

JPAC's Efforts Frustrate Families

On June 12, 1966, Marine Corps radioman Cpl. Gregory Harris and a contingent of South Vietnamese marines were ambushed and overrun in Quang Ngai province. When friendly forces retook the area the next day and recovered the dead, Harris was nowhere to be found. His family's nightmare was just beginning. They watched as Harris was first listed as missing, then declared dead. Months turned into decades of waiting in vain. They say dealing with the military's accounting agencies for the missing — known today as the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command and Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office — has been nearly as painful as the loss itself. They claim the agencies have withheld information and kept important documents out of Harris' file. Credible leads weren't followed, they say, potential gravesites weren't excavated and important witnesses weren't interviewed. The family believes that Harris was prematurely declared dead and unrecoverable.



Marine Cpl. Gregory Harris, second from right, is seen here smiling with friends in Vietnam. Harris was declared missing following a 1966 ambush in Quang Ngai Province, South Vietnam. His family has never given up hope of locating him - dead or alive.

Harris' family members aren't the only ones dissatisfied with the Defense Department's handling of the search for remains. Other families of the missing contacted by Stars and Stripes accused the agencies of incompetence, lying, withholding information, secrecy about recovered remains and DNA testing, placing foreign policy over the return of the missing and not responding to family members' questions. Many say there is a lack of accountability at the two agencies, a claim backed by recent reports. In July, The Associated Press exposed an internal review written by a management consultant that chronicled turf wars and questionable recovery results that the JPAC brass had covered up. A Government Accountability Office report mirrored those findings. In the wake of the scathing reports, hearings were held on Capitol Hill in August. But the families of the missing were not invited, and no more hearings are scheduled. As a result, the families say they fear no real changes will come to an operation that the review labeled as acutely dysfunctional. "They really need to allow families to tell their stories," said Harris' cousin, Mary Ann Reitano. "I've been on my cousin's case for 10 years, and they've done nothing but railroad us and throw up every kind of roadblock you can imagine."

JPAC and DPMO officials declined to comment on specific accusations, saying they cannot discuss individual cases or DNA analysis, instead referring questions to the service branch casualty offices. "Repatriation of American POWs and resolution of live sighting reports has always been one of this nation's highest priorities," said Maj. Carie Parker, director for public affairs at DPMO. There are 83,345 Americans missing in action: 73,661 from World War II; 7,907 from the Korean War; 126 from the Cold War; 1,645 from the Vietnam War; and six from Iraq and other conflicts, according to DPMO. The number includes Defense Department contractors. JPAC conducts field investigations, interviews, recoveries and identifications. It funnels the information to DPMO, which develops policy, oversees implementation, provides oversight and is responsible for much of the case analysis, according to the DPMO website and families of the missing. More than 1,000 active case files are under investigation at any given time, and this year, there were 40 on-site missions in six countries, ranging from Vietnam to Germany.

The fieldwork often requires hard labor. A dig in steamy Vietnam can involve laying out a large grid of land with stakes and string, then digging up each section and sifting it through a screen for bone fragments or other evidence while braving snakes and possible unexploded ordnance. Plane crash sites on the sides of rugged mountains present their own challenges, as do underwater excavations in rivers, lakes and even the Mediterranean Sea. There are tricky negotiations with sometimes-hostile regimes like North Korea, witnesses whose memories have faded and those who will say anything if they can find a way to profit. But somewhere between the field agents and JPAC/DPMO management and the families of the missing, there have been disconnects that are hard for the families to swallow.

Information and misinformation

Like so many others from Vietnam, the Harris case is complex. He was spotted by South Vietnamese marines being dragged alive into the jungle by enemy fighters. Informants later claimed he was being held at a training camp with plans to move him to Cambodia, but family members say those reports were discounted as not credible. Several individuals claimed they found and killed an American on the banks of the nearby Song Ve River after the battle. Others said a body lay in the river before they pushed it downstream toward a South Vietnamese outpost or built a raft to carry it there. The body reportedly caught on a sandbar, where it was buried. JPAC investigators recommended excavating the sandbar. Yet

the work was never completed, and officials eventually told the family that Harris' body probably had been washed away over time. His case was placed in the "no further pursuit category" in 1993. Nevertheless, family members continued to attend DPMO and JPAC annual update meetings, hoping for the information that would lead to him, dead or alive. DPMO case workers told the family they would not pursue leads "off the sandbar" because there was no credible information to suggest he might be elsewhere.

In 2006, Harris' family was mortified after memos surfaced in the Texas Tech University archives, saying Vietnam had admitted that Harris and others had survived and been taken captive. The memos were prepared in 1992 by a Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs investigator. No other information about his status was given. Reitano, Harris' cousin, said DPMO did not explain why it withheld the document from Harris' family and sought to discredit the investigator. The family then found a Defense Department report that cited the memoirs of a former Viet Cong officer and veteran of the battle as saying an American was captured that day. DPMO refused to sanction an interview with the man, claiming he "probably" didn't know anything, according to Reitano. She believes the agencies have cherry-picked information that supports Harris being dead and gone. The Vietnamese government has never officially spoken about Harris, instead telling family members that "according to U.S. investigators," no prisoners were taken during the battle.

