

'We Deserve to Have Our Family Home'

A Missouri woman said she is holding hope that the remains of relatives who died in World War II will be returned home to the family

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Families across the country are hopeful that one day the remains of their loved ones who went missing in war will be returned home. This includes the family of three sailors who died in the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

Karen Grantham, of Richmond, Missouri, attended a Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) family update on March 23 in Kansas City, Missouri. Three of Grantham's family members still are missing more than 80 years after their deaths.

Grantham said two of her uncles, Charles and Eugene Skiles, died while aboard the *USS Arizona (BB-39)*. Garold Skiles, Grantham's cousin, also died in the attack while aboard the *USS Oklahoma (BB-37)*.

"Something that my grandma wanted was for her boys to come home," Grantham said. "I hope we can get them home one day."

The remains of Charles Jr. and Eugene Skiles have not been identified. Grantham said that while there is a headstone for her cousin, Garold Skiles, at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Honolulu, it is uncertain where his remains are located. Grantham said she attended the DPAA family update in Kansas City to learn of any details on her missing family members. More than 400 people attended.

"I don't want to belittle the work DPAA does, but it has been more than 80 years since their deaths," Grantham said. "We deserve to have our family home or to at least know where they are."

VFW FUNDS FAMILY TRIP

Grantham's grandmother wrote a letter to then-President Harry S. Truman a few years after the deaths of her sons. She expressed her family's desire to witness the arrival of a

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homecoming ship from the Pacific.

“The experience, they indicated, would help compensate, in a small measure, for the loss of their two sons,” according to the April 1946 issue of *Foreign Service*, the predecessor of *VFW magazine*.

According to Foreign Service, the Navy was not able to transport the Skiles family, so VFW National Headquarters agreed to pay for the Gold Star family’s transportation from Kansas City to California. The couple, along with Grantham’s father, who was 15 years old at the time, arrived in Los Angeles in February 1946 at the request of Truman to witness the arrival of the USS Braxton (APA-138).

Accounting for all missing war veterans has been a VFW priority goal since 1929 when the Soviet Union allowed a VFW recovery party to search for war dead in the Archangel area of Russia. There, U.S. and allied troops had fought Bolshevik troops shortly after World War I.

‘WE NEED DNA’

Since 1995, DPAA has served as a vital connection for families of missing U.S. troops, ensuring regular updates to facilitate communication. DPAA continues to organize gatherings to inform families about the government’s global mission to locate missing troop remains. During these events, families exchange insights and updates with each other. DoD officials guide these discussions by briefing families on the mission’s objectives and providing updates on specific cases.

DPAA-affiliated officials, experts and scientists, including Department of Defense DNA Operations Director for the Armed Forces Medical Examiner Service Timothy McMahon, attended the Kansas City family update meeting.

According to DPAA, DNA can be used to support the anthropological and archaeological results from the missing service member’s recovered skeletal remains, along with any associated circumstantial evidence to identify an individual.

McMahon explained to attendees that it is vital that the DPAA have DNA samples from families to help identify remains of U.S. troops found around the world.

“When we deal with the Vietnam, Korean and Cold wars, we don’t have a DNA reference on hand as we do with today’s service members,” McMahon said. “So, we need DNA from a family member that we can use as a reference, whether it is through the mother for the mitochondrial DNA, the father for the Y-chromosome DNA or a sample from a sibling.”

McMahon added that even if remains have not been found yet, it is vital to have DNA references to identify troops missing in action.

“If we have remains of a service member that we cannot identify, it may just sit as an unknown sample,” McMahon said. “This is why we want to collect family samples ahead of time.” Learn more about DPAA’s mission at <https://www.dpaa.mil>.

This article is featured in the 2024 September issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Dave Spiva](#), associate editor for VFW magazine.