

Final Accounting And Closure For A Nation

EWS 2005

Subject Area National Military Strategy

FINAL ACCOUNTING AND CLOSURE FOR A NATION

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Contemporary Issues Paper

Major D. Verda, CG 6

8 February 2005

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE 08 FEB 2005		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2005 to 00-00-2005	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Final Accounting and Closure for a Nation				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) United States Marine Corps,Command and Staff College, Marine Corps University,2076 South Street, Marine Corps Combat Dev Command,Quantico,VA,22134-5068				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 11	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

The United States is committed to the return of its prisoners of war (POW) and missing in action (MIA). The dark silhouette of a man with the words "You Are Not Forgotten" represents this effort. It is displayed prominently at every government building and Veteran of Foreign Wars Post as a symbol of our nation's determination, almost an obsession, to recover those service members listed as POW or MIA. Can the United States recover all its POWs and MIAs? Given the numbers, locations, and resources available to accomplish the task, it seems impractical. The current political, social and economic policies which guide the recovery process are flawed and require a fair distribution of the worldwide recovery assets.

Political

The push to have a full accounting of MIAs came from the distrust and general discontentment of the American people during the Vietnam War. Prior to World War II, only on rare occasions did the United States make an effort to locate and repatriate MIAs. Following World War II, graves

registration units scoured the battlefields; however, they were not out to account for every man who was MIA.¹

Current records indicate approximately 88,000 men are listed as MIA from World War II to the present.² The probability of recovering or identifying all 88,000 men is remote. Even with the latest scientific technology, about half will never be found. The list includes naval aviators lost at sea, sailors swept overboard, and soldiers and Marines who died on the battlefield and could not be recovered.³ Other reasons remains cannot be found include: types of soil (acidic soil degrades remains), termites destroy remains, and inaccurate or false information about the location of remains from witnesses.

The effort to recover our missing service members enforces the commitment of the United States to "leave no man behind". However, there is a disparity on the priority of recovery efforts. Compared to World War II and Korea, Vietnam Conflict had the lowest percentage of total missing (about 3%), but the highest percentage of recovery missions (72%).⁴ Non-governmental organizations (NGO) have enormous

¹ Earl Swift, *Where They Lay* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 27.

² Warren P. Strobel, et al, The slow search for American MIAs. *U.S. News & World Report*, November 1998, 12.

³ Rudi Williams, Some Missing May Never Be Accounted For (Corrected Version), *Defense Link*, 21 February 1996.

⁴ T. Morganthau and T. Barrett, Hoping against hope (cover story), *Newsweek*, July 1991.

political influence. NGOs successfully lobby support from Congressional representatives for specific cases. Political pressure can affect the priority of some cases. For example, 2004 Presidential Candidate Howard Dean's brother, Charles Dean, was recovered in Laos taking precedence over military service member cases because of political pressure.⁵ If it is the goal of the United States to bring every serviceman home, politics should not interfere or prioritize who is recovered. The politics of war should not interfere with the effort to bring MIAs home.

SOCIAL

Families are the other casualties of a nation at war. During World War II, families may have only received a telegram informing them that their loved one was MIA. This MIA status left families with hope. As a result, many families were under enormous emotional strain and found it difficult to cope.

Following World War II, some families were comfortable leaving their loved ones remains overseas where they had been interred. These families were able to complete their

⁵ Dustin Frelich, "Turkey treatment for Dean's brother," < <http://www.etaalkinghead.com/archives/turkey-treatment-for-deans-brother-2003-11-27.html>> (7 February 2005).

grieving because they had knowledge of their loved ones death and internment. After the war, families were given the opportunity to have the remains disinterred and returned to the United States. However, most did not have the remains returned. This is illustrated by the 93,243 Americans interred overseas.⁶

After the Vietnam Conflict, the perception of war in the United States had changed. Families had great uncertainty over the status of POWs and MIAs because they were not satisfied with information provided by the government. Only the return of their loved one's remains, or conclusive evidence why they cannot be recovered, ultimately brings closure.⁷

A program focused on counseling could greatly benefit the families of the deceased. It could help in the grieving process and ultimately bring closure.

ECONOMIC

In the six years following World War II, the United States spent about \$158 million on recovery efforts. Currently, the United States spends approximately \$100

⁶ Richard L. Sherman, America's 14 overseas World War II cemeteries are serene and sobering monuments to war's cost, *World War II*, January 2002.

⁷ James W. Wold, Keeping faith with MIAs(cover story), *Defense*, 1995 Issue 4.

million per year on recovery efforts in Southeast Asia alone.⁸ There is separate funding for worldwide missions including Europe, Korea, and the Pacific. Every year, one hundred positive identifications are made of United States MIAs.

Future identifications of MIAs will eventually decline because all the sites in easily accessible areas have been investigated and recovered. The remaining sites are located at higher elevations and in the dense jungles of such places as: Vietnam, Laos, Papua New Guinea, and Burma.

First hand witnesses provide the recovery teams with vital information such as crash locations and personnel status. However, every year witnesses die and accurate recollection of events continue to fade. Members of investigation and recovery teams now rely on second hand witnesses who do not always have the correct information.⁹ For example, a witness may have heard about an incident from his grandfather and attempts to lead recovery teams to a potential location based on stories he heard but never witnessed.

The prospect of conducting investigation or recovery's can improve the political and economic standing of host

⁸ Swift, 288.

⁹ Mick Elmore, The hunt for those missing gets harder, *U.S. News & World Report*, February 2000.

nations with the United States. For example, in return for cooperation on MIA issues, the United States has begun to normalize relations with Vietnam, resulting in favorable trade agreements. In addition, recovery teams are also required to utilize and compensate host nations for land and transportation assets such as helicopters.

Risks

There are many inherent risks in conducting recovery missions. There is a constant threat from unexploded ordnance. Each country has deadly wildlife that the teams are forced to co-habit with, such as the banded crate in Vietnam and the Russell Viper in Burma which requires immediate medical care. In 2001, seven United States service members were killed on a Vietnamese helicopter crash while preparing for recovery operations.

Pile up all the risks that accompany the missions and you have to ask: Are they worth it? As the years pass and the lab's cases in Southeast Asia get tougher – the sites more remote, the witnesses older and less reliable, the effects of decay and erosion more destructively complete – we draw ever nearer to the point where the risks outweigh the results. Will we acknowledge that point when we reach it?¹⁰

¹⁰ Swift, 220.

Closure

For the last twenty years, the United States' highest priority has been the fullest possible accounting of POWs and MIAs.¹¹ The political, social and economic policies which guide the recovery process are flawed. Political links have created an unequal allocation of limited recovery resources to one conflict, Southeast Asia. Families have been devastated and unable to cope with their losses. As the recovery teams venture into more austere locations, the possibility of losing another life to recover remains increases. In the future, the United States will have to determine when the social and economic costs outweigh the recovery of every service member.

¹¹ Michael D Janich, "House Subcommittee on Military Personnel." *Advocacy and Intelligence Index for Prisoners of War - Missing in Action*, 28 June 1995.

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