

Looking to the Future

Remarks by Scott Althaus, first cousin once removed of 2Lt. Thomas V. Kelly, Jr., bombardier on the “Heaven Can Wait” bomber that was shot down on March 11, 1944 over Hansa Bay, Papua New Guinea

Offered on behalf of the Kelly Family, on the occasion of the first-ever “Heaven Can Wait” Crew Family Reunion, Victoria, Minnesota.

October 13, 2018

We would not be here today without the help of people we have never met, from all around the world. This room is not big enough to fit them all. There are so many to thank, and much that is hard to put into words. But none of us would be here at all if not for the incredible work of this Project Recover team, and the generosity of Dan Friedkin, who has so graciously funded their vision to locate and identify the underwater missing from World War Two. Thank you.

It’s been quite a story. But it’s only beginning, and I want to talk about the larger meaning and purpose of this story long after DPAA has done whatever it will do at Hansa Bay.

Fulfilling the Promise

The DPAA is a future-oriented organization. You can see that in its motto: “Fulfilling the Promise.” DPAA is fulfilling a promise that was made, but for more than 82,000 Americans who remain Missing In Action from wars fought in just the last 80 years, this is a promise that has not yet been kept. Of those 82,000 MIAs from the last 80 years, more than half—nearly 48,000—were lost somewhere in the Pacific Theater during World War Two. Eleven are the crew members of “Heaven Can Wait”.

So what is this promise, who made it, and who was it made to? We might think it was made by the military, to those who served and died, or maybe to the families of the fallen. And this is partly right. But the DPAA understands it differently, and I think it is worth reflecting on what the DPAA says its mission is:

“The United States has made a sacred promise to its citizens that it will bring home with dignity all those who have served. Providing a critical role in fulfilling that promise, DPAA is responsible for determining the fate of our missing and, where possible, recovering and identifying those who have made the ultimate sacrifice on behalf of a

grateful nation. We will not stop in our pursuit of answers for the families and for our nation.” (from DPAA “Strategic Goals and Approach” document)

This promise that the DPAA is fulfilling is by the United States—as a whole—to its citizens, collectively. The DPAA seeks answers both for “the families”—that’s us—and for “the nation”—that’s everyone else. The extensive—and expensive—efforts that DPAA undertakes to find, identify, and recover those Missing In Action from American wars is not for MIA families alone. It is done for all Americans. And it is especially done for all current and future members of the American armed services. They see what the DPAA is doing, and they know—because it is hardwired into the military’s culture to never leave a buddy behind, to make every reasonable effort to bring them back from the field of battle, and if it’s not possible in this moment then by any means necessary to go back and bring them home later—they know that if the time comes, their country will keep this promise for them too.

This promise is no small thing. It is much bigger than eleven families, or 82,000. This is a promise for the nation. And this “Heaven Can Wait” story that we have entered into—for many of us, just since this past Memorial Day—means that we have a small but important role to play in this larger promise.

Just by coming together, and remembering, and telling our story, we are providing an opportunity for the United States to make good on its word. In a day that sees our country divided by so much that pulls us apart, we have the special privilege of being at the center of something that brings Americans together.

Everyone can agree that finding and honoring the missing is a good thing for our country to do. A noble thing, an expression of our better selves. Our country is distinctive in many ways, but as the Project Recover people will tell you, the United States is unique in the world for the exceptional efforts that it undertakes to find its fallen dead. In these difficult times, we are at the center of what might be the one thing today that all Americans can still believe in, and one of the few things that also marks our country as exceptional on the world stage. This is a story that we get to help our country tell. And it is a story that will live on long after DPAA concludes whatever it is going to do at Hansa Bay.

A Promise for Us

But it is a story at risk of slowly fading from sight. Those who were old enough to know and remember our loved ones are fewer every year. Their memories are fragile. Beyond our own families, only 7% of all living Americans have served in the military at some point in their lives, and half of these veterans are over the age of 60.¹ If we are to collectively remember the missing and the fallen, then as the number of living war veterans grows smaller, the families of the fallen need to step forward to keep the story alive.

¹ <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/what-percentage-of-americans-have-served-in-the-military/>

The eleven men we honor today have not left their mark on the world in the way of their own choosing. So honoring their memories is left to those of us who inherited a world that they never lived to see. What's important for us to remember and pass along isn't so much how they died, but how they lived, and what they gave to those of us who remain. And we need to share what we have learned, and make sure that at least our families will never again forget the names and sacrifices of those whose lives were cut short by war.

There are four things we can do. First, we have a unique opportunity to talk with one another today, and to learn from one another what our families still know about these men who died 74 years ago. We came here mostly strangers, but if we use this time well to meet a bunch of people we've never met, we will leave as something more, with newfound connections that go far beyond our shared history.

Second, we can find and record the memories of those who knew our loved ones. Interview them before memories are lost forever. Save the letters, scan the pictures, and create a lasting legacy for our families of who these men were.

Third, we can tell the stories of our relative's lives so that the next generation will remember what we have learned. Memorial Day is not about good deals on mattresses. It is for remembering, and honoring, and sharing the stories of those who never came back.

Fourth, and most important, we can start asking other people to share *their* family's stories of loved ones lost to war. If they don't know their own family stories, encourage them to learn more. If they don't have any relatives who died in war, invite them to adopt someone else's relative as their own Memorial Day remembrance. Basic details on all 82,000 American MIAs are provided at the DPAA web site. Let's widen the circle of people who know something about an American MIA and will bring that knowledge to mind on Memorial Day.

We families of the fallen also have a promise to make back to our country. We can promise never to forget. We can promise to keep this story alive, and to pass it on to future generations.

I'll close with a confession. Earlier this year when talk of a crew family reunion started bubbling up, whenever I would speak of it with others I would always put "family reunion" in air quotes. We aren't family in any conventional sense: our only connection is the deaths of 11 men who went to war and never came back. And this isn't really a reunion, because most of us were complete strangers until just a few months ago.

But I've come to a different view. We are family, because they were definitely family in ways we can only imagine. Not family by blood, but by a deep commitment to one another in a cause that was larger than all of them. They trained together every day for eight months, and fought for four more. In his entry on the Kelly Family guestbook from Thanksgiving Dinner 1943, under the space marked "hobby", Don Sheppick wrote five words: "Taking care of the boys."

“The boys” were his brothers of the Tennyson crew. They were closer than family, and that makes us related. Project Recover people, I think that makes you cousins or something.

We are a family, and this is a reunion, but it’s been a while. The last time we gathered was March 11th, 1944. I’m looking forward to making up for lost time.