Weekly Report

National Security Division
Week ending December 21, 2018

The American Legion National Commander Brett Reistad tours the Indo-Pacific Theater

American Legion National Commander Brett Reistad meeting with President Tsai.

Annually, the National Commander departs for a tour of the Far East for the purpose of informing troops and commanders of the many programs and support the American Legion provides to our servicemembers. Additional, the National Commander uses these visits to gain a better understanding of the geopolitical and strategic challenges our country faces in the Indo-Pacific theater.

During the first week of the trip National Commander Reistad received briefings from Pacific Command Headquarters. The American Legion is mindful of the Pentagon's new National Defense Strategy, which lays out a world where great-power competition, rather than counterterrorism, will drive the department's decision-making and force structure. One of the main focuses during the travel is to gain a better understanding of regional security issues in the Indo-Pacific region and meet with senior Department of Defense officials in order to better inform the views of The American Legion. The information the National Commander receives assists the American Legion in articulating our legislative goals to Congress and the Administration for national security, servicemembers, veterans, and their families.

During the second week of the trip, Commander Reistad visited military installations throughout South Korea. The party toured facilities at Osan Air Base to gain a better understanding of conditions for deployed troops. They also met with Osan's installation leadership to receive an overview briefing of the installation's mission on the frontline.

Read more of the visit to South Korea here.

American Legion National Commander Brett P. Reistad receiving Taiwan's Medal of Honor.

Commander Reistad also visited the newly established U.S. Army Garrison Humphreys. Camp Humphreys' installation mission integrates and delivers support to enable readiness for a globally-responsive Army. Located within the seaport city of Pyeongtaek, along the western coast of South Korea, and approximately 40 miles south of Seoul, Camp Humphreys is home to the Army's most active airfield in the Pacific and the center of the largest construction and transformation project in the U.S. Department of Defense's history.

In the coming years, the Camp Humphreys military community population will more than triple in size, from 10,000 to 36,000 Soldiers, Civilians, and their Family members. Main construction projects underway include unit headquarters buildings, vehicle maintenance facilities, barracks, family housing, medical facilities, a military communications complex, a commissary, a post exchange, schools, and child development centers.

The National Commander spent the second half of the week visiting U.S. military installation throughout Okinawa beginning with a windshield tour of Kadena Air Base followed by a meeting with the installation's leadership.

American Legion National Commander Brett Reistad visiting the Kinkaseki POW camp while visiting Taiwan.

This week will included a visit to Taiwan where the Legion delegation met with Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen at the Presidential Palace. President Tsai detailed important points in the promotion of Veterans Affairs in Taiwan, hope for continued close ties between the United States and Taiwan. She also thanked the Legion for its long record of support for Taiwan and its resolutions supporting the country. She expressed concern that the PRC interfered in Taiwan's recent elections. When asked if China can be relied on to aid efforts to denuclearize North Korea, her answer was very nuanced. She believes that China wants a buffer between a pro-Western South Korea and its own border. All other factors removed, she did say that China would probably prefer North Korea to be non-nuclear. National Commander Reistad suggested that the ROC Veterans Affairs Council open a liaison office in Washington, D.C. to keep communications open between VSOs, the VAC and Congress. President Tsai concurred that this should be done.

American Legion National Commander Brett P. Reistad receiving acupuncture therapy treatment while visiting the Taiwan Veterans Hospital.

The delegation toured the Taipei Veterans General Hospital – ranked one of the best in the world. The staff was amazing and administered free acupuncture treatments to anyone in the delegation as a demonstration of their medicines. There are approximately 360 military veterans in Taiwan. The hospital treats about 2.5 million patients per year – 30 percent of them are veterans. Taiwan is openly encouraging people to practice "medical tourism" in their country. Medical costs are low – but free to veterans at Taipei Veterans General Hospital.

In a very dignified ceremony, Taiwan's Minister of Defense presented National Commander Reistad with Taiwan's "Medal of Honor." Obviously the criteria differs greatly from the U.S. Medal of Honor, but the award is still a distinction to be proud of.

A large official dinner hosted by Minister of Defense and VAC was held in honor of the National Commander and his delegation at the Sherataon Grand Hotel in Taipei. The VAC discussed Congress allowing for the creation of a new liaison office in Washington, D.C.

