**The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency's Hürtgen Forest Project**

Hello, I'm Dr. Ian Spurgeon, and I am a historian with the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency in Washington, D.C. This agency is dedicated to researching, investigating, recovering, and identifying American service members still missing from World War II, the Korean War, Vietnam War, Cold War, Iraq, and various other operational loss incidents.

Our efforts involve historical research, field investigations, archaeological excavations, and modern anthropology. Currently, there are more than 81,000 American service members unaccounted for from those conflicts—more than 71,000 of them are missing from World War II alone.

This presentation is about the United States government's current efforts to recover American soldiers still missing from combat in the Hürtgen Forest. I will briefly review past graves registration activities to reveal why those still missing were not recovered or identified by earlier government investigators. Then, I will describe DPAA's multidisciplinary efforts—of historical research, geospatial technology, cooperative efforts with universities and local experts, archaeological field work, and anthropological analysis—to find and identify the missing and return them to their families.

[SLIDE 2 – HÜRTGEN FOREST]

To begin, let's answer the first, basic question, which is: what is the Hürtgen Forest? The forest itself is a roughly 70 square mile section of heavily wooded terrain along Germany's western border, near Belgium. Its significance to World War II history, however, is that U.S. forces fought an exhausting and bloody campaign there from September 1944 to February 1945. Few Americans today know of this major battle. Unlike the more heroic images of Normandy or Iwo Jima, the accounts and photographs of combat in the Hurtgen Forest reflect darkness, fear, pain, and death. This is not a battle that is celebrated in movies or television shows. Yet, it was one of the longest battles in U.S. Army history, involving at least nine U.S. infantry and armor divisions—more than 120,000 American soldiers. And, during just the first three months of combat, some 24,000 Americans were reportedly killed, wounded, or went missing, and another 9,000 were pulled off the line due to illness, non-battle injuries, and combat fatigue.

[SLIDE 3 – 9th INFANTRY DIVISION COMBAT MAP]

The first American units to fight in the Hürtgen were from the 9th Infantry Division. In late September 1944, infantrymen from that division's 39th, 47th, and 60th Infantry Regiments cautiously advanced into the forest to test the German defenses. They found a vast array of enemy foxholes, pillboxes, barbed wire, and landmines opposing almost every step eastward. However, German units placed

their greatest defenses at the towns and roads in the eastern half of the forest. As a result, American infantry made good progress across nearly five miles of heavily wooded terrain during those first couple of weeks, only to find their advance stopped along the north-south road running through the village of Germeter in late October. Some of the hardest fighting occurred in a section of forest called the Raffelsbrand—where dozens of 60th Infantry Regiment soldiers were killed while bravely, but unsuccessfully, assaulting German pillboxes.

[SLIDE 4 – 28th INFANTRY DIVISION COMBAT MAP]

In late October 1944, the 28th Infantry Division arrived to relieve the 9th Infantry Division and renew the advance. This division laid out a very bold plan of attack. It would send its three regiments in three different directions. The most ambitious part of the plan, though, was the capture of the villages of Vossenack, Kommerscheidt, and Schmidt by the 112th Infantry Regiment. On November 2, 1944, the division launched that attack to mixed results. The 109th Infantry Regiment on the left captured about a mile of forested terrain north of Germeter, but was stopped by German artillery and small arms. The 110th Infantry on the right found enemy resistance in the Raffelsbrand still strong, and was unable to gain much ground at all. The most notable advances, though, occurred with the 112th Infantry Regiment at the middle of the division line. That regiment secured Vossenack quickly, and eventually rushed troops into Kommerscheidt and then

Schmidt. However, German infantry and armor attacks eventually overwhelmed the 112th Infantry troops at the latter two towns, and continuous artillery bombardments on the American positions at Vossenack broke the line there and prompted a chaotic retreat on November 6.

[SLIDE 5 – LATE NOVEMBER INFANTRY DIVISION COMBAT MAP]

By the middle of November 1944, it was clear that there would be no quick victory in the Hürtgen Forest. Therefore, over the next several weeks, American forces captured the region through a systematic and bloody sweep across the entire region. By mid-December 1944, the U.S. Army had secured about 90% of the Hürtgen Forest. Yet, German troops still held key defensive locations along the central and southeastern edges of the forest for several more weeks. Finally, in February 1945, American units launched a full offensive to cross the Roer River and eliminate all remaining resistance on the western bank.

