

**Preamble: (slide 1–title slide)** Hello and welcome to a discussion on disinterments in the Europe-Mediterranean Directorate of the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency. **My name is Sarah Barksdale, and I am one of the Europe-Mediterranean disinterment managers. I am Josh Fennell, the other disinterment manager. Together, we will walk you through the background, process, and goals of the Agency’s disinterment program for Unknown remains from the European Theater of World War II.**

**(slide 2–Definitions)** In the material you received from the Service Casualty Office that manages your loved one’s case, our researchers may have indicated that the agency is pursuing “disinterment” as a means to recover and identify your family member. In this presentation, two of the researchers in the Europe-Mediterranean Directorate will explain what that means, and walk you through the research, administrative, and operational processes involved in this method of recovery.

Have you ever visited or seen a World War II cemetery in Europe? **(slide 3–photo of an ABMC cemetery)** You may have seen pictures of the meticulously maintained cemetery grounds and rows of white crosses and stars dotting the landscape. Among the fallen buried in those cemeteries, there are approximately 2,800 Unknown service members, or “Unknowns” **(slide 4-photo of unknown grave)**. These are service members that Army graves registration personnel found during or shortly after World War II, but were unable to identify the remains as individuals with the technology at the time. The Unknowns in Europe are believed to be unidentified members of the Army, Navy, Army Air Forces, Merchant Marine, and Coast Guard; casualties of every type of combat action, from routine patrols and supply drops to the largest air, sea, and ground battles of the war. Today, those unknowns are buried throughout 18 cemeteries, maintained by the American Battle Monuments Commission or the Veterans Administration, in

9 countries in Europe and the Americas. DPAA is able to create proposals to “disinter” those Unknowns from their gravesites at many of those 18 cemeteries. With enough historical and scientific evidence, combined with the DNA samples that your family provided, DPAA can seek approval to disinter those remains, and repatriate them to the DPAA laboratory at Offutt Air Force Base in Omaha, NE, for scientific analysis and hopefully identification.

Let’s start by talking a little bit about how these Unknowns were collected, and how they arrived at their final resting places. **(slide 5–recovery photo)** During and after World War II, Army graves registration personnel worked to recover and identify the remains of U.S. service members in Europe, North Africa, and North America. They recovered the remains from a variety of places: the battle areas, local cemeteries, actual aircraft crashes and shipwrecks, isolated burials on or around the battlefields. **(slide 6-image of temporary cemetery)** For the most part, they were able to recover and bury remains as individuals, not as commingled groups from mass graves, like those more commonly found in the Pacific theater. As they worked, Europe graves registration personnel filled out burial reports, sometimes conducted preliminary examinations of the remains, and catalogued any possessions and the location of death. Then, they sent those remains to a series of temporary cemeteries, usually the first of which lay in fairly close proximity to the area of recovery.

As you learn more about your relative’s circumstances of loss, you may hear about places such as Anzio, Huertgen Forest, Monte Cassino, Normandy, Ploesti, and a number of other battles throughout the European Theater. **(slide 7–animation showing the progression of temporary cemeteries to permanent)** When service members fell in battle, in some cases, local civilians recovered their remains, and then buried them in a town nearby; or perhaps enemy combatants buried them in an isolated grave near the site of their death. It is also possible that no

one recovered them until after the war, when the American Graves Registration Command conducted more thorough searches of these battlefields. When graves registration personnel did finally recover the remains, they most likely buried them in a temporary U.S. military cemetery in a nearby town. Those cemeteries were created during and just after fighting swept through those areas, and therefore they tended to follow the paths of Allied units.

**(slide 8—chart showing the names of and number of Unknowns in permanent cemeteries)** Eventually, graves registration exhumed the remains, reexamined them to try and identify them, and then moved them to a somewhat larger U.S. military cemetery as a collection point; this process of disinterment, reexamination, and reburial may have happened multiple times before final burial. Then finally, those service members that graves registration could not identify were given a final resting place in one of those 18 permanent cemeteries, alongside many other fallen Americans

It is important to emphasize that at each transfer and reexamination, graves registration personnel worked hard to identify the recovered service members, constantly reevaluating any evidence they had for each set of remains. **(slide 9—pictures of CIP/CIL)** In Europe, the U.S. Army established a Central Identification Point at Strasbourg, France, and brought in top experts to try to identify remains. This effort included forensic scientists, dentists, and anthropologists from major universities. They conducted in-depth examinations, using the scientific techniques they had available at the time, including bone measurements to estimate height, fingerprinting, dental analysis, and fluoroscopic examinations to determine if there were objects lodged in the remains. Investigators also looked at material evidence with the remains, sorting through wallets, letters, identification tags, and any clues recovered with the remains. Teams in the field spoke to members of American units associated with the remains, and interviewed civilian

witnesses and officials to gain any insights into the circumstances of death for these individuals, to try to identify them.

