

POW/MIA'S

R E P O R T

OF THE

SELECT COMMITTEE ON POW/MIA AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES SENATE



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Attachment 2

To those who remembered

We salute, as well, the veterans and responsible activist groups who have never stopped pushing for answers. These are the people who fought against the forgetting; who persisted in their questioning; and whose concerns led directly to the creation of the Select Committee. The Committee's investigation has validated their efforts, for they had good reason to argue that the full story was not being told, to suggest that there was more to learn and to insist that a renewed focus on the issue would produce greater pressure and yield new results.

It is to these Americans, therefore, to the POWs who returned and to all those who did not, to the families and veterans who kept the memory alive, that we pay tribute, and to whom we have dedicated the work of this Committee, including this final report.

THE COMMITTEE'S PURPOSE

The most basic principle of personal honor in America's armed forces is never willingly to leave a fellow serviceman behind. The black granite wall on the Mall in Washington is filled with the names of those who died in the effort to save their comrades in arms. That bond of loyalty and obligation which spurred so many soldiers to sacrifice themselves is mirrored by the obligation owed to every soldier by our nation, in whose name those sacrifices were made.

Amidst the uncertainties of war, every soldier is entitled to one certainty—that he will not be forgotten. As former POW Eugene "Red" McDaniel put it, as an American asked to serve:

I was prepared to fight, to be wounded, to be captured,
and even prepared to die, but I was not prepared to be
abandoned.

The Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs was created to ensure that our nation meets its obligation to the missing and to the families of those still listed as unaccounted for from the war in Southeast Asia or prior conflicts. As past years have shown, that obligation cannot fully be paid with sympathy, monuments, medals, benefits or flags. It is an obligation—a solemn duty—that can be met only with the best and most complete answers that are within our power to provide.

Tragically, and for reasons found both at home and abroad, those answers have been slow in coming. Our nation has been haunted by the possibility that some of the missing may have survived and that, somewhere in Southeast Asia, brave men remain in captivity.

Although we know that the circumstances of war make it impossible for us to learn what happened to all the missing, we have been haunted, as well, by our knowledge that there are some answers from Southeast Asia we could have had long ago, but have been denied.

Because our wartime adversaries in Vietnam and Laos have been so slow to provide the answers, the American people turned to the U.S. Government for help, but events over the past 20 years have undermined the public's trust. The Indochina war, itself, was partly a secret war and records were falsified at the time to main-

tain that secrecy. The Paris Peace Accords promised answers to POW/MIA families, but the war between North and South Vietnam did not stop, and for the families of many, the answers did not come. Ever-changing Defense Department policies confused families and others about the official status of the missing and obscured even the number of men who might possibly have remained alive. The official penchant for secrecy left many families, activists and even Members of Congress unable to share fully in their own government's knowledge about the fate of fellow citizens and loved ones and this, more than anything, contributed to the atmosphere of suspicion and doubt.

Underpinning all this, the POW/MIA issue is alive today because of a fundamental conflict between the laws of probability and the dictates of human nature. On a subject as personal and emotional as the survival of a family member, there is nothing more difficult than to be asked to accept the probability of death when the possibility of life remains. Since Operation Homecoming, the U.S. Government has sought to avoid raising the hopes of POW/MIA families; it has talked about the need to maintain perspective and about the lack of convincing evidence that Americans remain alive. But U.S. officials cannot produce evidence that all of the missing are dead; and because they have been so careful not to raise false hopes, they have left themselves open to the charge that they have given up hope. This, too, has contributed to public and family mistrust.

Many of the factors that led to controversy surrounding the fates of Vietnam-era POW/MIAs are present, as well, with respect to the missing from World War II, Korea and the Cold War. Here, too, there have been barriers to gaining information from foreign governments; excessive secrecy on the part of our own government; and provocative reports—official and unofficial—about what might have happened to those left behind.

The Select Committee was created because of the need to reestablish trust between our government and our people on this most painful and emotional of issues. It was created to investigate and tell publicly the complete story about what our government knows and has known, and what it is doing and has done on behalf of our POW/MIAs. It was created to examine the possibility that unaccounted for Americans might have survived in captivity after POW repatriations at Odessa in World War II, after Operation Big Switch in Korea in 1953, after Cold War incidents, and particularly after Operation Homecoming in Vietnam in 1973. It was created to ensure that accounting for missing Americans will be a matter of highest national priority, not only in word but in practice. It was created to encourage real cooperation from foreign governments. It was created, in short, to pursue the truth, at home and overseas.

Whether the Committee has succeeded in its assigned tasks will be a matter for the public and for history to judge. Clearly, we cannot claim, nor could we have hoped, to have learned everything. We had neither the authority nor the resources to make case by case determinations with respect to the status of the missing. The job of negotiating, conducting interviews, visiting prisons, excavating crash sites, investigating live-sighting reports and evaluating archival materials can only be completed by the Executive branch.