Although few Americans today know much about the Hürtgen Forest, for the men that fought there, the Hürtgen Forest was one of the most significant campaigns of World War II.

[SLIDE 6 – CASUALTIES] So, what happened to the thousands of casualties suffered during the several months of fighting in the Hürtgen Forest? Well, the job of recovering the dead during the battle primarily fell to graves registration personnel who accompanied U.S. forces and handled the retrieval, documentation, transfer, and burial of remains in cemeteries behind American lines. When American forces advanced rapidly, graves registration teams recovered remains quickly and efficiently. On the other hand, when the line remained stagnant, ongoing combat frustrated recovery efforts.

Beyond the constant danger of enemy fire and countless landmines, the harsh terrain and poor weather frequently made finding and recovering the dead during the battle impossible. For instance, when reporting the disappearance of a soldier after a nighttime attack near Vossenack, a 13th Infantry Regiment officer wrote that the night of the attack "was extremely black and to find a man in woods unless he answered a call was impossible." During the Hürtgen Forest campaign, if the remains of a soldier were not recovered immediately, there was a good chance they would be lost within the tangled mess of broken trees, artillery craters, mud, and snow.

The remains that could be collected during the campaign were sent to cemeteries at Henri-Chapelle in Belgium and Margraten in the Netherlands. Most of the fallen were recovered within a few days of death, typically with their "dog

tags" or other forms of identification. Nonetheless, when U.S. forces secured the last section of the forest and crossed the Roer River in February 1945, hundreds of bodies—American and German—still lay across the battlefield. Wartime graves registration teams did not stay for long in the Hürtgen Forest after the front line advanced eastward. They continued moving with the frontline troops. During the months after the battle, returning German civilians and rear echelon American soldiers operating around the Hürtgen found dozens more remains. However, these were usually chance discoveries, not systematic searches for the missing.

[SLIDE 7 – BURIALS] It was not until 1946 that the War Department tasked the American Graves Registration Command (AGRC), part of the U.S. Army Quartermaster Corps, to formally investigate, recover, and identify fallen American personnel in the European Theater. This effort included processing remains from the temporary American cemeteries, as well as recovering thousands of remains from plane crashes, isolated graves, and battlefields across Europe. That summer, AGRC teams began the first recovery missions in the Hürtgen. Documentation within the recovery files indicate that graves registrations teams operated independently, sending remains to whatever cemetery they were assigned to. As a result, the dead of Hürtgen were scattered among four different cemeteries—one in the Netherlands, two in Belgium, and one in France.

[SLIDE 8 – AGRC SKETCH MAP] Based upon the AGRC reports, most of the remains recovered in 1946 were initially found by demining teams clearing landmines from the forest. Many of these areas had not been thoroughly searched before, due to the danger of mines. These remains, having been exposed on the ground surface for years, were skeletonized and often had been scattered—by damage from the battle or animals and natural weather conditions. And frequently, these teams found large numbers of bodies relatively close together. It is important for us to understand the circumstances of recovery. For instance, although most sets of remains recovered by the AGRC appear to be individual remains, recent projects shed light on commingling among unidentified remains recovered from major battlefields. DPAA anthropologists found that of 73 sets of remains originally processed by the AGRC in the 1940s in Europe, 30% had some degree of commingling.

[SLIDE 9 – AGRC REPORTS] Graves registration teams after the war were supposed to record information about their recoveries to help with identification. The forms they used included entries for the individual's name (if known), military organization, rank, service number, town name and coordinates, names of other individuals found nearby, estimated date of death, and information about the burial

(if one occurred). Remains that had no means of identification were issued an X-number designation (the X indicating unknown).

[SLIDE 10 – 1946 MAP] They also drew sketch maps showing recovery locations, particularly if the remains were unidentified. Unfortunately, the early recovery sketch maps—those drawn in 1946—were pretty rough. They were usually not drawn to scale, and provide only a general representation of the area. This makes our current efforts of studying where remains were found in 1946 more difficult.