**(slide 10—pictures of World War II ID efforts)** The efforts of the American Graves Registration Command involved thousands of military and civilian employees, whose searches covered most of the European Theater until 1954. Graves registration personnel were largely successful, and they eventually identified over 97% of the remains initially designated Unknown. But there were times when officials simply could not make identifications, despite their best efforts. Records show that without the benefits of our modern technology, examiners were painfully aware of the risk of misidentifications. Consequently, they frequently left remains in an Unknown status rather than taking that chance. For those individuals they could not identify, they labeled those Unknowns with an “X” and a number, and most often the name of the temporary cemetery where they were buried. All of the documentation on the investigations that graves registration personnel conducted for each set of remains—the information on recovery location, each examination, the physical state of the remains, the transfer paperwork, and a variety of other evidence—were collected in a file that DPAA researchers refer to as an X-file.

This X-file is central to disinterment proposals. In the Europe-Mediterranean Directorate, researchers conduct comprehensive reviews of all casualties within a geographic area, to determine if the appropriate next step to recover those service members’ remains is field investigation, field recovery, or disinterment—or a combination of the three. For that work, historians and analysts constantly compare information from the X-files with the circumstances of loss for service members who may be associated to one or more Unknowns. The goal at that stage is *not* to prove the remains belong to one specific service member; rather, we want to assemble all relevant evidence linking X-files to the right list of candidates and ensure it is likely

that *someone* will be identified as the result of disinterments. Unlike graves registration investigators in the past, today we have the most complete set of combat and personnel records possible, as well as the advantages of new technology, and a global network of partners, archives, and private researchers.

In this section of the presentation, I will talk more specifically about DPAA's disinterment program, describe the analytical and administrative processes that go into creating and approving a disinterment proposal, and at the end I'll present you with an overview of the current state of Europe disinterments.

**(slide 11—graph of Europe disinterments 2005-present)** Prior to the formation of this agency in 2015, there were fewer than 10 disinterments of Europe Unknowns, all-time. That's because in the past, it was extremely difficult to obtain permission to conduct disinterments, and there was no single office with authority to request them. In 2015, the Deputy Secretary of Defense directed DPAA to proactively leverage our increased access to historical records and technology to determine if it is "more likely than not" that we can identify Unknowns and return them to their families.

While the main laboratory for DPAA is in Oahu, Hawaii, the laboratory at Offutt Air Force Base, in Nebraska, is the principal lab to receive all remains from Europe, including disinterments. Having research and scientific capabilities aligned in this way, within an organized and regulated procedure, allows us to build strong cases for disinterment and achieve greater success in identifications. Consequently, since 2015 disinterments have become a pillar of our accounting efforts. In recent years, more than two-thirds of all identifications have come from disinterments.

Together with our partner organizations, we take the responsibility for exhuming gravesites in honored burial grounds very seriously, so each of our proposals must undergo a rigorous research and administrative approval process before disinterment occurs. Such diligence means the process can take more than a year to complete, from research to disinterment, with additional time needed for scientific analysis of the remains to achieve an identification.

Like all activities in the Europe-Mediterranean area, creating a disinterment proposal starts with research and analysis. **(slide 12—map showing X-file and unresolved loss locations)** Historians and analysts working on geographically-organized teams write the proposals, which in simple terms are just research memos describing the circumstances of casualties in a certain area or for a specific loss event. Using historical evidence, researchers explain how an Unknown may be associated with missing service members who perished in the vicinity where the remains were recovered.

When deciding to include a service member as a candidate for association, analysts look at factors like the person's place and date of death, eyewitness accounts, wartime and postwar search and recovery records, local records, and other, specialized knowledge they may have as subject matter experts about enemy burials or other wartime practices. We have also found that each identification we make from the disinterments and field activities gives our historians and analysts new information, to support more disinterment proposals from the same areas.

**(slide 13—lines of evidence)** Once researchers compile a comprehensive list of likely historical candidates, the proposal goes to the laboratory, where scientific staff compare biological data from the X-file with information in each candidate's personnel records. DPAA scientists look for similarities in height, age, dentition, and other factors, as well as noting

whether certain methods—such as comparison of chest x-rays—are possible, depending on the condition of the Unknown remains and the records available for each candidate. From these combined historical and scientific inputs, our final proposal to disinter uses multiple lines of evidence to present the strongest possible case to exhume the remains.

**(slide 14—evidence and FRS on file)** All proposals then undergo an administrative review process to ensure they meet the standards established by the Department of Defense, so DPAA can identify the remains in a timely manner. That means, in order to gain approval to disinter an individually-buried Unknown, which is the primary type in the European Theater, we must have a medical means of identification available for at least 50% of the candidates associated with the Unknown. Most often, that means we need DNA samples from relatives of those unresolved Soldiers, Sailors, or Airmen. In less common cases where we believe the Unknown remains are a commingled group, we must have a means of identification available for at least 60% of the candidates.

When we have met the requirements and it is more likely than not someone will be identified as the result of disinterment, the Department of Defense sends the proposal to the cemetery authority, at either the American Battle Monuments Commission or the Veteran's Administration, depending on where the Unknown is buried. The Europe-Mediterranean Directorate then coordinates directly with those organizations to schedule disinterments within cemetery capacities, and without impacting their operations as memorials to our nation's fallen.