The party's next and final location to visit during the trip will be Tokyo, Japan. The delegation will meet with several cabinet level members of Japan's government as well as the U.S. embassy to meet with the ambassador. Friday the delegation will visit the United States 7th Fleet at Yokosuka where it will meet with the installation's leadership and tour the USS Ronald Reagan.

American Legion National Commander Brett P. Reistad meeting with Vice Minister Suzuki.

Follow updates from the National Commander's trip at: https://www.legion.org/.

Staff meets with Ambassador of Republic of Azerbaijan to the United States

On Monday, December 17th the Turkish Heritage Organization held its first roundtable discussion as part of its new Ambassador Series. The Republic of Azerbaijan's Ambassador to the United States, Elin Suleymanov partook in an invite-only event.

Speaking to The American Legion, government officials, business leaders and think thank experts, Ambassador Suleymanov opened the discussion by speaking about various regional projects Azerbaijan was a part of and continued the discussion on US-Azerbaijan and Turkey-Azerbaijan relations, as well as a myriad of different topics concerning Azerbaijan, the surrounding region, and its place in the world. THO was honored to have had the opportunity to host H.E. Elin Suleymanov as its inaugural Ambassador Series speaker.

Elin Suleymanov is Azerbaijan's Ambassador to the United States of America. Prior to that, for over five years, Mr. Suleymanov had been the nation's first Consul General to Los Angeles and the Western States leading the team, which established Azerbaijani diplomatic presence on the West Coast. Earlier, he served as Senior Counselor at the Foreign Relations Department, Office of the President in Baku, Azerbaijan and as Press Officer of the Azerbaijani Embassy in Washington, DC. Mr. Suleymanov's experience before joining diplomatic service includes working with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Azerbaijan and Glaverbel Czech, a leading manufacturing company in East-Central Europe.

Items of Interest

Trump orders full withdrawal of U.S. Troops from Syria

(Courtesy of NY Times)

WASHINGTON — President Trump has ordered a rapid withdrawal of all 2,000 United States ground troops from Syria within 30 days, declaring the four-year American-led war against the Islamic State as largely won, officials said Wednesday.

“We have defeated ISIS in Syria, my only reason for being there during the Trump Presidency,” the president said in a Twitter post on Wednesday morning. He offered no details on his plans for the military mission, nor a larger strategy, in Syria.

Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the White House press secretary, said in a statement that “we have started returning United States troops home as we transition to the next phase of this campaign.”
But Pentagon officials who had sought to talk the president out of the decision as late as Wednesday morning argued that such a move would betray Kurdish allies who have fought alongside American troops in Syria and who could find themselves under attack in a military offensive now threatened by Turkey.

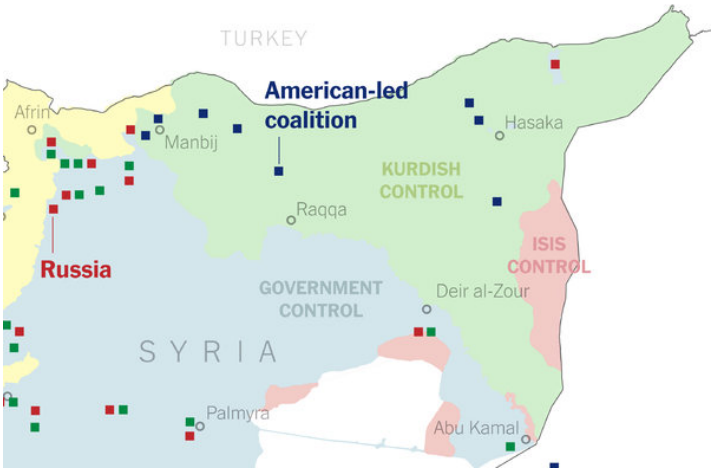
One American official said that Kurdish leaders were informed of the president’s decision on Wednesday morning.

”At this time, we continue to work by, with and through our partners in the region,” Col. Rob Manning, a Pentagon spokesman, said in a short statement.

A second official said the withdrawal of troops would be phased out over several weeks and that the American-led airstrike campaign against the Islamic State in Syria, which began in 2014, would continue. That official said the military hoped to rely on Kurdish fighters on the ground to help with targeting.

Officials discussed the emerging policy on condition of anonymity before any announcement from the White House.

