



Written by [John White](#) on September 16, 2019

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“You Are Not Forgotten”

Only two flags that represent the United States have ever flown over the White House. One is the Stars and Stripes. The other is the POW/MIA flag. POW/MIA means Prisoners of War/Missing in Action.

The flag calls to mind the sacrifice and plight of Americans who have sacrificed their own freedom to preserve freedom for all of us. It reminds us that, while we enjoy the privileges of freedom, somewhere there are soldiers who have not been accounted for and may be held against their will by the enemies of freedom. America honors them annually with National POW/MIA Recognition Day, the third Friday in September.



We know about those Killed in Action (KIA) or Wounded in Action (WIA) because the evidence of their sacrifice is ever before us in monuments and displays. Sadly, the same cannot be said for those who are missing in action or who may have been taken prisoner by an enemy and never repatriated.

Since World War I more than 200,000 Americans have been listed as Prisoners of War or missing in action. Fewer than half of them were returned at the end of hostilities, leaving more than 125,000 American servicemen missing in action since the beginning of World War I. During the 14 years of American involvement in Southeast Asia, more than 2,500 Americans were captured or listed as Missing in Action. More recent conflicts such as Operation Desert Storm and Operation Iraqi Freedom have added to that total.

Families of American soldiers who are POW or MIA endure a special kind of heartache. Until the fate of their loved ones can be determined, many emotional, legal, and practical issues can not be addressed. For them, every day is POW/MIA Day.

The POW/MIA flag was created in 1971, during the Vietnam War, by the National League of Families, which was formed by families of POWs and MIAs. They saw the need for a symbol of their POW/MIAs. The result: a flag with stark black-and-white images of a silhouetted man with head bowed, a guard tower and a strand of barbed wire, and the words “You Are Not Forgotten” stretched across the bottom.

The flag designer was Newton F. Heisley of Colorado Springs, Colorado, who died at home on May 14, 2009. He was 88.

Heisley was a World War II pilot. The words “You Are Not Forgotten” were inspired by his memories of piloting transport planes on long flights across the South Pacific during the war. In his 2002 book *Faith Under Fire*, he said that, while flying, he thought about “being taken prisoner and being ... forgotten.” As he worked on designing the flag, that wartime experience came back to him. He wrote down the phrase and incorporated it into the design. His son Jeffrey, then 24 and a Marine, was the model for the



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captured soldier.

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The flag quickly caught on with the league and veterans organizations. Its popularity spread. In 1990, Congress recognized the league's POW/MIA flag and designated it as "the symbol of our Nation's concern and commitment to resolving as fully as possible the fates of Americans still prisoner, missing and unaccounted for in Southeast Asia, thus ending the uncertainty for their families and the Nation." Today, however, the flag has come to represent all the missing from U.S. military actions.

The POW/MIA flag flies each year on Armed Forces Day, Memorial Day, Flag Day, Independence Day, National POW/MIA Recognition Day, and Veterans Day. It flies on the grounds or in the public lobbies of major military installations as designated by the secretary of defense. It also flies at all national cemeteries, the national Korean War Veterans Memorial, the National Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the White House, the United States Postal Service post offices, and at the official offices of the secretaries of state, defense, and veterans affairs, and the director of the Selective Service System.

The design of the POW/MIA flag was never copyrighted. It became a flag that belongs to everyone, a design that hauntingly reminds us of those we must not ever forget. Behind the black-and-white silhouette is a face we can't see — the face of a husband, a father, or a son who has paid with his freedom for our freedom.

In 2005, Heisley told *The American Legion* magazine that he made no money from reproductions of the flag. "I didn't get anything, and I don't want anything," he said. "I'm only thinking of the POWs and MIAs. They're not forgotten."

In 2008, there were 22,000 living former POWs from World War II through the Gulf Wars. The older ones — most of them from World War II — are leaving us as their generation passes on. MIAs, however, are slowly coming home. In 2007, the remains of 62 service members from all wars were returned home and identified. The military continues to seek return of those 82,000 servicemen still missing worldwide since WW II.

The mission of the Department of Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) is to provide the fullest possible accounting for our missing personnel to their families and the nation. It records accounted-for and unaccounted-for figures for the conflicts from World War II until today.

DPAA lists 7,648 missing Americans from the Korean War, with some 5,300 believed to be in North Korea. DPAA also lists 111 Cold War losses in the vicinity of the Korean peninsula. The DPAA search-and-recovery teams have not operated in North Korea since 2005 due to team safety and security concerns.

However, many veterans and the loved ones of missing soldiers believe that U.S. government policy prohibits it from being successful in its search: To reduce international tensions, the United States has routinely denied the existence of live U.S. POWs in adversarial countries after a conflict has ended, despite compelling findings from its own research proving otherwise. For instance, the U.S. government has told Russia that it has no evidence that Russia held unrepatriated U.S. POWs, yet knows this to be untrue. A government report entitled *The Transfer of U.S. Korean War POWs to the Soviet Union*, compiled by U.S. Air Force personnel, determined that during the Korean War, U.S. military personnel,



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namely F-86 pilots who were shot down, were transferred to the Soviet Union (an entity whose pilots were not-so-secretly flying on behalf of the North Koreans) so that the U.S. pilots could be interrogated for intelligence.

The U.S. government lists 31 flyers seen alive by both U.S. forces and Soviets after they were captured, about whom it has extensive eyewitness documentation of their transfer to the Soviet Union, flyers who were not returned at the end of the war.

Likewise, though two defense secretaries — Melvin Laird and James Schlesinger — testified under oath that they concluded that U.S. military personnel were left in Vietnam after the war, basing “their conclusions on strong intelligence data — letters, eyewitness reports, even direct radio contacts,” the U.S. government’s official position, beginning with President Richard Nixon, is that no U.S. troops were left behind in Vietnam.

The Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), the nation’s oldest and largest war veterans organization, is among those who do not forget. When it learned that President Trump would be meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in Singapore in June 2018, it sent a letter to Trump urging him to include the return of American remains as a discussion point with Kim Jong-un.

In late July 2018, North Korea returned 55 boxes of remains believed to be U.S. service members who have been missing in action since the Korean War. When the boxed MIA remains were returned, VFW National Commander Vincent Lawrence said, “The VFW will continue working toward the fullest possible accounting of missing Americans....We owe it to their families and we owe it to their battle buddies. This is a top priority to the VFW and we thank President Trump for making this issue his priority, too.”

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