**Sarah can say more about those operations.**

As you learned, our Unknowns are located in 18 different cemeteries across 9 countries, and planning for such widely-varying conditions can be challenging (**slide 15—cemeteries on a map**). In most of Europe, we are limited to conducting disinterments during the late-Spring and

Summer months, as weather conditions are too poor at other times for us to excavate graves without inflicting significant damage to the cemetery grounds. These cemeteries are hallowed burial places for fallen Americans, treated reverently as memorials, and we must protect them even as we pursue our efforts to identify an Unknown and return them to their family. For example, the cemetery with the greatest number of Unknowns in Europe is the Ardennes American Cemetery in Belgium. With over 700 Unknowns from major battles such as Huertgen Forest, the Ploesti air raids, the Battle of the Bulge, and more, Ardennes is a critical piece of our disinterment plan. **(slide 16–releasable photo of a disinterment operation)** However, weather and unique soil conditions mean that every exhumation we conduct has the chance to damage the grounds or adjacent burial plots. We have been working hand-in-hand with the American Battle Monuments Commission to mitigate the extent of any impacts on Ardennes, but currently we have mutually agreed to limit our disinterments just in Ardennes American Cemetery to 50 graves per year.

**(slide 17–cemeteries with major sets named for each)** Despite a few limitations, our researchers have active proposals to disinter Unknowns at nearly every cemetery open to us. As you can see in this image, there are sets of Unknowns at different cemeteries linked to losses associated with major operations. This allows us to conduct disinterments more evenly, lessening the impact at each location. Additionally, our research effort is growing for losses associated with cemeteries in more temperate environments, providing options for more of a year-round disinterment approach that will further reduce any strain on our partners and the cemeteries.

As a great example of that, in October 2020, DPAA accomplished the first disinterments of Unknowns linked to the Anzio invasion in Italy. Those remains were interred in Sicily-Rome



American Cemetery, which has a moderate climate year-round. We are continuing with plans to disinter more Unknowns associated with the Anzio campaign, while we expand our research for Unknowns at Florence American Cemetery in Italy, the Rhone American Cemetery in southern France, and the North Africa American Cemetery in Tunisia to enable disinterments throughout the year and significantly advance our ability to bring closure to the families of our missing service members. **Josh can highlight a few other recent disinterment efforts.**

Thanks, Sarah. **(slide 18-simple map showing location of Ploesti)** Recently, we completed disinterments of over 80 commingled Unknowns believed to be associated to Airmen killed during the 1 August 1943 strike against synthetic oil refineries in Ploesti, Romania. Most of them were buried in the Ardennes American Cemetery, shown as a cross on this map.

On the horizon, we will disinter the remaining Unknowns believed to be associated with Operation MARKET GARDEN, the liberation of the Netherlands; most of those remains are buried in Netherlands American Cemetery.

**(slide 19-simple map showing Reipertswiller)** We also have approval to exhume Unknowns associated with a lost battalion from the 45th Infantry Division, that was cut off by German troops in eastern France in January 1945; those Unknowns largely are buried in Lorraine American Cemetery.

**(slide 20-simple Hürtgen map)** And ongoing efforts are focused on the more than 150 Unknowns linked with ground troops killed in the Hürtgen Forest of Germany. Most of those Soldiers are buried at the Ardennes American Cemetery.

Even more work is underway on proposals to disinter Unknowns associated with the Battle of the Bulge, and research and technology are boosting disinterment efforts for Normandy, France; Austria and Germany air losses; and the Gothic Line campaign in Italy.

If your loved one does not fall within one of the areas I mentioned, please know that our researchers continuously propose other disinterments that are not linked to any major campaigns. In short, wherever research suggests potential to identify an Unknown, from any area, our analysts pursue to the fullest extent; we are not limited to only the events I've touched on here.

**(slide 21—graph past disinterments and FY21-22 projections)** As we wrap up this presentation, I want to share another overview to emphasize how effective and important disinterments have become to the DPAA mission. In just the few years since the agency formed, we have disinterred nearly 10% of all Europe Unknowns and sent them to the Offutt lab for identification. Through the end of 2020, that was more than 250 Unknowns, which is more than 30 times the number of all disinterments from Europe prior to DPAA's creation. In future years, we will do everything possible to keep growing our disinterment totals, to further support identification efforts.

**(slide 22-dignified carry at Offutt)** In addition to ongoing research, the best path to return an Unknown to their family is with your help, primarily by providing DNA family reference samples. You also may know details about your service member such as their pre-enlistment medical history, or your family may have letters and other private correspondence containing details not currently available to DPAA. If you or someone you know has a loved one missing from World War II, please reach out to your Service Casualty Office to determine if a DNA sample or other personal information will support the recovery and identification efforts.

Thank you for listening today, and thank you for being a valuable part of the mission to bring home our missing service members. Please visit the DPAA home page for more information **(slide 23-does not exist yet-contact info for DPAA and SCOs)**.