[SLIDE 11 – 1947 MAP] By 1947, as the investigators grew more experienced and standards improved, the AGRC sketch maps for recoveries in the Hürtgen Forest improved. Several recovery sketches from 1947 include detailed geographical markers, such as forest paths and firebreaks accurate enough for modern topographical association.

[SLIDE 12 – AGRC PROCESSING] Once AGRC teams recovered remains from the battlefield, they transported them to processing stations in Belgium and France. AGRC technicians analyzed the bones to estimate the individual's height, weight, and age (if possible) and completed skeletal charts to show which bones were missing or damaged.

[SLIDE 13 – SKELETAL] Among the most important methods for identification were tooth charts. AGRC technicians examined the teeth of remains and recorded which teeth were present, previously extracted, posthumously missing, or contained fillings. Examiners also combed through the material evidence for any means or clues of identification, including names or numbers written on clothing and personal effects. Most of the remains recovered during this period could be identified from dog tags or personal equipment. However, dozens of remains were found across the Hürtgen Forest without identification, and, despite the AGRC's best efforts, could not be identified with the technology of the 1940s. Those remains were buried in U.S. cemeteries in Europe as unknown soldiers.

[SLIDE 14 – AGRC DIG] By 1950, except for a few isolated cases spurred by Congressional requests, the AGRC concluded its searches in the Hürtgen Forest. Investigators had inspected hundreds of foxholes, numerous trenches, and thousands of square meters of area for remains and isolated burials. However, their searches were increasingly unsuccessful, and even during this late date, there were still some areas of the forest that were unsafe to walk through due to unexploded ordnance and landmines. In December 1950, as military attention was turning to the new war in Korea, War Department officials formally recommended

that 283 service members still missing from combat in the Hürtgen Forest and surrounding areas be declared non-recoverable.

Over the next few decades, German residents occasionally found American remains during work projects or farming operations around villages in the Hürtgen Forest. And, metal detectorists searching for World War II artifacts sometimes stumbled across isolated burials. Yet, it was not until the early 2000s that the Department of Defense began actively searching for missing Americans there. Around 2014, the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) compiled a comprehensive list of 200 American soldiers still missing from combat in the Hürtgen Forest. Historians and analysts at JPAC began conducting initial field investigations there. This sparked the U.S. government's effort to gather DNA reference samples from the families of those missing soldiers.

[SLIDE 15 – DPAA EM] Then, in 2015, the Department of Defense reorganized various parts of the POW/MIA accounting community, combining JPAC, the Defense Prisoner of War Missing Personnel Office (DPMO), and the Life Science Equipment Laboratory (LSEL) into the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency. This new organization placed the responsibility for all cases of missing individuals in Europe within the hands of its Europe-Mediterranean Directorate in

Washington, D.C. That directorate established four multi-disciplinary teams, each with a geographical responsibility. Each team consists of three or four historians, one archaeologist, and one logistical planner. Those small groups are responsible for the research, analysis, and investigation of all missing American service members in their geographical areas. The Hürtgen Forest falls under one team, the Central & Eastern Europe team (also color-coded the "Green Team").

The head of the Europe-Mediterranean Directorate selected the Hürtgen Forest as a high priority area due to the density of missing Americans there, and the potential for several recoveries and identifications through comprehensive research and field work. Furthermore, JPAC had already established a solid foundation of research and DNA reference sample collection for the Hürtgen Forest cases. Thus, the Hürtgen Forest became the Europe-Mediterranean Directorate's first dedicated ground campaign project.

[SLIDE 16 – HURTGEN FOREST PROJECT] The Hürtgen Project has three main objectives. First, research and write a historical summary for every American service member missing from the Hürtgen Forest. Second, recommend disinterment for every set of unknown remains that has a greater than 50% chance

of identification. Third, conduct investigations to determine potential next steps for field work and execute recoveries when applicable.

The first objective—the writing of individual case summaries—is the backbone of the Hürtgen Project. If you are the family of a missing American from World War II and have attended a DPAA Family Member Update, you have received a case summary. These narrative documents describe what we know today about the circumstances and location of loss, previous efforts by Army investigators to find that person, and what our next steps are for research and investigation.