In a series of meetings and conference calls over the past several days, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and other senior national security officials have tried to dissuade Mr. Trump from a wholesale troop withdrawal, arguing that the significant national security policy shift would essentially cede foreign influence in Syria to Russia and Iran at a time when American policy calls for challenging both countries.



Abandoning the American-backed Kurdish allies, Pentagon officials have argued, will hamper future efforts by the United States to gain the trust of local fighters, from Afghanistan to Yemen to Somalia.

In addition, the Islamic State has not been full vanquished from the small territory it controls on the Syrian-Iraqi border. The Islamic State has held that territory for more than a year in the face of attacks by American-allied forces, and has used it as a launching pad to carry out attacks in Iraq and Syria.

But Mr. Trump promised during his presidential campaign to withdraw American troops from Syria, and has been looking for a way out since. He reluctantly agreed in April to give the Defense Department more time to finish the mission.

In recent days, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey has given Mr. Trump just such a possible path: Mr. Erdogan has vowed to launch a new offensive against the Kurdish troops that the United States has equipped to fight the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

As the debate over withdrawing from Syria was raging inside the White House over recent days, Mr. Trump argued that the risk of a Turkish incursion could be a threat to the United States forces in Syria, officials said, although Mr. Erdogan would likely face huge reprisals if Turkish troops killed or wounded any Americans.

On Monday, Mr. Erdogan said that he told Mr. Trump that Turkey would launch its offensive soon. Turkey considers the American-backed Kurdish forces to be a terrorist group because of their connection to the Kurdistan Workers' Party, a Kurdish insurgency in the region. The Syrian Kurds hope to create an autonomous region in northeast Syria, similar to the one in neighboring Iraq. They now control around 30 percent of Syria's territory.

Pentagon officials have been pushing for a diplomatic solution to the issue.

The Islamic State, a militant group also known as ISIS, has lost an nearly all of its territory in Iraq and Syria, where the 2,000 American troops are mostly advising a militia made up of Kurdish and Arab soldiers.

In recent days, Turkey has accused the United States of failing to tackle security threats in the region. The United States and Turkey are NATO allies but uneasy partners in the war against the Islamic State.

But one Defense Department official suggested that Mr. Trump also wants to divert attention away from the series of legal challenges confronting him over the recent days: the Russian investigation run by the special counsel as well as the sentencing of his former personal lawyer, Michael Cohen, in a hush-money scandal to buy the silence of two women who said they had affairs with Mr. Trump.

Mr. Trump's former national security adviser, Michael T. Flynn, was in court on Tuesday, where he was harshly criticized by federal judge for his efforts to mislead federal investigators.

Pence provides update on Space Command

U.S. Space Command will be the U.S. military's 11th unified combatant command, Vice President Mike Pence announced at the Kennedy Space Center in Florida.

"It will serve alongside other functional commands like Strategic Command and Special Operations Command, and it will be led by a four-star flag officer," Pence said. "It will establish unified control over all our military space operations."

(Courtesy of Military Times)

"It will serve alongside other functional commands like Strategic Command and Special Operations Command, and it will be led by a four-star flag officer," Pence said. "It will establish unified control over all our military space operations."

U.S. Space Command will integrate space capabilities across all branches of the military, the vice president said. "It will develop the space doctrine, tactics, techniques, and procedures that will enable our warfighters to defend our nation in this new era," he added.

In the future, the U.S. Space Command will become the sixth branch of the armed forces, he said, noting that the administration is working with Congress to stand up the U.S. Space Force before the end of 2020.

Pence was joined by Air Force Secretary Heather Wilson, who announced the upcoming launch of the Global Positioning System III Space Vehicle 1, the "Vespucci," a communications satellite designed to deliver GPS to the military.

In the audience were airmen of the 45th Space Wing who were involved in the lead-up to the launch of the "Vespucci."

"We've forged new partnerships with pioneering companies like those involved in the rocket that sits on the launch pad today," Pence said. "We're investing in tools and capabilities that our armed forces need to protect our nation from the commanding heights of space. And that, of course, is what the 45th Space Wing has always done. … And we're going to continue to provide the 45th with the resources to accomplish your mission in the days ahead.

