

## DNA Tests Spark Efforts to ID Korean War Remains

By Rudi Williams  
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON -- The Korean War is often referred to as the "forgotten war," and many families of servicemen missing from that war felt their loved ones were also forgotten -- until now.

Advances in forensic medicine have enabled DoD to redouble efforts to identify some of the 846 sets of Korean War remains buried as "unknowns" in the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Honolulu, also known as "the Punch Bowl." Investigators will use the same mitochondrial DNA technology that proved the remains of Air Force 1st Lt. Michael J. Blassie were those interred in the Vietnam crypt of the Tomb of the Unknowns in Arlington National Cemetery, Va.

A new DoD policy authorizes the Army's Honolulu-based Central Identification Laboratory to disinter remains of unknown service members that "we believe, with the help of DNA, we can identify," said Allen Liotta, deputy director, Office of POW/Missing Personnel Affairs in Arlington, Va. "When the remains were returned to U.S. custody in 1953 and forensically reviewed, there was insufficient information to identify them. Now, however, with DNA technology we believe we can identify some of them."

"We're carefully reviewing the cases, looking to see which ones there was a lot of information on but just shy of being able to make an identification," Liotta said. He said the laboratory believes it has compelling evidence on about a dozen sets of remains. "We believe that by the end of this summer we will have begun to excavate the first of those dozen."

There are no plans at this time to open all 846 graves in the Punch Bowl.

Of the 8,200 servicemen missing from the Korean War, Liotta said, the remains of 1,000 are already in U.S. custody -- the 846 at the Punch Bowl and more than 200 at the Central Identification Laboratory that were unilaterally repatriated by the North Koreans or found during joint recovery operations.

The first joint recovery operation inside North Korea came more than 43 years after the war. "Our work in Korea has been on going since the end of the war, but the problem was, we had no access to North Korea," he said.

After negotiations in early 1996, Liotta led the first DoD delegation to Pyongyang, the North Korean capital, to discuss joint recovery work to locate and repatriate remains of missing U.S. servicemen. The visit was the first official one by a U.S. delegation since the 1953 armistice.

The North Koreans agreed to two joint recovery operations, the first a 20-day investigation starting on July 10, 1996. Another 20-day mission was scheduled for that September.

The first mission resulted in the repatriation of the remains of a U.S. Army soldier who fell in battle near Unsan, North Korea. "We identified the remains fairly quickly because we had a fairly complete skeleton with dog tags and other identification," Liotta said.

But there was a major problem. "We didn't have a family to return the remains to," he said. "That was the first clear unambiguous signal to all the services that we needed an aggressive outreach program to locate families the department had lost touch with since 1953.

"We realized we were going to have to rely heavily on DNA technology, so each of the services began an aggressive outreach program ... to locate as many of those families as possible to obtain reference samples for DNA technology. The technology and numbers of samples have grown geometrically over the last two years. A very successful program."

Liotta's office conducts monthly visits around the country to meet with families of missing Americans from all wars. "We update them on the department's activities," he said. "We've seen the number of Korean War families grow from a handful at each meeting in 1996 and 1997 to more than 100 at each meeting today. I think that's because of the services' aggressive efforts to let families know we'll be in their areas."

The families are "grateful and surprised" by the visits, he said. "They didn't know the government was still trying to find the remains of their missing loved ones," Liotta said. "They're very happy and proud that the government would make such an effort."

He said mitochondrial DNA comes from the maternal side of the family, therefore, DNA samples are needed from the mother, siblings or other relatives on the mother's side of the family.

He emphasized DNA isn't a sure-fire method of identifying all remains. There are scientific limitations. In some instances, he said, remains have been burned so badly that the DNA has been destroyed.

"In Korea, where it freezes in the winter and temperatures vary throughout the year, we've had 100 percent rate in getting DNA samples from Korean War-era remains," Liotta said. "DNA offers us a tool to close cases and get answers we wouldn't have been able to without it."

Thirty-five sets of remains have been repatriated from North Korea since 1996, but so far, only three have been identified and returned to families, he said.

POW/MIA spokesman Larry Greer said the identification laboratory uses DNA on about 45 percent of their cases from all wars. The other 55 percent are being identified through traditional forensic means, such as dental X-rays.

"Dental X-rays are the preferred method because it gives you scientifically highly credible identifications," Greer said. "Good dental records can be as accurate as fingerprints."

In addition to the outreach programs for Korean War families, Greer said, the department also seeks family members of the 78,000 servicemen missing from World War II and the 123 lost in Cold War incidents. He said the POW/MIA office needs information and documents that could aid in identifying remains, such as photographs, military records and letters. Veterans who may have information about burial sites, POW camps and other details are also being sought.

For more information, contact the casualty office of the nearest military installation or the POW/Missing Personnel Office at:

DPMO-WASH, D.C.  
Attn: PMKOR  
1745 Jefferson Davis Highway  
Crystal Square 4, Suite 800  
Arlington, VA 22202

The POW/Missing Personnel Office Web site lists the names of all Korean War and Vietnam War MIAs. It also has information related to accounting efforts worldwide, including World War II and the Cold War. The address is [www.dtic.mil/dpmo](http://www.dtic.mil/dpmo). The Web site includes an e-mail window where messages can be sent regarding Korean War MIA matters.

Toll free numbers for the services' and State Department casualty offices are:  
Air Force -- 1-800-531-5501  
Army - 1-800-892-2490  
Marine Corps - 1-800- 847-1597  
Navy - 1-800- 443-9298  
State Department Casualty Office - (202) 647-6769



Families of servicemen missing since the Korean War are "grateful and surprised" the government is still trying to account for their loved ones, said Allen Liotta, deputy director of the Defense POW/[Missing Personnel] Affairs. On the table is the DNA sample kit being given to family members during monthly outreach meetings. Photo by Rudi Williams.