

THE UNSEEN ARSENAL FILES

Four True Stories of American Military Power

01 PLANT 42
The factory America won't let you photograph

02 PRIME CHANCE
How Iran's secret minelayer was caught

03 GREENLAND
America's 85-year secret at the top of the world

04 THE MISSING
The hunt for America's 80,000 missing men

ILLUSTRATED WITH MAPS, DIAGRAMS AND PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE ARCHIVES

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

TO THE READER

> *This book is for the men and women who served, and for the families who waited for them.*

Every file in it began as one of our documentaries. A film has forty minutes and a narrator who cannot stop. A book can take its time. Here you will find each story told in full, with the names, ranks, ages and hometowns of the people in it, the dates and the numbers set out where you can find them again, and a list of the sources behind every file, so that you can check our work.

A book can also show you things a film has to hurry past. Each file opens with a case summary and a map of where the story takes you. Along the way you will find pages marked By the Numbers, The Ship, The Aircraft, How It Works and Timeline. They pull the hard facts out of the story and lay them out so you can study them, come back to them, or show them to a grandchild.

Each file ends with what is left today: the places you can still visit, and the ships, aircraft and bases that survive. One ends with a page you can use: how a family can help the government identify a missing serviceman.

If a story in these pages touches your own family, or your own service, we would be honored to hear about it.

The Unseen Arsenal team

VOLUME ONE

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THE HUNT FOR AMERICA'S

80,000 MISSING MEN

PEARL HARBOR ▪ NEW GUINEA ▪ KOREA ▪ VIETNAM ▪ ARLINGTON

The search for the men who never came home, 1941 to 2026

The USS Oklahoma lies capsized in Pearl Harbor after the attack of December 7, 1941. Four hundred twenty-nine of her crew were killed, and for eighty years most of them had no names. U.S. NAVY PHOTOGRAPH (PUBLIC DOMAIN)

CASE FILE 04

THE MISSING

STILL OPEN
CASE STATUS

OPENED	December 7, 1941, Pearl Harbor, Hawaii
STILL MISSING	More than 80,000 Americans from the Second World War, Korea, Vietnam and the Cold War
LOST AT SEA	More than 40,000 of them
SEARCHING	Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA), formed in January 2015
REACH	Laboratories in Hawaii and Nebraska, 120 partners, missions in 45 countries
RECORD YEAR	231 men identified in fiscal year 2025

IN THIS FILE NINE STORIES

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THE MAP

WHERE THIS FILE TAKES YOU



1 PEARL HARBOR, HAWAII

DECEMBER 7, 1941

The Oklahoma rolls over and the Arizona explodes. The laboratory that names the missing stands here today, and so does the Punchbowl, where the unknowns were buried.

2 HANSA BAY, NEW GUINEA

MARCH 11, 1944

The B-24 Liberator Heaven Can Wait goes down with eleven men aboard. She lies about two hundred feet down.

3 UNSAN, NORTH KOREA

NOVEMBER 1950

Master Sergeant Charles McDaniel is lost in the first great clash between American and Chinese soldiers.

4 AN LOC, SOUTH VIETNAM

MAY 11, 1972

First Lieutenant Michael Blassie's attack jet is shot down during the Easter Offensive.

5 MANILA, PHILIPPINES

THE WALLS OF THE MISSING

More than 36,000 names of men the Pacific kept. A bronze rosette marks each one who has been found.

6 ARLINGTON, VIRGINIA

THE TOMB OF THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER

Guarded every minute of every day since 1937. One of its crypts is empty on purpose.

Map: The Unseen Arsenal. Coastlines and borders: Natural Earth (public domain).

THE STORY

More than 80,000 Americans who went to war for this country never came home. For their families there was never a grave to visit, only a name on a wall of the missing and a lifetime of wondering. And yet, at this moment, somewhere in the world, a team of Americans is still out there looking for them.

Off the north coast of New Guinea, a B-24 bomber has been lying on the sea floor, about two hundred feet down, since 1944, and seven of the eleven men who flew her have still not come home. In the jungles of Southeast Asia, the acid in the soil is slowly dissolving what is left of the men who fell there, which turns every year of searching into a race against time. And in the crater of an old volcano above Honolulu, eighty-six sailors and Marines from the battleship Arizona lie under headstones that carry the name of their ship, with a single word where their own names should be: Unknown.

On December 7, 2026, eighty-five years to the day after Pearl Harbor, the first of those graves will finally be opened. For years the Pentagon had looked at that job and decided it would take a decade and nearly three million dollars, so it simply did not happen. What changed it was one man, a real estate agent from Virginia who refused to take no for an answer. He went out with a small team and found the families himself, and it took him three years.

