteers.....But, Ann, we didn't get line-dancing or hot tubs.

And finally, let me reassure the government officials working diligently to provide answers to the families, I've been where you are and you will come out of this with scar tissue, but great rewards. Your work is critical, and I'm personally behind you to help in any way possible, gray hair and all. In the interim, may God bless our collective efforts. Ann's signaling I must depart, as my Twitter account is full and my Facebook page and blog need urgent updating.....