



From left, Sgt. Ian McGill, Navy civilian Mindy Simonson and Sgt. 1st Class Gary Epley prepare the excavation area for final photos at a remote World War II crash site in Papua New Guinea in 2012. Team members conduct global search, recovery and laboratory operations to identify unaccounted for Americans from past conflicts. (Photo by Jason Kaye)

JPAC: NCOs Help Military Account for the Missing

By Jonathan (Jay) Koester

NCO Journal

When America deploys its Soldiers into harm's way, it does so with a solemn promise: Should those Soldiers be killed in battle, the nation pledges to do everything in its power to bring them home to their families. The NCOs of the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command work each day to help make sure that promise is kept.

The command was activated in 2003 and is headquartered on Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawaii. Along with civilian personnel, the joint command includes service members from the Army, Marines, Air Force and Navy. Every day, JPAC continues the search for the more than 83,000 Americans still missing from past conflicts.

The focus of JPAC is researching case files, investigating leads, excavating sites and identifying Americans who were killed in action but never brought home.

That important mission is what inspired Sgt. Maj. DaNang McKay, command senior enlisted leader of JPAC, to reclass into a mortuary affairs specialist (92M) after

beginning his Army career in satellite communications.

"I thought that it was remarkable that the Army and Department of Defense said we need a specialty, a skill, that's dedicated to anyone who has fallen in war, and we're going to dedicate money, energy, efforts and training to make sure we do that right," McKay said. "At that point, I realized that was something I wanted to do if I was going to continue to wear the uniform. The whole ideology: When men and women, sons and daughters, put themselves in harm's way to defend the constitution of the United States and human rights for all people, if they die in battle, somebody is dedicated to go back and bring them home. We make that promise.

"A lot of our forces have no idea that this organization exists, but as the word gets out that there is an organization dedicated to bringing the fallen home, we have a hard time keeping the flood gates down of people wanting to come and join us," DaNang said.

Every step in the process of bringing home a fallen



Sgt. Nicholas Cazel of the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command builds a boundary of sand bags with the help of a Laotian man during a recovery mission in 2011 in Laos. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Adelita Mead)

Soldier is important and meaningful, said Sgt. 1st Class Byron Johnson, the assistant NCOIC for operations at JPAC. But the final part, bringing closure to a family, is especially rewarding.

“We plan and coordinate missions to go out to different places and look for our fallen comrades,” Johnson said. “I enjoy doing this JPAC mission. It’s very deep to me because I’ve done all of it, from the recovery side, to actually going out and briefing the family members that we have found remains for. The look on their face when you tell them ‘we found your family member’ ... it brings closure to the family because they never knew what happened to them. It’s really rewarding.”

Air Force Staff Sgt. Brian Valencia, a forensic photographer at JPAC, said he was so inspired by the mission that he applied three times before finally being accepted to the command.

“The mission is a very noble mission,” Valencia said. “We’re keeping a promise that we’re going to bring everybody home. This is important, not only to the general public, but to those of us in uniform, to know we’re actually trying to do what we said we were going to do. My dad was in Vietnam. He’s really happy that I’m doing this job because of what he saw and what he went through in Vietnam.”

Research

There are usually more than 1,000 active case files under investigation at any given time, and JPAC identifies about six MIAs each month. The search for MIA servicemembers begins with in-depth research, including photographs, correspondence, unit histories, maps, and medical and personnel records.

All that research goes into the decision to send a team to dig at a location, said Master Sgt. Carl T. Boone, Operations NCOIC at JPAC.

“I oversee the noncommissioned officers here who plan the missions, going out to Southeast Asia, and worldwide,” Boone said. “We have missions in Korea, China, Burma, India. I oversee the planning, as well as ensure our NCOs are preparing proper decision briefs and confirmation briefs to deliver to the commander of JPAC in order to get their decision on whether we go out and dig at viable sites that we’ve received pertinent information on.”

“It’s (the decision on whether to dig) heavily predicated on the information that we receive from our research and analysis group NCOs,” Boone said. “We take that information along with those NCOs, as well as the NCOs in the investigation and research group, and we all come together and decide as a whole what we would need to execute that mission, what assets we would need, what individual skill sets we would need. Those are some of the heavy things we brief to our commanders in order to get a decision on whether those sites will be dug or not.”

Recovery

If the decision to dig is made, a small team is organized to get to the area and begin the work.

JPAC’s recovery missions can last from 35 to 60 days, depending on the location, terrain and nature of the recovery. Long, difficult hikes are often required to reach sites deep in the jungle, though the most common method of reaching remote sites is via helicopter. Adding to the difficulty, teams travel with up to 10,000 pounds of survival and excavation equipment.

1st Sgt. Domingo J. Chavez, detachment first sergeant at JPAC, was previously a team leader for the command.

“You’re in charge of a group of 10-12 men and women. Not all of them are Army; not all of them are military,” Chavez said. “You have the different services that go with you, and you get augmented with the critical elements of your team, like your EOD [Explosive Ordnance Disposal] or your medic. You get about a week with them before you actually go out there into the jungle. You don’t know each other, which can make it difficult, but you quickly build your team.”

Chavez has been on missions to Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Belgium and Germany, and he said noncommissioned officers are a critical element of the teams’ success.