This job, long frustrated by the intransigence of foreign governments, will take time to complete notwithstanding the recent improvements in cooperation, especially from Vietnam. The Committee takes considerable pride, however, in its contribution, through oversight, to improvements in the accountability process, and in the record of information and accomplishment it leaves behind.

That record includes the most rapid and extensive declassification of public files and documents on a single issue in American history. It includes a set of hearings and Committee files in which virtually every part of the POW/MIA controversy has been examined. It includes disclosure after disclosure about aspects of U.S. policy and actions that have never before been made public. It includes a rigorous, public examination of relevant U.S. intelligence information. It includes an exposure of the activities of some private groups who have sought inexcusably to exploit the anguish of POW/MIA families for their own gain. It includes a contribution to changed policies that is reflected on the ground in Vietnam in the form of unprecedented access to prisons, military bases, government buildings, documents, photographs, archives and material objects that bear on the fate of our missing servicemen. And it includes encouraging the Executive branch to establish a process of live-sighting response, investigation and evaluation that is more extensive and professional than ever before.

How then, one might ask, does this issue get brought to a close? There is no simple answer to that question. Clearly, the desire for closure cannot override the obligation to pursue promising leads. Just as clearly, our future expectations must be confined within the borders of what the chaotic circumstances of war, the passage of time, the evidence of survival and the logic of human motivation allow.

We want to make clear that this report is not intended to close the door on this issue. It is meant to open it. We knew at the outset that we could never answer all the questions that exist. In fact, some questions may never be answered or are more properly answered by other branches of government.

What we set out to accomplish, however, was to guarantee that the doors and windows of government were opened so that Americans would know where to go for information, so that the information would, to the greatest degree possible, be available, so that an unparalleled record would exist on which to base judgments, and so that a process of accountability would be in place to provide answers over time. We have accomplished our goal.

The Committee believes that a process is now in place that, over time, will provide additional answers. Americans can have confidence that our current efforts can ultimately resolve this painful issue. As this Committee's investigation of World War II and Korea shows, new information can come unexpectedly, years after the fact. That is why our goal must not be to put the issue to rest, but to press the search for answers and, in this case, to go to the source for those answers in Southeast Asia and elsewhere.

We must build on recent progress to guarantee that we reach the limits of what is knowable through an accounting process that is professional, open, genuine and unrestricted. We must constantly measure whether the promises and commitments of foreign govern-

ments are being fulfilled. We must maintain the momentum that has built at the highest levels within our own country to continue the search for new information. And we must ensure that as long as there is good reason to hope for more answers, our national obligation to pursue those answers continues, as a matter of honor, and as a duty to all those who have or who someday will put their lives at risk in service to our country.

THE COMMITTEE'S METHODS AND APPROACH

The POW/MIA issue has proven almost as emotional and controversial as the Vietnam War itself. As mentioned above, vigorous disagreements have caused some to be accused of conspiracy and betrayal; and others to be accused of allowing their hopes to obscure their reason. The Committee has sought to transform this troubled atmosphere by encouraging all participants in the debate to join forces in an objective search for the truth.

Because the overriding hope and objective of the Committee was to identify information that would lead to the rescue or release of one or more live U.S. POWs, the Committee gave first priority to investigation of issues related to our most recent war, the conflict in Vietnam. Nevertheless, substantial resources were devoted to seeking and reviewing information concerning Americans missing from World War II, the Korean War and the Cold War.

To ensure credibility, the Committee has operated on a nonpartisan basis, with a nonpartisan staff, directed by Members equally divided between the two parties.

To ensure perspective, the Committee sought the guidance of family members, activists, veterans' organizations and many others about how to conduct the investigation, where to focus, whom to consult and what issues to address. Every single individual or group that has claimed to have information on the issue has been invited—and in a few cases repeatedly invited—to provide it. Former U.S. POWs from the Indochina War were contacted and asked to share their knowledge and all previous inquiries and investigations on the subject were reviewed.

To ensure thoroughness, the Committee requested, and received, access to the records of a wide range of U.S. Government agencies, including intelligence agencies and the White House. Unlike previous investigators, we refused to accept "national security" as grounds for denying information and obtained assurances from the highest levels of government that no relevant information would be withheld.² We traveled overseas to Moscow, Pyongyang, and several times to Southeast Asia for face to face talks with foreign officials and gained access to long-secret archives and facilities in Russia, Vietnam and North Korea. And we solicited the sworn testimonies of virtually every living U.S. military and civilian official or former official who has played a major role in POW/MIA affairs over the past 20 years.

² There were a few instances where the Executive branch denied the Committee access to specific intelligence sources. The Committee has been assured, however, that the information that could have been provided by those sources has not been withheld. Also, access to the debriefings of returned POWs was granted only to the Chairman and Vice-Chairman.