

‘It’s a Race Against Time’

Sept. 19, POW/MIA Recognition Day, is a time to reflect on all those still unaccounted for

Sep 18, 2025

On March 18, the remains of Army 1st Lt. William Hott were successfully identified nearly seven years after having been returned to the U.S. from North Korea, and nearly 70 years after having been deemed “non-recoverable” by the U.S. Army. Before being successfully identified, Hott was one of nearly 83,000 currently unaccounted for military personnel, dating back to WWII.

Hott marked the 100th successful identification from remains returned from North Korea in 2018, after President Trump reached an agreement with North Korean leader Kim Jung Un. A total of 55 boxes of remains were returned to the U.S. The identification of those remains is still in process.

The contents of the 55 boxes did not just include the remains of U.S. soldiers. Remains of unidentified Chinese and Korean soldiers were found inside as well, illustrating a complex problem all countries face: the pursuit of leaving no one behind.

National POW/MIA Recognition Day falls on the third Friday of September. Established in 1979 by former President Jimmy Carter, the day serves to recognize those who have been lost in combat as well as their families who are without answers.

VFW AND POW/MIA RECOVERY EFFORTS

As far back as 1920, the VFW has been involved in recovery efforts of unaccounted-for troops. The very first mission was the recovery of members of the 31st Infantry Regiment, also known as the “Polar Bears,” in Siberia during the Siberian Expedition between 1918 and 1922.

Today, the VFW works closely with the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) to assist in the recovery and documentation of troops who went missing in action through Joint Field Activities (JFA). VFW recently completed one with the DPAA in Southeast Asia in March 2024.

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

406 W. 34th Street
Kansas City, MO 64111

Office 816.756.3390
Fax 816.968.1157

WASHINGTON OFFICE

200 Maryland Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002

Office 202.543.2239
Fax 202.543.6719

info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

“Along with traveling with the DPAA, we also help to ensure that they’re fully funded every year,” said VFW Associate Director of Communications and Public Affairs Brittany Dymond.

Then-VFW Junior Vice Commander-in-Chief Carol Whitmore and VFW Director of Public Affairs and Strategic Outreach Robert Couture joined the DPAA on a JFA diving trip at the Samaesarn dive site in Thailand in March 2024. The mission included diving for and establishing recoverable remains from WWII-era sunken ships and aircraft. The group also had the chance to learn more about the processes behind recovering remains found above ground.

“We owe these recovery efforts to the families back home, to the veterans who gave their last full measure of devotion to our country,” Whitmore said.

This past March, Couture, along with VFW Junior Vice Commander-in-Chief Tim Peters and VFW Assistant Adjutant General Brian Walker, conducted a fact-finding mission in Thailand and Vietnam. Their goals included assessing the needs and impact of the DPAA, as well as strengthening ties with the international VFW community.

Peters’ personal mission is to bring attention to the global efforts of locating and identifying the 83,000 missing American service members. He has a strong relationship with DPAA director Kelly McKeague, and the two have coordinated volunteer teams for recovery missions in the past.

On July 11, during the 30th anniversary of reestablishing diplomatic ties between the U.S. and Vietnam and the 40th anniversary of the first American recovery mission for those missing in the Vietnam War, past VFW Commander-in-Chief Larry Rivers and VFW Washington Office Executive Director Ryan Gallucci attended events in Hanoi to strengthen the evolving relationship between the two countries.

While meeting with the Veterans Association of Vietnam, Rivers praised the efforts of VFW members who have turned in war artifacts that could help Vietnam identify their own missing military personnel.

“The VFW has a record of service and should be proud of our efforts, not only during times of war, but in times of bringing peace,” Rivers said.

On July 15, Peters, alongside DPAA leadership, presided over a handoff of artifacts between the VFW and the Vietnam embassy in Washington, D.C. These artifacts will help aid Vietnam’s recovery efforts for their missing.

YOU CAN HELP WITH RECOVERY EFFORTS

The process behind recovering and identifying remains can be challenging. Organic material

can break down quickly, and the more time that passes, the more difficult it is for DNA analysts to be accurate in their identification.

“It’s a race against time,” said Couture. “Depending on the soil composition, the ground may be so acidic that the organic material breaks down completely and is lost.”

Memories also play a crucial role in the identification of those unaccounted for in combat. Stories and artifacts of war can help pinpoint when and where soldiers were last seen or heard. When there is little or no remains for accurate DNA analysis, these resources provide the next best solution for an accurate assessment.

VFW and the DPAA encourage the families of those who have gone missing to provide DNA samples to help in the recovery efforts and to help find an accurate match.

They also encourage service members to share their recollections of events to help further pinpoint the story of what happened to unaccounted troops whose remains have yet to be found.

“My father died tragically when his plane crashed during a simulated parachute operation in Fort Hood, Texas, on March 12, 1985,” Couture said. “I know what happened to my dad. They recovered his remains. I have that closure. There are families out there who don’t have that closure and don’t know if they’ll ever be able to bury their loved ones on home soil. It doesn’t matter if you’re 5, 20 or almost 100, you still want to know what happened to your loved one.”

This article is featured in the 2025 September/October issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Danny Cook](#), senior writer for VFW magazine.