"The progress that we've made and the leadership America has provided in space is a result of careful, methodical, cutting-edge work of the people that are gathered here and the decisions that were even made here today," the vice president said, looking out at the assembled airmen.

Air Force maintainers brace to meet SECDEF's 80% readiness order

(Courtesy of Air Force Times)

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis has thrown down the gauntlet for the Air Force's maintainers: Get four out of every five F-16, F-22 and F-35 fighter jets ready to fly at any given time — and get it done by the end of fiscal 2019.

It's not going to be easy — and not only because those planes aren't anywhere near the 80 percent goal.

Maintainers are already working long hours, with 12-hour-plus shifts and weekend work a common reality on the flightline. Some are bracing themselves for even longer workweeks as the pressure grows to hit that target — but wonder how much more they can give.

"Maintainers have been running hard for a long time," said retired Gen. Hawk Carlisle, former head of Air Combat Command, in a Nov. 29 interview. "You can only get so much blood from a stone."

Complicating matters is the fact that F-16s are aging, and require more work. Bases are often short crucial parts necessary to get jets back in the air. And while a massive shortfall in the Air Force's maintenance ranks has been closed, many of those new, young maintainers are still gaining the vital experience they need to make more advanced repairs and work on their own.

A 'stretch goal'

One maintainer, who works on F-16's electrical and environmental systems at Kunsan Air Base in South Korea, said the 80 percent order is "borderline unattainable," at least in that time frame. Eventually he thinks F-16s can get there, but it'll be hard to keep 80 percent up if operations tempos increase.

"We all just kind of laughed about it," said the Kunsan maintainer, who asked to remain anonymous because he was not authorized to speak to the press. "That's always been the unspoken goal for us anyway, 80 percent. That's always been the warm fuzzy number for everybody."

Carlisle said Mattis' challenge is a way to focus the Air Force's attention on finding ways to address its readiness shortfalls.

But even if it's not impossible, Carlisle said it's "a stretch goal — as an understatement."

To be sure, mission-capable rates are headed in the wrong direction and need to turn around. They've been steadily declining across the fleet for years, and things have gotten particularly worrisome for crucial fighter jets.

MISSION-CAPABLE RATES

Mission-capable rates for the three Air Force fighters covered by Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis' readiness order all declined between fiscal 2016 and 2017, the most recent year for which data was available.

AIRCRAFT	2017	2016	CHANGE
F-16C Fighting Falcon	70.2 %	73.1 %	- 2.9
F-16D Fighting Falcon	66 %	69.1 %	- 3.1
F-22 Raptor	49 %	60.2 %	- 11.1
F-35 Lightning II	54.7 %	64.6 %	- 9.9
Source: Air Force			

The Air Force declined to make any officials available for interviews to describe how the service planned to meet Mattis' goals, which were laid out in a September memo to service secretaries. Mattis also wants the Navy to get F-18 mission-capable rates to 80 percent.

But in a Nov. 15 panel discussion, Air Force Secretary Heather Wilson said the Air Force was planning to bolster Air National Guard units with either additional Guardsmen or contractors, to allow them to run second maintenance shifts. Many Guard units now do not have second-shift maintainers who can work on planes that come in from an afternoon flight needing repairs, Wilson said, which means they can't fly the next morning, harming readiness.

Wilson also said the Air Force is particularly concentrating on improving readiness in squadrons that would be called upon if a conflict were to break out with Russia or China. She said the service is making progress, and is 15 percent more ready than it was 15 months ago, with 75 percent of operational units with combat missions ready to fly.

A maintainer with the 325th Maintenance Group inspects the underside of a 95th Fighter Squadron F-22 Raptor during a deployment exercise at Tyndall Air Force Base, Florida, June 14. (Airman 1st Class Isaiah J. Soliz/Air Force)

Maintainers are worried

In a Dec. 5 talk hosted by the Mitchell Institute in Arlington, Virginia, Lt. Gen. Mark Kelly, the deputy chief of staff for operations, said the Air Force needs to strike a balance in managing its maintenance manpower. If the Air Force ends up pushing its more experienced maintainers past the point where their fitness and family lives suffer, Kelly said, "we got a problem."

But at the same time, the service has to get its readiness rates up, as well as training up its thousands of apprentice maintainers until they reach the 5, or journeyman, level and can handle more complex jobs. Kelly said long hours have been a constant reality for maintainers throughout the 32 years he's been in uniform, "and I'd be remiss to say that's going to change in the next year."

