

# New DPAA Director Faces Multi-Faceted Challenges

John Stryker Meyer 1 Comment Expert Analysis

During his three weeks as the first director of the newly formed **Department of Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA)**, recently retired **LTG Michael S. Linnington** has hit the ground running, bringing new energy and a renewed commitment to the federal government's efforts to research, locate and return to the United States the 25,000 - 30,000 recoverable remains.

Under the new plan triggered by **former Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel**, DPAA consolidated three previous federal operations: the Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office (DPMO) based in the D.C. area; the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) based in Hawaii where the forensic laboratories are located, and where the search teams are launched for missions to recover unaccounted-for American remains; and the Air Force's Life Sciences Equipment Laboratory at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio.

On January 30, the JPAC colors were cased during a formal ceremony in Hawaii, the DPMO colors were cased and the DPAA was formally activated. On July 27 the new DPAA building and facility in Hawaii will be dedicated - it'll be one of three DPAA offices in the country. This will bring staff from 16 separate buildings into one efficient headquarters and a state-of-the-art laboratory with a family viewing area for visitations. The building will be named after Hawaii Senator and **Medal of Honor recipient Daniel Inouye**. Insiders note that it has taken 14 years to get this building up and running.

Linnington's initial appearance before the 46th annual **National League of POW/MIA Families** meeting drew positive reviews from league officials, veterans and family members.

League CEO and Board of Directors Chairman Ann Mills-Griffiths, said, "We're very impressed with Mr. Linnington's first three weeks on the job. He spent time at our annual meeting talking to the families whose relatives remain missing in action, he looked them in

the eye and told them that under his leadership Southeast Asia (SEA) will be DPAA's top priority."

Rick Estes, president of the **Special Operations Association** said, "The members of the SOA's POW/MIA Committee were very impressed with Mr. Linnington and we look forward to continuing to work with DPAA analysts and field investigators in any effort to find and recover the remains of our soldiers and all missing personnel."

One family member, who asked not to be named said, "(LTG) Linnington faces formidable challenges, one of which is to stop the bitter, senseless competition that has existed between the three agencies that are merged now into the DPAA. He has to streamline the operation to make Southeast Asia its top priority."

Mills-Griffiths added, "Mr. Linnington has the right qualifications, the heart, the character as the first DPAA director to get this agency on track, moving into the 21st Century because the Vietnam War was the most recent war, its family members are still alive and today we have the best government-to-government agreements since the cessation of hostilities."

### **DPAA Challenges Awaiting Linnington**

1.) **Morale:** Especially at the field and key mid-management positions in DPAA and among the (SEA) staff. "The workforce has been jerked around in a most shameful fashion in recent years by leaders who have no background in the MIA issues and no sense whatsoever of the realities of what our teams face when they are on the ground," said a former DPMO employee who requested anonymity. "They didn't care about the Southeast Asia missions. They were driven by numbers, instead of quality work in the field."

Only last month, a few weeks before Linnington's appointment was announced by Secretary of Defense Ash Carter the woman who oversees the Research and Analysis office, the office that oversees SEA, Korea, Cold War losses and WW II missions, met with the SEA

staff for the first time in more than 20 months. She told them that her efforts to push WW II missions ahead of SEA missions would continue.

During the last 18 months, a private consulting firm was given a \$9 million contract to evaluate priorities within the old DPMO. One former DPMO staffer told SOFREP that "instead of finding ways to improve operations, such as going to the field to interview our scientists and recovery teams for example, they went about changing the emphasis of our mission from SEA to WW II....Fortunately, Director Linnington has announced to the League that SEA is a DPAA priority."

2.) **Change WW II Priority:** After Congress mandated the Pentagon to develop the capacity and capability to be able to identify up to 200 missing-in-action service members by 2015, key upper-level DPMO and JPAC officials emphasized missions where they recovered large numbers of remains, which is easier with WW II remains and Korean War remains from N. Korea, than digging through the acidic soil in SEA jungles.

One insider told SOFREP that, since 2010, key POW/MIA leaders in Wash., D.C. and Hawaii advocated privately that they wanted bigger numbers of recovered remains at the expense of cutting back on the SEA efforts. "Over time those DoD leaders and key upper management staff in Hawaii have either misread or simply don't care about the 2010 law, **PL 111-84 (NDAA 2010)**, that directed the Secretary of Defense to develop the capacity and capability to be able to ID 200, not return 200. There is a difference."

There are internal reports written before Linnington was sworn in that shift the SEA Task Elements in DPAA to support WW II by Fiscal Year 2019. That move would close the Cambodian mission, including Bangkok-based personnel, shifting them to the WW II focus in Burma and India.

Another critical piece to the change in emphasis was the withdrawal of analysts from SEA, at the cost of standing up WW II efforts.

Last month, **former Green Beret Cliff Newman** observed first hand the net result of this change in emphasis when he returned to SEA for the second time in 20 years to work with a DPAA recovery team in an attempt to pinpoint the location of six Americans killed in action near the Laotian border in February 1971. The latest attempt failed because the Landing Zone for the DPAA team was too far away from the hill that Newman identified as the helicopter crash site where the six Americans died.

Newman turned in an After Action Report to DPAA about his June trip. He told SOFREP that he could not release details of that report until DPAA released it publicly, however he had one observation: The Joint Field Activity (JFA) had to investigate 21 cases in "only five weeks." Newman remembers that in years past, before the present push for WW II recoveries, JFA teams had more time to probe each case.