We construct these case summaries by researching and analyzing unit records, combat histories, and personnel files. Many of these records were not available to the investigators who searched for remains immediately following WWII, and cross-referencing them all today after gathering them from the national archives, produces a much better informed picture of the context surrounding each casualty. Through these efforts—by first looking at the losses individually—the DPAA historian determines the last known location of each missing American in the Hürtgen Forest.

This work, initially, is not precise. Historical reports regarding the loss of a missing soldier frequently list the closest town, or the unit command post, as the place of loss.

[SLIDE 17 – NARA REPORTS] Those reference points may be several hundred meters, or even a few kilometers, from the actual spot where a soldier died. So we study battle reports and combat interviews found at the National Archives, which describe battalion-level, even company-level, movements throughout the battle—sometimes with maps. The DPAA historian uses these sources to reconstruct a unit's movement and determine the most likely place a soldier, or group of soldiers, was lost.

[SLIDE 18 – BATTLE MAPS] We utilize Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping technology to geo-reference historical fighting positions on satellite images of modern terrain. This helps us understand a unit's location on the day a particular soldier went missing. We then record the geographical coordinates of each soldier's last known location and enter it into a DPAA database.

[SLIDE 19 – HURTGEN MISSING] That data is imported into geospatial software to provide a comprehensive, visual image of the unresolved losses of the Hürtgen Forest.

Historians at DPAA have marked the last known locations of the 200 soldiers missing from combat in the Hürtgen Forest. This data, when projected

onto modern satellite imagery, shows that while soldiers went missing across many parts of the forest, there are notable clusters of unresolved losses. These cluster locations correlate to areas where American forces engaged in prolonged fighting in stationary positions, particularly in the center of the forest, near the town of Vossenack, where the 9th, 4th, and 28th Infantry Divisions fought in October and November 1944. Indeed, those divisions have the highest number of missing soldiers from the Hürtgen Campaign.

Once all of the unresolved losses of a particular area of the Hürtgen Forest have been studied, the DPAA historian then reviews the files of unidentified remains (or X-files) recovered in the 1940s from that area of the Hürtgen.

[SLIDE 20 – UNKNOWNS] Historians at DPAA have used sketch maps and recovery reports in the X-files to determine the approximate recovery locations of approximately 2,500 unknown remains recovered across Europe in the 1940s. That effort showed that more than 170 unidentified remains were recovered in the Hürtgen Forest, or its immediate vicinity. This data was also imported into geospatial software to create a visual image of X-file recovery locations. Not surprisingly, these visual images illustrate that many of the unknown remains came from the cluster areas of unresolved casualties.

[SLIDE 21 – COMPARISON] By comparing the last known locations of missing soldiers to the recovery locations of unidentified remains, DPAA historians can begin to make historical connections and recommend the disinterment of unknown soldiers for scientific testing. It is important to note, the exhumation of the unknowns is not a simple process. These remains were honorably and permanently buried in the 1940s and 1950s. In 2015, a Department of Defense policy gave DPAA the ability to propose disinterment of unknown remains if historical research can establish that identification is more likely than not. For the Huertgen Forest Project, we look at each set of unknown remains on a case-by-case basis. For each case, DPAA researchers and scientific experts analyze the relevant X-file and personnel files, including the historical, dental, and physical details of soldiers who went missing in the area to determine whether there is greater than average chance to identify a specific set of remains. If they agree, their recommendations go through a Department of Defense approval process. Once approved, the remains are disinterred—usually from an American Battle Monuments Commission cemetery—and sent to the DPAA lab for full anthropological analysis and, hopefully, identification.

[SLIDE 22 – DPAA IDENTIFICATION MAP] During the first five years of this formal project, between January 2016 and January 2021, DPAA historians

recommended disinterring a total of 114 sets of unidentified remains previously recovered from the Hürtgen Forest and buried as unknown soldiers. So far, from that effort, 29 soldiers have been identified. One additional soldier was identified from remains found by a German construction crew at Schmidt. (In this slide you can see the dispersion of cases that have been solved. Each human figure in the above image represents the last known location of a soldier that has been identified by DPAA since 2016.) Several other identifications are currently pending.

