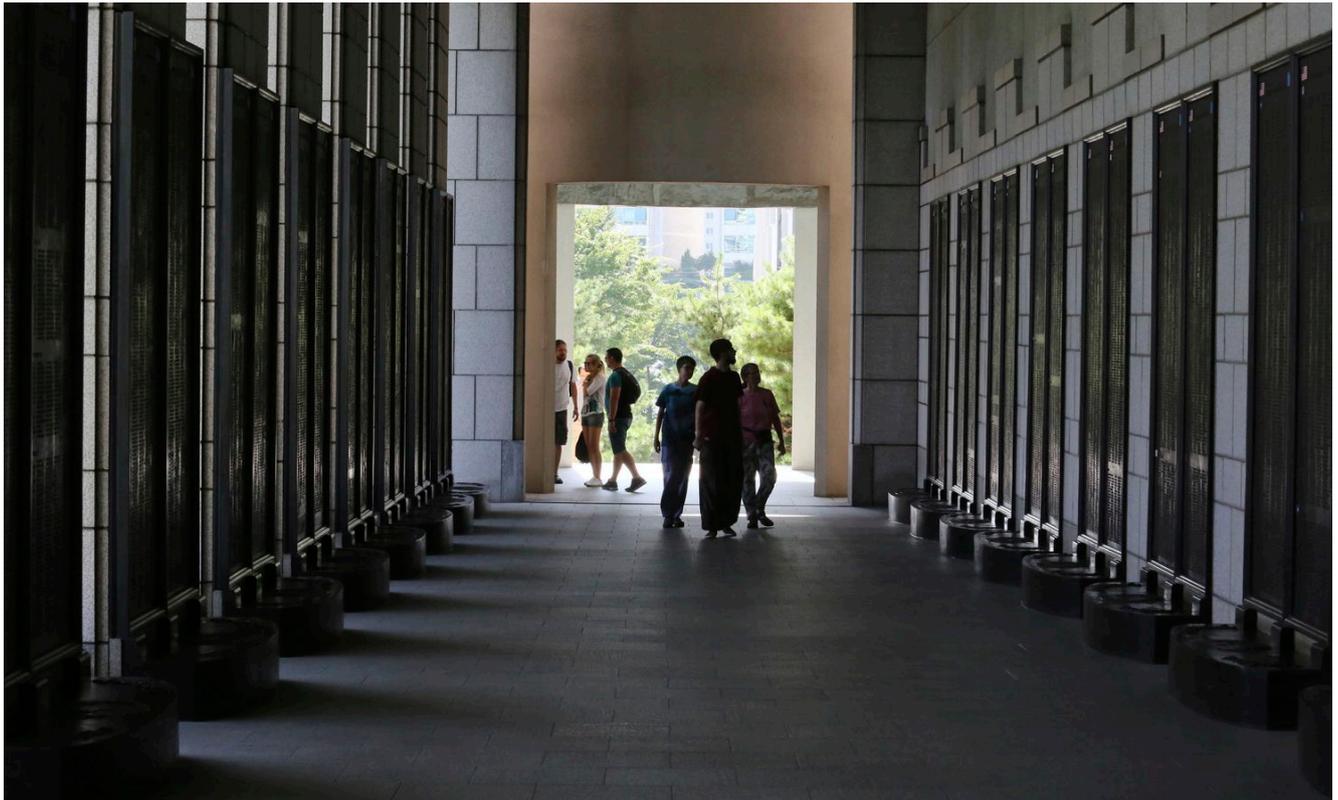


U.S. military takes possession of remains that North Korea says belong to Americans who died in the Korean War



Visitors look at the names of U.S. troops killed in the Korean War at the War Memorial of Korea in Seoul. (Ahn Young-Joon/AP)

OSAN AIR BASE, South Korea — A U.S. Air Force plane carrying what are thought to be the remains of Americans killed during the Korean War arrived at Osan Air Base in South Korea on Friday morning, the 65th anniversary of the armistice that ended the fighting.

The U.S. Air Force C-17 aircraft departed for the Kalma Airport in the North Korean city of Wonsan before 6 a.m. on Friday morning. It returned around 11 a.m. local time, where it was greeted by a crowd of several thousand U.S. servicemen and their families — all American servicemen in South Korea had been invited to the event.

The exchange means that one part of the agreement reached between President Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in Singapore on June 12 has been partially fulfilled — albeit more slowly than many had anticipated.

“Today’s actions represent a significant first step to recommence the repatriation of remains from North Korea and to resume field operations in North Korea to search for the estimated 5,300 Americans who have not yet returned home,” White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said in a statement Thursday night.

The remains are expected to remain at Osan for a few days for initial testing, before a repatriation ceremony is held on Aug. 1 and they are sent on to Hawaii.