This chapter is about people like him, the ones who would not let go. There is a Pearl Harbor survivor who spent years fighting for graves that were not even from his own ship, and a college professor named after a

WHAT CHANGED IT WAS ONE MAN, A REAL ESTATE AGENT FROM VIRGINIA WHO REFUSED TO TAKE NO FOR AN ANSWER.

bombardier he never met, who spent four years working out where that bombardier went down. There are two brothers who were three and two years old when their father left for Korea, and who got back the only name that came home in fifty-five boxes. And there is a family from St. Louis who discovered that the Unknown Soldier of the Vietnam War, the man a president had laid to rest at Arlington with the Medal of Honor, had a name all along.

If you have ever walked into a VFW hall or an American Legion post, you have seen the black flag with the white silhouette of a man, the guard tower, the strand of barbed wire, and the four words underneath: You Are Not Forgotten. Most people see it as a symbol. For the people in this story it has always been a promise, and in a laboratory in Hawaii, on the floor of the Pacific, and in that cemetery inside an old volcano, they are still working to keep it.

At Arlington, inside a tomb that soldiers have guarded every minute of every day since 1937, there is a crypt that has stood empty since 1998. By the end of this chapter you will know why it is empty, and why it is going to stay that way.

01
YOU ARE NOT FORGOTTEN

A black flag flies at every VFW hall and Legion post in the country. It was drawn in 1971, and it is still waiting for more than 80,000 men.

The black flag was born in 1971, in the middle of a war that was leaving men behind. Mary Hoff of Jacksonville, Florida, was the wife of a Navy pilot who had been listed as missing in Southeast Asia, and she belonged to a group of wives, parents and children of the missing who called themselves the National League of Families. She believed their men needed a symbol, something people could fly from a flagpole or a front porch, something that would not let the country look away.

The design was drawn by Newt Heisley, an advertising man who had flown as a pilot in the South Pacific during the Second World War, and who worked at the New Jersey agency used by the flag maker Annin. He sketched the silhouette of a prisoner of war against an unbroken white circle, with a guard tower and a strand of barbed wire behind him. For the face, he used his own son, Jeff, who had just come home from Marine Corps boot camp. Underneath it, he lettered the league's motto: You Are Not Forgotten.

That October the league presented the flag to Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, and over the years that followed it spread from one VFW hall and Legion post to the next. In 1988, on National POW/MIA Recognition Day, it flew over the White House for the



THE FLAG, YEAR BY YEAR

1971
Mary Hoff asks for a symbol. Newt Heisley draws it.

OCTOBER 1971
Presented to the Secretary of Defense.

1988
Flies over the White House.

1989
Placed in the Rotunda of the Capitol.

1990
Congress recognizes it as a national symbol.

first time, and other than the Stars and Stripes it is the only flag that has ever flown there. Since 1989 it has stood in the Rotunda of the United States Capitol. In 1990 Congress recognized it as a national symbol, and today the riders of Rolling Thunder and the American Legion Riders carry it on their escort missions.



The POW/MIA flag flies beside the Stars and Stripes at Naval Support Activity Naples, Italy. Wherever American servicemen are stationed, the black flag goes with them. PHOTO: U.S. NAVY (PUBLIC DOMAIN)

So how many men is that flag still waiting for? The answer comes from the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, the part of the Pentagon whose only job is to find them, and the numbers are hard to take in. More than 71,000 Americans from the Second World War are still unaccounted for, along with more than 7,300 from Korea, 1,565 from Vietnam, and more than one hundred from the Cold War. Altogether that is more than 80,000 men. More than 40,000 of them were lost at sea, going down with their ships or with aircraft that never came back from a mission, and many of them will never be found.

BY THE NUMBERS

80,000+

Americans who went to war in the last century and are still not accounted for. Each tag below stands for one thousand of them.



71,644
SECOND WORLD WAR

7,338
KOREAN WAR

1,565
VIETNAM WAR

About 126
COLD WAR

40,000+
were lost at sea, and many of them will never be found

200
identifications a year, the goal Congress set for the agency

231
men identified in fiscal year 2025, the most in a single year

Unaccounted-for totals published by the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, read November 4, 2026. Tags are rounded to the nearest thousand; the Cold War total of about 126 men is too small to show as one tag.

For their families, missing is a word that never quite closes, because there is no funeral, no grave, and for many of them never any certainty about what happened.

It was never supposed to be this way. After the Second World War, the Army sent teams across the world to find its dead and bring them home, and the American Graves Registration Service identified roughly 280,000 Americans in an enormous effort. But when those teams finally packed up, tens of thousands of men were still out there, in jungles and on mountainsides, on the bottom of the sea, and in graves marked Unknown.

For decades the job of finding them passed from one office to another. In January 2015 the Pentagon finally brought those offices together under one roof, in a single agency known by its initials, DPAA. It describes its mission in four words that will come back later in this chapter: the fullest possible accounting.