An airman conducts a post-flight inspection on an F-16 Fighting Falcon in Afghanistan. The age of the fourth-generation fighters adds to the difficulty of reaching 80 percent readiness rates. (Senior Airman Scott Saldukas/Air Force)

Some maintainers are worried. The Air Force is pushing to train and qualify more pilots to help plug a roughly 2,000-pilot gap. And an F-15 avionics airman, who also asked for his name not to be printed, said that means more flying, which will mean more wear and tear on planes that needs to be repaired.

And he fears that's going to make it even harder for squadrons to hit 80 percent.

"Most bases are already working longer hours and pulling weekend duties," he said. "That's kind of the culture. We're already working pretty hard. … My biggest concern is, for some units, they are going to be flying a lot more to qualify pilots. So that means we're going to be breaking a lot more planes, and that's going to put a higher demand on maintainers to try to keep them at 80 percent."

Current and former maintainers tell Air Force Times they're stretched thin, sometimes barely having enough time to wolf down a quick lunch before getting back to work. Many get up early to squeeze in their physical fitness training before their shifts begin, they say — no exercising on the job for them.

Retired Master Sgt. Chris Linkous, who was an F-16 crew chief before he retired in 2016, worries that overwork may be straining maintainers and their families.

"There's just no time," Linkous said. "These kids are either going to the gym … before they come in to work at 6 in the morning, or they're going to the gym at 6 in the afternoon when they get off work. There is no time for a family life, there's no time for anything other than aircraft maintenance."

Read the full article here.

Quality of Life

TRICARE Update

TRICARE Open Season

Did You Miss the 2018 TRICARE Open Season?

If you missed TRICARE Open Season, you still have time to act.

- For this year only, you have until Dec. 31, 2018 to enroll in a new plan or make changes to your enrollment (e.g., switch from individual to family enrollment).
- Beginning Jan. 1, 2019, you can only enroll or make changes during Open Season or after a Qualifying Life Event (QLE), as outlined below.
  Did you intend to enroll in a FEDVIP dental or vision plan, but missed the Federal Benefits Open Season for reasons beyond your control? Visit www.benefeds.com to see what options are available to you.

Making Enrollment Changes Outside of Open Season

- Outside of TRICARE Open Season, you can enroll in or change enrollment to TRICARE Prime or TRICARE Select following a Qualifying Life Event (QLE).

- A QLE is a certain change in your life, such as marriage, birth of a child, or retirement from active duty, which may mean different TRICARE options are available to you. A TRICARE QLE opens a 90-day period for you to make eligible enrollment changes. A QLE for one family member means all family members may make enrollment changes. To learn more, visit www.tricare.mil/lifeevents.
- Outside of the Federal Benefits Open Season, you may only make changes to your existing FEDVIP plan if you experience a FEDVIP QLE. Remember, FEDVIP QLEs may be different from the TRICARE QLEs.

Staff Activities

- This week, Jeff Steele is staffing the National Commander on the Far East Trip. Jeff worked several months to coordinate this trip which has been a success.
- This week, staff has continued to plan and coordinate the Washington Conference. We have been meeting with offices within the Department of Defense's Defense Health Agency and POW/MIA Accounting Agency to coordinate speakers for the event. We have also met with current and former ambassadors to develop a foreign policy panel to take place during the Conference.
- Monday, staff attended a roundtable discussion hosted by the Turkish Heritage Foundation with the Ambassador of Azerbaijan to the United States, Elin Suleymanov.
- Thursday, staff met with Bonnie Carrol, President of the Tragedy Assistance for Surviving Spouses Organization to discuss the American Legion's program to support Gold Star Families.
- Dimitri Meritis, interning from Hill Vets, continues to work on the early planning for the National Commander's upcoming trip to Europe in late May.

POW/MIA Update

Personnel Recovered

DPAA released the following year end review: In Fiscal Year (FY) 2018, the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) accounted for 203 missing persons from past conflicts.

Broken down by conflict, 10 were accounted for from the Vietnam War, 37 from the Korean War, and 156 were from World War II.

