

Korean War MIA Meeting
Tuesday 11 April 2017
Venue – Russell Offices Canberrrs

Summary of Key Outcomes

This document is a summary of the key outcomes to facilitate working group members' ability to communicate with constituents and stakeholders. It does not cover all items discussed, nor does it replace the minutes which are distributed for members purposes. It deliberately does not document the full nature of discussions as it is considered that to do this would stifle open and honest working group discussion over time and is not in the common interest of working group members or their constituents.

Attendance

AHQ - COL Ashley Collingburn

UWC-A – Andrew Bernie, Brad Ebert, MAJ David Wilson, FLTLT Kirsty Wright,
PTE Garth Rider

RAAF – AIRCDRE John Meier, SQNLDR Greg Williams, WOFF Steve
Mountstephen

RAR Association – President 5 RARA COL Roger Wainwright (Rtd)

RAAF Association – WGCDR Lance Halvorsen MBE (Rtd)

77 Squadron Association – GPCAPT Milton Cottee (Rtd)

Australian Council of Korean Veterans Associations - National President, RADM
Ian Crawford AO AM (Rtd)

Korean Veterans Association of Australia – ACT Representative, Colin Berryman
OAM

Family of MIAs – Jill Talty, Julie Dorrington (via teleconference), Ian Saunders
OAM, Derek Luxford

Apologies

AVM Brent Espeland AM (Rtd), LTCOL Ted Chitham MC OAM (Rtd)

1. Introductions by new Defence representatives

AIRCDRE Meier, COL Collingburn and Andrew Bernie introduced themselves to the group and outlined their recent career histories. Other attendees also introduced themselves and indicated their respective connections to the Korean War MIA Working Group.

AIRCDRE Meier advised that as a result of a recent Air Force Headquarters reorganisation, the History and Heritage Branch which he leads was formed. The Aircraft Recoveries and MIA Investigations cell, headed by SQNLDR Williams, is now part of the Air Force History and Heritage Branch.

COL Collingburn advised that in light of the disposition of Australia's Korean War MIA and with the working group's concurrence, meetings would be co-chaired by himself and AIRCDRE Meier.

2. Back brief on results from UWC-A visits to DPAA and MAKRI

Andrew Bernie advised that the visit to the DPAA Asia/Pacific facilities based in Hawaii was very successful. He confirmed that the proposed MOU was circulated in advance of the visit to enable informed discussion on the matter during the visit, and that it was well received by DPAA.

In relation to exhumation of remains interred in the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific (the Punchbowl), Andrew advised that exhumations are conducted on a targeted basis where DPAA assess that the likelihood of identifying the disinterred remains is better than 50%. In order to reach the threshold for disinterment for DNA testing and comparison against FRS held, significant other supporting evidence must be present to support a possible identification, for example dental records, chest x-rays, other anthropological information and recovery date and location.

In relation to the visit to MAKRI in Seoul, Andrew advised that the meeting was also very productive and that MAKRI was receptive to the idea of formalising the bilateral relationship through an MOU or similar arrangement. MAKRI already has MOUs with a number of countries, including many of the countries that comprised the UN forces during the Korean War. Of particular interest for the Australian situation is that MAKRI does not automatically forward caucasoid remains to DPAA. Caucasoid remains are provided to the country of origin, or if this is unknown, they are retained by MAKRI.

UWC-A has undertaken to send MAKRI the last known location of Australian MIA, dental records and FRS, in conjunction with the drafting of an MOU between the two organisations.

3. Status of Australian DNA FRS provided to DPAA

During his DPAA visit, Andrew confirmed that AFDIL had received Australian FRS profiles. These profiles are included in all comparison tests against DNA profiles recovered from remains held by DPAA – these occur every two or three months. In response to a request by Australian families for written confirmation that Australian FRS are included in comparisons against DNA profiles recovered from Korean War remains, Andrew advised that a draft letter to this effect had been received from US Authorities. The letter was sent in draft form initially to ensure that it covered the concerns of Australian families, and will be signed and sent in final form after UWC-A has confirmed that the draft letter meets Australian MIA family requirements.

4. MOU between Defence and DPAA

The latest draft of the correspondence to DPAA that will formalise the bilateral relationship was tabled. Attendees were asked to provide feedback within a week.

It was suggested that a preamble to the draft MOU letter should include reference to the interests of the families of Korean War MIAs. Working group members were invited to submit draft wording for inclusion.

Discussion ensued about the different status of the terms “agreement” and “arrangement” in the context of the draft letter to DPAA and that an “agreement” may have more legal status. The Defence legal drafters have deliberately described the proposed exchange of letters as an “arrangement”, but the meeting agreed that members were welcome to include feedback on this issue in their comments on the draft letter.

5. Outcome of the UWC-A investigation into the 4 unknown Allied soldiers at UNMCK

Mr Ken Corke, Director of War Graves, Department of Veterans' Affairs introduced himself to the group. He advised that in this role, he has responsibility for maintaining war cemeteries, memorials and individual war graves in Australia and the region, for commemorating eligible veterans who died post-war and for building and maintaining official Australian memorials overseas. In addition, he has responsibility for implementing Australian Government policy in relation to these matters. Ken was invited to the meeting as he had responsibility for implementing Government policy on matters likely to be discussed on this issue.

The draft Final Report by UWC-A on the Four Allied Unknowns at UNMCK was tabled at the meeting and distributed to attendees. Working group members were requested to provide any comments regarding the report within a month.

The report concludes that it is highly unlikely that an Australian is among the four unknown allied burials at UNMCK; however, the possibility cannot be categorically excluded. Of particular relevance is that the evidence presented in the report shows that PLTOFF Stephens and CPL Murphy, the two Australian MIAs whose last known location was south of the DMZ, and therefore closest to the recovery locations of the four allied unknowns, have been ruled out as being among the unknowns at UNMCK Pusan through odontology comparison.

Ken outlined to the meeting the Australian Government policy regarding exhumation of war graves. He advised that to date the Government had not approved any requests for the disinterment of remains in a war grave for the purposes of attempting to establish the identity of an unknown soldier. On the basis that the report indicated it was highly unlikely that any of the allied unknowns at UNMCK were Australian, he considered it was unlikely the Government would initiate a request for exhumation to UNMCK in these circumstances. It was noted that individuals or veterans organisations are free to pursue this matter with Government if they wish.

RADM Crawford thanked UWC-A for their work in preparing the report and indicated that in light of the findings, it may be prudent to pursue other, potentially more productive avenues, for example the possibility that remains within the possession of DPAA may be those of Australian servicemen.

6. Q&A session on DNA technology - FLTLT Kristy Wright

FLTLT Wright's presentation was condensed due to time constraints; however, she briefly explained:

- the different types of DNA and DNA tests;
- the parts of the skeleton with the best chances of successfully extracting DNA;
- factors that degraded DNA, in particular formaldehyde in the context of Korean War remains processed by US mortuary services in Camp Kokura, Japan;
- the power of discrimination and 'common' DNA profiles in the Australian population, meaning other supporting evidence or a second DNA test may be needed to support a mtDNA match; and
- next generation sequencing and current research priorities.

7. Next meeting

The next meeting will be scheduled for late July 2017.