

# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

2157 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6143

MAJORITY (202) 225-5051

MINORITY (202) 225-5074

<http://oversight.house.gov>

### **“The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency: Bringing Our Nation’s Heroes Home”**

#### **Subcommittee on National Security**

**November 19, 2019 at 2:00pm; 2247 RHOB**  
**Chairman Stephen F. Lynch**

Good afternoon, everyone. Today we will examine the progress of the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, or DPAA, in fulfilling its historic mission to “provide the fullest possible accounting for our missing personnel to their families and the nation.” This will mark the first congressional hearing to exclusively focus on oversight of DPAA since the agency’s creation in 2015.

At the outset, I’d like to commend Ranking Member Hice of Georgia for his leadership in supporting POW/MIA identification and recovery efforts. On a bipartisan basis, Mr. Hice and I have been working to address outstanding budgetary, operational, and management challenges facing the DPAA in order to maximize the agency’s ability to account for the more than 82,000 missing servicemembers from World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and other conflicts. In September, Mr. Hice’s staff joined me on a Congressional Delegation to visit DPAA’s headquarters and skeletal identification laboratory, located on Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, to receive a mission update from Deputy Director Rear Admiral Jon Kreitz.

The streamlining of POW/MIA tracking and recovery efforts into a single agency, now DPAA, followed extensive audits conducted by the Department of Defense Office of Inspector General, the Government Accountability Office, and other federal agencies. These reports highlighted critical mission gaps arising from the fragmentation of accounting operations across the three entities, each reporting through separate chains of command. In response to bipartisan concerns over the lack of a clearly defined mission, inconsistent policies, indeterminate resources, and other obstacles facing the accounting community, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel and Congress mandated the creation of a single organization to lead a renewed effort to identify and recover the remains of missing American military personnel.

To the credit of agency leadership, since 2015, DPAA has taken meaningful steps towards refining its mission, unifying agency functions and personnel, and augmenting its accounting and recovery operations.

With 218 recorded identifications in Fiscal Year 2019, DPAA reports that it exceeded the previous highest annual total recorded by the agency or its predecessor organizations. In order to further improve its missing person identifications, DPAA is developing a strategy with an end goal of making at least 350 identifications annually by 2025. To this end, the agency plans to continue expanding its disinterment operations. In December of last year, DPAA commenced a large-scale, multi-phase disinterment project for 652 sets of remains of American servicemen

buried as unknown soldiers at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, also known as the Punchbowl.

DPAA is also reinforcing its mission through diplomatic partnerships with 46 host nations and collaborating with veterans service organizations, non-profit institutions, and other private sector entities. Investigation and recovery team operations are ongoing in Laos, Myanmar, Malaysia, South Korea, Guam, Palau, and other host nation sites. Moreover, the agency reports that its strategic public-private partnerships in field investigatory and excavation work, historical research analysis, and data collection have augmented recovery operations and helped to maximize scarce resources.

However, gaps in our POW/MIA accounting and recovery efforts remain. The Office of the Inspector General reports that while DPAA allocates the majority of its operational budget to Vietnam War-related cases in Southeast Asia, the agency has not effectively communicated its rationale to accounting community stakeholders. In certain cases, the prioritization of Southeast Asian cases has distracted DPAA from pursuing viable missions related to previous conflicts outside of the Pacific Theater. The Office of Inspector General also found gaps in information-sharing between the agency and the families of unaccounted-for-service personnel. The communication of timely and accurate information to our POW/MIA families is a core responsibility of DPAA and we must make every effort to improve this process.

We must also examine other personnel and operational challenges. For example, mandatory furloughs of Department of Defense civilian employees in previous years have suspended the search and recovery missions of DPAA's predecessor agencies and brought them to a virtual halt. Given that agency anthropologists, life support analysts, and other civilian workers were forced to take monthly furlough days, they could not participate in operations that typically last over a month. Delays are also problematic because the extreme conditions during the annual rainy season in places like Vietnam and Laos provide a limited window of opportunity to conduct recovery operations. In order to ensure the continuation of DPAA missions in the event of future budgetary uncertainty, earlier this month I introduced H.R. 4879, the *Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency Support Act*, to exempt DPAA civilian employees who are deployed on recovery missions from furloughs.

Back in 2011, I led a bipartisan Congressional Delegation to Vietnam and the Philippines to examine search and recovery operations conducted by one of DPAA's predecessor agencies, the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command. I recall that our counterparts from the Vietnamese Office for Seeking Missing Persons and the Philippines Government repeatedly expressed their great admiration for the United States for its unwavering national commitment to leaving no servicemember behind. It is our collective determination as a nation to bring America's heroes home that guides this Subcommittee's oversight in this area.

I'd like to thank our witnesses for being here today, and with that, I'll yield to the Ranking Member from Georgia, Mr. Hice.

---

---

Contact: Aryele Bradford, Communications Director, (202) 226-5181