“NCOs bring a lot of skills and knowledge to the team,” Chavez said. “Our team leaders are mostly officers; they are more focused on talking with the locals, the tribes and trying to get all the permits, all the things we need to get in. But the NCOs in the background are the ones moving, directing, logistics, getting everything that everyone needs to make a successful mission. You don’t want to pass that off to the officer. He’s busy; he’s doing all kinds of cool stuff to get us in there with no



Sgt. 1st Class Borys Tsybulin, right, an explosive ordnance technician augmented to the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command, loads a wheelbarrow with dirt so it can be taken to a screening station and sifted through in 2011 in Xepon, Laos. The team was searching for evidence of Americans unaccounted-for from the Vietnam War. (Photo by Tech. Sgt. Paul Villanueva II)

problems. The NCO is in the background making things happen, getting augmenters, training them, building teams, getting equipment, making sure Joes have food. We have to bring food for 45 days in foot lockers.”

The missions are difficult, and include living out of tents and dealing with jungle wildlife. But both Chavez and Sgt. 1st Class Nicholas Moran of JPAC’s operations cell, investigation and recovery group, said they had never had anybody, military or civilian, back out of their duty.

“I think it’s because the mission is so honorable and unique that a lot of the challenges and unfavorable conditions just kind of fade away,” Moran said.

Working with civilians and members of the other branches of service offers many opportunities for learning, Moran said.

“One of the most rewarding things I’m going to take away from here is the difference (in branches),” Moran said. “You can spend your whole career in a platoon, company or line environment and not learn what you have the opportunity to learn here because of the differences. In the Army, we get set in our ways on how we operate. Here, you get 12 individuals from different branches, different ranks, plus civilians, and you have to learn to work together with different mindsets and different views. That strengthens you as a person and professionally.”

Air Force Master Sgt. Jason Uncapher, operations superintendent, agreed that the joint atmosphere is a special part of a special mission.

“That’s one of the big things I’ll take from being at JPAC is being able to learn from one another, especially on the NCO side, because we all blend into one,” Uncapher said. “Although we are four separate services, we’re

all one mission; we’re all one unit. Our motto is ‘Until they are home,’ and it’s not just something we say. Everybody you talk to here feels that passion. You have to have a unique skill set to be here, but that passion also has to come along with it.”

Identification of remains

Once the recovery effort is completed, the team returns to Hawaii. All remains and artifacts found during the recovery operation are then transported to JPAC’s Central Identification Laboratory for analysis.

Depending on the amount and condition of recovered remains, forensic anthropologists produce a biological profile from recovered skeletal remains that includes sex, race, age at death, and height of the individual, according to JPAC’s website.

Teeth are often the best way to identify remains because they are durable, unique to each person, and may contain surviving mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA). These genetic patterns are compared with genetic patterns from family reference samples provided by each unidentified American’s family.

To help identify missing servicemen, JPAC needs mtDNA samples from the missing person’s maternal line. For more information on how to donate a DNA reference sample, or how to encourage others to donate, click on the “Submit a DNA Sample” at JPAC’s website, jpac.pacom.mil.

History

The path toward a joint military command dedicated to bringing our fallen Soldiers home began in 1973 with the creation of the Central Identification Laboratory, Thailand. CIL-THAI was focused solely on Americans still missing in Southeast Asia.

Just three years later, in 1976, Central Identification Laboratory, Hawaii, was established. CILHI was created to search for, recover and identify missing Americans from all previous conflicts. In 1992, Joint Task Force-Full Accounting (JTF-FA) was established to focus on Americans missing as a result of the Vietnam War.

With CILHI and JTF-FA sometimes duplicating efforts, the Department of Defense eventually joined the two together in 2003, creating the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command.

McKay and Boone have worked for both CILHI and JPAC and said they have been impressed by what the joint command can do.

“I am a true fan of the previous organization (CILHI), because that was my first organization,” McKay said. “But once I came back and hit ground, I was amazed by what has been accomplished (at JPAC). It was about a 10-year break between the two tours. Our abilities, our efficien-

cy, the magnitude of what we do is totally impressive compared to what we started off as. We started as a small shoebox of dedicated professionals trying to bring home the fallen, to now what we have is a mighty force of individuals working together, bringing folks home.”

“Overall it was a great improvement,” Boone said. “Before, we didn’t work as closely with the noncommissioned officers of the JTF-FA, so there was a lot of conflict in planning. As they brought together all the branches of service, I think it gave all the NCOs across the spectrum a better idea of what everyone’s jobs were in planning those missions.”

The JPAC of today brings together NCOs, officers and civilians into a strong force to bring the fallen home. The NCOs of JPAC understand they are part of something important and are proud to be part of it, said Staff Sgt. Nicole McMinamin, a team sergeant at JPAC.

“NCOs bring a confidence in knowing that they are going to be a part of something bigger than themselves,” McMinamin said. “They know what this mission is all about. They want to make sure there is closure. Everyone who deploys, that goes to Iraq or Afghanistan or wherever they are deployed, some of them didn’t know that if they die out there, they are going to be taken back. Having NCOs here it relays the message to everybody that, no matter where you are in the world, we will come and find you and bring you home to your family.”



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