A former JPAC employee told SOFREP that before the bureaucratic shift to WW II began, field teams had much more flexibility when on a mission in SEA. If the dig appeared to be fruitful, the team could stay in the field longer than originally planned. Today, with caseloads growing for SEA staff, that flexibility is gone.

Mills-Griffiths said that during the League's annual meeting Linnington tactfully explained that the SEA missions can be improved "without the exclusion" of continuing efforts to work on Cold War, Korean War and WW II cases. One new asset that DPAA will explore will be the "Public-Private Partnership" initiative where reputable non-governmental agencies could work in conjunction with DPAA teams.

Earlier this week Linnington told the AP that he sees such partnerships as a potential DPAA asset. He pointed to the recent case where the Florida-based nonprofit group, History Flight Inc., worked with DPAA officials, turning over the remains of 36 Marines killed during the horrific battle for the Tarawa Atoll during WW II which today is called the Republic of Kiribati. Among those three dozen Marines were the remains of **Medal of Honor recipient Lt. Alexander Bonnyman Jr.** Those remains will be examined by DPAA forensic experts for positive identification.

**3.) Improved Communications:** One congressional source bitterly disappointed in the performance of the old regimes said there is a "most critical need for improvement of communications between the new director in two directions - from his office up to the Secretary of Defense, and down from his office to key management staff who oversee critical field and laboratory analysis operations." Traditionally at DoD, agencies under the Secretary of Defense are overseen at the Assistant Secretary level. In recent years, both under the Bush and Obama administrations, such support and advocacy for the MIA missing has not been present while prior management from the director's office down to key personnel appeared to condone leaders making WW II recoveries a priority over SEA missions.

Statistics compiled by the National League of POW/MIA Families for Americans losses accounted for from the Vietnam War support that premise. To date, the Obama administration's total is 54, the George W. Bush Administration's total was 126, while the Clinton Administration netted 480 returns.

Newman had a few suggestions: Establish better communications between the higher staff, the analysts and the ground teams; create dedicated teams (not temporary-duty members); and to have better coordination between the DPAA teams and their Vietnamese counterparts.

**4.) Improve Vietnam links:** Following the war, building a meaningful diplomatic relationship with the communist-run Vietnamese government was difficult at best. However, there have been consistent efforts over more than four decades to improve those relationships. As far back as 2009 there have been improvements that were evident to JFA teams. However, as Newman and DPAA officials learned last month, better communications between joint teams of Americans and Vietnamese could still use some improvement in SEA field operations.

And, this week, there have been two major developments that on the surface appear to present additional good news for SEA efforts.

Due to increasing tension between Vietnam and China - a long-time, historic enemy of Vietnam, top Vietnamese officials were greeted by President Obama at the White House to note that this was the 20th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Vietnam and the U.S. since hostilities ended in 1975. The Washington Post said that **General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong** was complimentary of Obama and invited the president to visit him in Vietnam.

Later, Trong, Vietnamese President Truong Tan Sang, and Defense Minister Gen. Phung Quang Thanh met with Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, who signed a joint vision statement for the bilateral defense relationship and discussed defense cooperation and regional security issues.

Carter, in a **DoD release**, "reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to Vietnam and the Asia-Pacific region," while noting progress "on ...legacy of war issues, support for Vietnamese peacekeeping training and operations..."

Coincidentally, Tokyo officials met in Ho Chi Minh City with communist leaders the same day to "consolidate relations with Hanoi and for cooperation with Mekong nations."

5.) **Probe by war, not region:** In recent months, among the old DPMO/JPAC bureaucrats who have quietly pushed the POW/MIA issue toward a number-based mission, they set into motion plans to conduct investigations into missing service members by regions, instead of by wars - a concept that Mills-Griffiths and the National League of POW/MIA Families opposes.

These are some of the key issues confronting Linnington. During his meeting with the League he told them that he was impressed with the DPAA's work force that's in the field.

Today there are more than 600 military and civilians assigned to DPAA. These resources are always subject to change based on funding and the priorities of the DPAA director.

Those resources are broken down as:

Field activities, with 239 personnel including military who deploy on investigations/recovery missions, explosive ordnance disposal technicians, medics, field communications and forward-based personnel.

Support and administration, 162 personnel, logisticians, policy officials, operations planners, personnel and finance specialists and external communications staff.

Research and analysis, 113 personnel including historians, analysts, researchers and archivists.

Forensics, 88 people including anthropologists, archaeologists, odontologists, lab and evidence technicians and a medical examiner.

One long-time observer of the POW/MIA mission and issues said, "Over the last 12 years or so, we've seen seven or eight DPMO and directors, interim directors, and now a new, first DPAA director all of whom appeared at first to be dedicated to the mission of recovering U.S. service members. I'll hold my vote until we've seen what General Linnington will do in the months ahead."

Linnington told National League of Families that he wants to stay with the mission for a long time, perhaps 10 years, because he believes continuity is important.

## **About the Author**

John Stryker Meyer is an author and U.S. Army Special Forces combat veteran of service in covert reconnaissance who served two tours of duty running recon with the Studies and Observations Group, also known as MACV-SOG. Meyer has authored two books: *Across The Fence: The Secret War in Vietnam -- Expanded Edition*, and *On The Ground*.