[SLIDE 23 – COMPARISON MAP AGAIN] The comparison of last known locations of missing soldiers to the recovery locations of unknown remains is also important for the third step of our project—the field work. For instance, roughly the same number of unknown remains were recovered from the woods southeast of the town of Hürtgen as there are missing American soldiers from combat there. Therefore, the remains of most—or even all—of the missing in that area may already be in one of our cemeteries. Conducting a field investigation for those soldiers would be unnecessary, for we wouldn't find their remains in the Hürtgen. On the other hand, at Kommerscheidt and Schmidt, around 25 soldiers of the 112th Infantry Regiment and supporting armor units are still missing, while only 11 sets of unknown remains were recovered from those towns. Therefore, we know that

the remains of some of our missing are still somewhere buried or hidden on the battlefield. Those are the places we focus our field work.

[SLIDE 24 – FIELD INVESTIGATION] The field work begins with investigations by the DPAA historian to the battle area to gather information from local residents, witnesses, and third-party researchers. We work very closely with the local Hürtgen government, which has been extremely supportive of our efforts. We ensure that all DPAA activities follow local regulations, and we only conduct work after gaining permission from the local landowners and officials. Through these efforts, we inspect battle sites to determine if a missing American may still be located in the area.

Part of this effort involves new and innovative methods for searching battlefields through non-invasive, or non-destructive, ways. This involves magnetometry and ground penetrating radar. To facilitate this work in the Hürtgen Forest, DPAA has begun partnering with individuals and groups who have expertise in the region and in new technology. Among the most important for the Hürtgen Project are partnerships with a Dutch research group called Stichting, M.I.A, and with Prof. Dr. Christoph Rass and the University of Osnabrück. These organizations have spent years studying the combat history and American fighting positions in the Hürtgen Forest. DPAA's official partnerships with these groups,

and others, involve sharing information to complement each other's interests and objectives. The cooperation with Stichting M.I.A. and the University of Osnabrück resulted in a geophysical study and excavation near the town of Hürtgen in 2018.

[SLIDE 25 – MAGNETOMETRY] Stichting M.I.A. helped DPAA with research indicating that a missing 28th Infantry Division soldier was still buried in a foxhole near the town of Hürtgen. Professor Rass' team at the University of Osnabrück conducted a magnetometry study at the site, and confirmed the presence and location of foxholes along the battle line. With this information, DPAA conducted an excavation using equipment to scrape several centimeters of soil to expose the anomalies.

[SLIDE 26 – EXCAVATION] The result of that soil scrape was the easily visible presence of several foxholes, and a few artillery shell craters. The excavation also revealed two intersecting trenches, which had been mentioned in an eyewitnesses report. Having exposed the military positions, DPAA personnel, alongside a volunteers from Stichting M.I.A., carefully excavated each position. A large quantity of military artifacts, and military ordnance, was recovered.

[SLIDE 27 – ARTIFACTS] Unfortunately, this effort did not locate the missing soldier (his remains may still be in another part of the field). Yet, the methodology proved sound. Through cooperative efforts, DPAA, Stichting M.I.A., and the University of Osnabrück analyzed historical records, conducted a non-invasive geo-sensing survey, and then used archaeological techniques to find, excavate, and verify a specific battle line used by the 28th Infantry Division some 70 years later—after forest fires, agricultural development, and other environmental changes had obliterated all surface indications.

DPAA continues to work with the University of Osnabrück, Stichting M.I.A., and other third-party researchers to research and locate possible burial locations and fighting positions across the Hürtgen Forest. This type of cooperation is vital to DPAA's success.

[SLIDE 23 – ID PHOTOS] These three elements of DPAA's Hürtgen Project—the individual case analysis, the disinterment of unknowns, and the field work—are ongoing, and will continue for several more years. If you are a family member of a soldier still missing from the Huertgen Forest campaign, you can learn more about your relative's case by clicking on the families tab on the DPAA website, which is dpaa.mil.

It is our sincere hope that, through these efforts and with coordination of experts around the world, we can recover and identify all of the missing from combat in the Hürtgen Forest.

Finally, while we talk about the numbers of missing soldiers, each one is a person, whose loss devastated a family. Each recovery and identification allows us to celebrate that soldier's life, service, and sacrifice, and hopefully offers some measure of closure. Here are the faces of some of the Hürtgen Forest casualties DPAA has identified since 2016. They are missing no more.