The DPAA FY2018 in Review is a chronological pictorial depiction of DPAA's global mission of providing the fullest possible accounting of our missing personnel to their families and the nation. It is a snapshot of the ongoing work by our service members and civilian professionals, the countries in which they operated, and the partners without whom we would not have been successful: the combatant commands, military Service Casualty Offices, the Armed Forces Medical Examiner System-Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory, the Defense Intelligence Agency-Stony Beach, the teams from the Department of Veterans Affairs and the American Battle Monuments Commission cemeteries, and the non-governmental organizations that conduct missions on DPAA's behalf.

DPAA is focused on the research, investigation, recovery and identification for approximately 34,000 (out of ~83,000) missing Americans they believe are possibly recoverable from World War II, the Cold War, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, Iraq, and other designated past conflicts.

Link to FY2018 Year in Review:
http://www.dpaa.mil/Portals/85/Documents/Newsletters/YiR%20FINAL.pdf

This week, the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency made 32 new funeral announcements. Click on the links to read more:

12/18/18: Airman Accounted For From World War II (Lord, J.)WASHINGTON
12/17/18: Marine Accounted For From World War II (Freet, F.)WASHINGTON
12/17/18: Marine Accounted For From World War II (Gojmerac, N.)WASHINGTON
12/17/18: Soldier Accounted For From Korean War (Spangenberg, G.)WASHINGTON
12/17/18: Sailor Accounted For From World War II (Blancheri, W.)WASHINGTON
12/17/18: Marine Accounted For From World War II (Salerno, M.)WASHINGTON
12/17/18: Soldier Accounted For From World War II (Boegli, W.)WASHINGTON
12/17/18: Soldier Accounted For From Korean War (Jones, W.)WASHINGTON
12/17/18: USS Oklahoma Sailor Accounted For From World War II (Headington, R.)WASHINGTON
12/17/18: USS Oklahoma Sailor Accounted For From World War II (Dick, F.)WASHINGTON
12/17/18: USS Oklahoma Sailor Accounted For From World War II (Smith, M.)WASHINGTON
12/17/18: USS Oklahoma Sailor Accounted For From World War II (Gowey, C.)WASHINGTON
12/17/18: USS Oklahoma Sailor Accounted For From World War II (Tindall, L.)WASHINGTON
12/17/18: USS Oklahoma Sailor Accounted For From World War II (Kelley, J.)WASHINGTON
12/17/18: USS Oklahoma Sailor Accounted For From World War II (Guisinger, D.)WASHINGTON
12/17/18: USS Oklahoma Sailor Accounted For From World War II (Jordan, W.)WASHINGTON
12/17/18: USS Oklahoma Sailor Accounted For From World War II (Keffer, H.)WASHINGTON
12/17/18: USS Oklahoma Sailor Accounted For From World War II (Barrett, W.)WASHINGTON
12/17/18: USS Oklahoma Sailor Accounted For From World War II (Nail, E.)WASHINGTON
12/17/18: USS Oklahoma Sailor Accounted For From World War II (Nicoles, F.)WASHINGTON
12/17/18: USS Oklahoma Sailor Accounted For From World War II (Pace, M.)WASHINGTON
12/17/18: USS Oklahoma Sailor Accounted For From World War II (Olsen, E.)WASHINGTON
12/17/18: USS Oklahoma Sailor Accounted For From World War II (Craig, J.)WASHINGTON
12/17/18: USS Oklahoma Sailor Accounted For From World War II (Crim, W.)WASHINGTON
12/17/18: Soldier Accounted For From Korean War (Shaw, J,)WASHINGTON
12/17/18: USS Oklahoma Sailor Accounted For From World War II (George, G.)WASHINGTON
12/17/18: USS Oklahoma Sailor Accounted For From World War II (James, C.)WASHINGTON
12/14/18: Airman Accounted For From World War II (Leinweber, H.)WASHINGTON
12/14/18: USS Oklahoma Sailor Accounted For From World War II (Gomez, C.)WASHINGTON
12/14/18: USS Oklahoma Sailor Accounted For From World War II (Clayton, G.)WASHINGTON
12/14/18: Soldier Accounted For From Korean War (Coons, F.)WASHINGTON
12/14/18: Soldier Accounted For From Korean War (Boyce, J.)WASHINGTON

Joe Sharpe, Acting Director, National Security Division
Rhonda Powell, Director, National Security Division