Its heart is a laboratory at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam in Hawaii, the largest and most diverse skeletal identification laboratory in the world, where more than 150 anthropologists, archaeologists and forensic dentists work. The agency runs a second laboratory in Nebraska. Its field teams are made up of anthropologists, historians, archaeologists and military personnel. Some of them dive, and some of them climb; one team leader describes the mountain crash sites they work on as Class 5 terrain, pure vertical. Together with 120 partners, the agency carries out missions in forty-five countries.

The agency is careful with one phrase in particular. A man is counted as accounted for only when two things have happened: the scientists have proven who he is, and his family has been told.

Congress has set the agency a goal of two hundred identifications a year, and for five years in a row it fell short. Then, in its 2025 fiscal year, it identified 231 men,

AT A GLANCE

THE AGENCY

FORMED	January 2015
MISSION	The fullest possible accounting
LABS	Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawaii, and Nebraska
STAFF	More than 150 scientists at the Hawaii laboratory
REACH	120 partners, missions in 45 countries

231

men identified in fiscal year 2025, a record

188

of them came from graves marked Unknown

HOW IT WORKS

HOW A MISSING MAN COMES HOME

The steps the agency follows for every man it finds.

1

RESEARCH

Historians and analysts work through old records, maps and witness accounts to find where a man was lost.

2

SEARCH

A field team of anthropologists, archaeologists, historians and military specialists surveys the site. Some of them dive; some of them climb.

3

RECOVERY

The site is dug by hand, and every bucket of soil is passed through mesh. A single tooth or a button can be enough.

4

THE LABORATORY

Anthropologists and forensic dentists study the remains at the agency's laboratory in Hawaii or its second laboratory in Nebraska.

5

DNA

Scientists compare DNA from the remains with samples given by relatives. Almost anyone within four generations can help.

In this file: the Blassie family, 1998

6

IDENTIFICATION

Dental records, old chest X-rays, the bones themselves and DNA are weighed together until there is proof.

In this file: 361 men of the Oklahoma

7

ACCOUNTED FOR

A man is counted as accounted for only when his identity is proven and his family has been told.

8

HOME

He is buried under his own name. Lieutenant Herbert Tennyson was laid to rest in Wichita in June 2025, beside his wife, Jean.

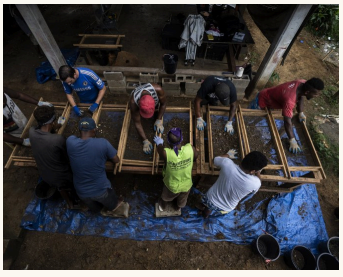
In this file: Heaven Can Wait



DIGGING. A soldier serving with the agency excavates a site on Guadalcanal, July 2019. U.S. AIR FORCE PHOTO (PUBLIC DOMAIN)



SCREENING. Team members work the screens during the same mission, June 2019. U.S. AIR FORCE PHOTO (PUBLIC DOMAIN)



BY HAND. Team members and local villagers screen the soil, one bucket at a time. U.S. AIR FORCE PHOTO (PUBLIC DOMAIN)



A Marine staff sergeant serving with the agency fills a bucket during a recovery mission on Guadalcanal, June 2019. The team was looking for Marines missing since the battle of 1942. U.S. AIR FORCE PHOTO BY TECH. SGT. ERIK CARDENAS (PUBLIC DOMAIN)

THE SCIENTISTS HAVE PROVEN WHO HE IS, AND HIS FAMILY HAS BEEN TOLD.

a record. Most of those names did not come from jungles or the sea floor but from old graves. One hundred eighty-eight of them came from unknowns who were lifted out of cemeteries, where they had been waiting all along.

Every one of those names depends on something the scientists cannot dig out of the ground, and that is family. To prove who a man is, the laboratory needs DNA from the people he left behind: a sister, a nephew, a grandchild, a cousin. And every year there are fewer people left who remember these men, who knew their faces and their voices and the sound of their laugh.

The people who still remember do not always wait for the government. Sometimes they push, and

sometimes they push for decades. In this story it starts on a Sunday morning in Hawaii, in December 1941.



A forensic anthropologist with the agency catches a sandbag during the same mission on Guadalcanal, June 2019. U.S. AIR FORCE PHOTO BY TECH. SGT. ERIK CARDENAS (PUBLIC DOMAIN)

END OF THE FREE SAMPLE

The rest of the story is in Volume One.

File 04 goes on for eight more chapters: the Oklahoma at Pearl Harbor, the B-24 that went down with eleven men aboard, the unknown who had a name, and the search for the 643 families needed to open the graves of 86 men from the Arizona.

Volume One holds all four files in 230 illustrated pages.

01 Plant 42

02 Prime Chance

03 Greenland

04 The Missing

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