Yonhap News Agency reported Thursday that North Korea has accepted 100 wooden transit caskets that it plans to use to return the remains. The U.S. military command in South Korea moved the caskets into the demilitarized zone that splits the Korean Peninsula in late June.

Earlier Thursday, the expected recovery was greeted with cautious optimism by Rick Downes, executive director of a group of families whose loved ones never came home from the Korean War. They have watched discussions in recent weeks with a mixture of hope and cynicism, he said.

“These are poker chips, unfortunately,” said Downes, who runs the Coalition of Families of Korean & Cold War POW/MIAs. “These guys, these missing men, are still serving. The war still goes on, and they are being negotiated and used as a bargaining tool.”

[*\[For the U.S., a frustrating history of recovering human remains in North Korea\]*](#)

A U.S. official told The Washington Post last week that North Korea has agreed to hand over about 55 sets of remains. Friday was suggested as a likely date for the repatriation because of its symbolic importance as the anniversary of the armistice, but the official cautioned that the date could change and that the number of remains would need to be checked after they are handed over.

Former New Mexico governor Bill Richardson, who has worked on repatriation issues and visited North Korea several times, said Thursday that he sees the potential recovery as a positive first step. But he warned that Pyongyang could

stall in delivering other remains and attempt to use the issue as a way to make money.

“They’ll give a certain amount of remains for free right away,” Richardson predicted. “But then they’ll say, ‘The next ones, we need to find them, locate them, restore them.’ And then they’ll start charging, and they’ll milk this.”

Though the United States has a policy of refusing to pay for the repatriation of remains, in the past, it has agreed to provide some funding for expenses incurred by the North Koreans.

The [Pentagon estimates that nearly 7,700 U.S. troops are unaccounted for](#) from the war; among them are 5,300 believed to have been killed north of the 38th parallel, which largely coincides with the boundary between North and South Korea.

The North Korean government is believed to have somewhere between 120 and 200 sets of U.S. military remains in its possession and ready to deliver, but there are thousands more still in the North Korean countryside, said Mickey Bergman, vice president of the Richardson Center for Global Engagement that the former governor founded.

Some remains were buried by U.S. troops in cemeteries that were intended to be temporary until China’s entry in the Korean War forced U.S. forces to withdraw farther south. Other remains are at sites where aircraft crashed or in unmarked graves, Bergman said.

“One of the things that is so important is for the American people to understand that this is just the beginning,” he said. “This is going to take years. It’s going to take interviews and sight surveys and teams on the ground. My fear is that we will get these remains and once again say ‘Mission accomplished!’ And it’s not.”

After the remains are returned, scientific testing will be needed to confirm that they belong to American soldiers from the Korean War. In the past, North Korea has been accused of deliberately including non-American bones — even animal bones — in a bid to fool U.S. authorities.

The remains will be sent to Hawaii, where the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency runs a laboratory at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam. The identification

process there could take years, U.S. officials have said. It often includes a review of archival information that determines where certain U.S. troops were likely to have gone missing or been buried.

After the historic summit between the two leaders last month, Trump and Kim agreed to work together to recover U.S. remains left in North Korea and to implement the “immediate repatriation of those already identified.”

Only a few days after meeting Kim, Trump portrayed the return of the remains as something that had already happened. “We got back our great fallen heroes, the remains,” he told a campaign rally in Minnesota. “In fact, today, already 200 have been sent back.”

However, while the U.S. military had moved caskets into the Korean Peninsula’s joint security area [in anticipation](#), no remains had been sent back. Soon, negotiations were dragging out longer than many had expected.

“That it took this long to secure such low-hanging fruit is a bad sign that North Korea intends to lean on its traditional negotiating posture,” Van Jackson, a former Pentagon official who teaches at Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand, said of the prospective repatriation.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was expected to return with remains when he visited Pyongyang for an overnight stay July 6. But after his team was criticized by the North Korean Foreign Ministry, his visit only highlighted tensions between the United States and North Korea over the return of the remains and issues surrounding denuclearization.

On July 12, North Korean military officials left their U.S. counterparts waiting for hours at the joint security area before belatedly calling to request that they reschedule their prearranged meeting. Only after this meeting and subsequent ones was practical progress made.

One part of the holdup appeared to be North Korean requests for payment.

The last time North Korea’s military returned likely remains of American troops was in 2005 amid escalating tensions with Pyongyang, when the United States halted a program that had been running since the 1990s.

In 2007, Richardson visited North Korea on a private mission that had the

approval of the Bush administration. Richardson returned with the remains of six servicemen.

The return of the remains now would come after commercial satellite imagery appeared to show that North Korea had destroyed part of a [satellite-testing facility](#) that was part of the country's missile-development program. Trump, who told reporters in June that North Korea had agreed to destroy that facility, said Tuesday that the United States appreciated the move.

Lamothe reported from Washington.

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