'Sad chapter'

Dissatisfaction with JPAC's work has been going on for years. In 2010, Congress mandated that the agency increase its annual recovery numbers from 70 to more than 200 by 2015. The agencies were given \$500 million in the past five years to increase recoveries, but the numbers have changed very little. During last month's Congressional hearings, JPAC commander Maj. Gen. Kelly McKeague said his agency could possibly reach 125 recoveries a year by 2018 — news that was met with disapproval by lawmakers. Sen. Claire McCaskill, a Missouri democrat and member of the Senate oversight subcommittee that held the hearings, said it is clear the agencies need to do a better job. "Officials involved in POW/MIA recovery efforts need to provide family members with the most accurate information available — and it's clear to me that that's not always happening," she said in a statement to Stars and Stripes. JPAC and DPMO officials denied interview requests for top officials by Stars and Stripes.

There are many families who are dissatisfied with DPMO and JPAC and their handling of specific cases, according to Lynn O'Shea, director of research for the National Alliance of Families, an all-volunteer agency for families of POW/MIAs from all wars. "It is hard to pick the 'best cases' to demonstrate this, as there are so many," she said. O'Shea said JPAC and DPMO have edited witness statements, selectively excluded data and produced false data. She testified before Congress in 2009 but said no steps were taken to address the issues she raised. "This is a sad chapter in our history," she said.

Will reviews lead to changes?

Changes are coming, according to McCaskill. "The different agencies involved in recovery efforts are painfully lacking in structure, leadership and accountability," the senator said. "Steps must be taken to ensure that these agencies are communicating with one another and not engaged in turf battles or

overlapping efforts.” The issues raised in the recent reports also are under review by the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, according to Army Lt. Col. Jim Gregory, a spokesman for Defense Press Operations for Intelligence, Policy and Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict. Gregory defended JPAC and DPMO’s interactions with families and said that while there is adequate oversight, the Defense Department will consider “immediate, additional” steps to improve the agencies’ activities. “All involved with the accounting community, whether it is the family members, casualty assistance officers, scientists or DOD leadership, are passionate about the mission,” Gregory said. “That passion is well placed because the mission is sacred, and the commitment to the fullest possible accounting of servicemembers still missing is unwavering.”

Still, family members remain skeptical. “I’ve been living this dream for 20 years,” said John McDonnell, whose father, Army Capt. John McDonnell, went missing in a helicopter crash in South Vietnam’s Thua Thien Province on March 6, 1969. The co-pilot was knocked unconscious and recovered, but there was no trace of McDonnell. His son said JPAC investigators discounted and refused to investigate two separate live sightings. The captain’s identification card was later found on display at a military museum in Hue “I don’t understand the lack of a good analysis,” McDonnell said. “You wouldn’t tolerate this from your local sheriff’s department.”

Donna Elliott, a former Army Reserve sergeant, has visited Vietnam eight times trying to find her brother, Army Pfc. Jerry Elliott, who went missing near Khe Sanh village on Jan. 21, 1968. He jumped from his helicopter in an attempt to save the crew of another chopper that had been shot down while both were attempting to resupply the beleaguered garrison there. Enemy fire forced the helicopters to take off, leaving three men surrounded by enemy forces. Two made it to a nearby base, but no trace of Elliott was found. Donna Elliott said JPAC investigators have not interviewed the last U.S. servicemember to see her brother alive, failed to record testimony from another witness, and have not sought out dozens of South Vietnamese troops who survived the battle. She said the agencies have refused to share all pertinent documents with her and provided the Vietnamese with incorrect information about her brother that allegedly precludes them from searching their archives. In April, she wrote a letter to DPMO and the Army’s casualty office asking them to rectify the errors. She never heard back.

“They’re not keeping the promise,” said Elliott, who wrote a book about her search and dealings with the agencies. “Sometimes you’re not clear who the enemy is when you’re getting more cooperation from a foreign government than our government.” On one of her trips to Vietnam in 2003, Vietnamese soldiers led her to the grave of an American servicemember at the site where her brother disappeared. The remains had been uncovered and reburied in a shallow grave. It took JPAC seven months to excavate the site, she said. They later told her it was an American but have not disclosed the identity. She says the combat boot found on the body was too small for her brother, and only one other person is missing from the site, so she believes it is Staff Sgt. Billy “Tex” Hill. The Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory has Hill’s DNA on file and DNA was extracted from the remains, Elliott said, but Hill is still listed as missing.

JPAC declined requests from Stars and Stripes to discuss the case or identify the recovered servicemember. “The recovery and identification process may take years to complete,” JPAC spokesman Lee Tucker said. “I cannot speak to a specific case, but our investigators go to great lengths to obtain any and all information relevant to our missing servicemembers including on-site reconnaissance and interviewing potential witnesses. They also research archives and record depositories, analyze

correspondence, maps, photographs, unit histories and medical and personnel records.” In May, Elliott emailed JPAC officials explaining that the site where her brother was last seen is being bulldozed and the fill used for road projects. She received no response. “Every day that passes I wonder if my brother’s body has been accidentally scooped up by a dozer, hauled off in a dump truck and crushed into road fill without anyone noticing because JPAC staff couldn’t find the time to make a telephone call, or at least let me know they made an effort to coordinate any new discovery information,” she said. It’s a nightmare she has most every night.

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