THE DAILY —— DISPATCH

1995 Indianapolis National Convention — MONDAY, SEPT. 4

'They died... rest of us can go on'

■ Readings from the "GI Journalist" and a reminder of our need to be thankful

Ernie Pyle stepped out of the tent, sat down on the wooden ammo boxes, pulled the piece of paper out of his manual typewriter and began to read the story he had just written about Army Capt. Henry T. Waskow of Belton, Texas, killed on the front lines of Italy, Jan. 10, 1944.

"It was hard to tell officers from the men in the dim light, for everybody was bearded and grimy. The men looked down into the dead captain's face and then spoke directly to him, as though he were alive. 'I'm sorry, old man.' "

It wasn't really Ernie Pyle, the "GI Journalist" of World War II, but an actor. But the emotion of that reading was real for the 3,000 people on hand for Sunday morning's Patriotic Religious Service. The solemn event focused on the end of World War II and the men and women who fought and died in it.

A special segment of the staple convention ceremony focused on Pyle's writing about men he served with in Europe and in the Pacific.

Wearing the duds of a dog face and Pyle's trademark billed, stocking cap, the actor also read an April 12, 1945, dispatch from Okinawa. "... That is our war, and we will carry it with us as we go from one battleground to another until it is all over, leaving some of us behind on every beach. I don't know whether it was their good fortune or their misfortune to get out of it so early in the game. I guess it doesn't make any difference, once a man is gone... They died and thereby the rest of us can go on and on."

Pyle's own life would come to an end six days later on the nearby island of Ie Shima, cut down by a Japanese sniper's bullet.

Many were visibly moved by the Pyle reading – including the actor reading the words. Some bowed their heads in reflection. Others dabbed at their eyes when the last letter was read and "Pyle" packed his papers into a rucksack and walked into a darkened tent.

Remembrance and gratitude for America's fallen comrades was the theme of a special message delivered by the National Chaplain Roy P. Pryor of South Carolina.

"We need to have an attitude of appreciating all of the niceties of life that come to us," Pryor said. "We, in the United States of America, have so much to be grateful for, and cannot forget our comrades whose blood was spilled to preserve freedom."

The service also included the laying of memorial wreaths by National Commander William Detweiler and National Adjutant Robert Spanogle; National Auxiliary President Linda Newsome and National Auxiliary Secretary Peggy Sappenfield; SAL National

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Opening Day

National Commander William Detweiler will be at center stage as the plenary sessions get under way this morning in Halls A & B in the Indiana Convention Center. Detweiler, who hails from New Orleans, La., was elected to The American Legion's top position at the 76th National Convention at Minneapolis in 1994. At right, he poses with his family following his election last year.

Evidence reveals Soviets held POWs

Documentary evidence uncovered recently reveals military officials of the former Soviet Union transported 25-to-35 Americans captured in Korea to Soviet territory, a former Rand Corporation researcher said Sunday.

Dr. Paul Cole presented a sampling of the hundreds of top secret Soviet KGB documents he discovered in researching Soviet archives the past 30 months to Legionnaires attending The American Legion's Special POW-MIA Committee meeting Sunday at the convention center.

Cole said the Soviets were hungry for information about American military technology during the frostiest of the Cold War years, and used their influence with the North Koreans to control American personnel captured during the war, 1950-53.

"We can use these records to solve some of our own mysteries," said Cole, who currently is a senior associate with the Defense Forecast International.

"I think families need to know what happened to their loved ones. What I'm trying to show is that there is evidence available (on missing Americans). It's not an issue of assigning blame; it's an issue of finding out what happened," said Cole, whose research findings have embarrassed U.S. government officials anxious not to make waves for Russian Federation President Boris Yeltsin's fragile regime.

His findings also call into question the agenda of the U.S.-Russian Joint Commission (USRJC), formed in 1992 to discover the fate of American service personnel suspected to be in Russian custody during the Korean and Cold War eras.

"Our government's response has been: don't bother the Russians," Cole said.

Since 1991, his research into Soviet archives uncovered top secret files documenting cases of Americans being transported and interrogated by Soviet authorities. The Russians sought information about American weapons and equipment technology, said Cole. Other files show the Soviets searched for and reported extensively on American planes downed along "MiG Alley" and on Soviet soil during the Korean War.

In one case, Cole told Legionnaires, U.S. officials possessed only the sketchiest intelligence about a B-26 and its crew downed in enemy territory on Nov. 21, 1951. Its crew, naturally, were considered missing in action and reported as such by the Defense Department.

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His research revealed, however, a Russian Air Force report of the incident that specified the date, time and location the B-26 was downed and crash-landed, killing its crew. Other records with official KGB registration stamps, tell of an American pilot who died in Soviet custody while being transported to a site on Russian territory for further interrogation.

Cole said for political reasons, the U.S.-Soviet commission won't accept relevant documents from outside researchers like him, on the grounds such actions might "violate the spirit" of cooperation between American and Russian authorities. U.S. officials also shoot themselves in the foot by stonewalling relatives of the missing by classifying any documents received from the Russians.

"The USRJC has existed longer than the Korean War lasted, yet has not resolved one case," said Cole, leaving Legionnaires to wonder if that's much of a return on the commission's $40 million annual budget. "Their job is to collect information, classify information and debunk information," concludes Cole.

Legionnaires also heard from Pat Dunton, president of the Korea-Cold War Family Association of the Missing. Dunton, whose father has been missing in Korea since April 12, 1951, told a familiar tale of being shunted from one government agency after another in search for information, and the barriers she and members of the group face in the search for answers.

Also, Bill Bell of the National Veterans Research Center updated Legionnaires on Vietnam-era POW-MIA cases. He said the French paid the Vietnamese $320 million between 1954-86 for remains of their war dead, and that strategy was carried over to Vietnam's dealings with the Americans.

"Live political prisoners are used for political purposes, and the remains of prisoners or the missing are used for economic purposes. That's basic communist doctrine," Bell said.

Vietnam's cooperation with U.S. authorities at crash site excavations is another example, he said, of the political/economic game. He said there were 305 "last known alive" cases of missing Americans when the Vietnam War ended. Of those, 196 were in Vietnam, and more than 100 in Laos.

"What's disturbing is that first person testimony indicating a man is dead is accepted (by U.S. officials) as hard evidence, while testimony indicating a man is alive is considered unreliable, or hearsay," said Bell.

According to Bell, the Department of Defense spends $19 million a year excavating crash sites when all evidence shows any remains or aircraft wreckage had been cleared away years ago. ❑

MIA identification tedious task

The investigative team slogged through the Cambodian jungle to find the crash site. They began their tedious operation to excavate the site and sifted through the soil. What they found was parachute rigging and silk fragments, an undetonated ejection-seat rocket, 200 bone fragments and a handful of teeth.

Their sparse discovery, however, led to the identification of a jet pilot and navigator who were shot down over Cambodia in 1968, but whose remains were never found. Such is the work of the Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii (CILHI) and its work to identify the remains of American servicemen who didn't return from foreign battlefields.

"It's tedious work but we're committed to collecting and identifying these remains to put families' minds at ease," said Dr. Thomas Holland, speaking before the National Security and Foreign Relations commissions last Friday. Holland is one of 13 anthropologists at CILHI.

While much of their work is geared toward investigations of those who were reported MIA in the Vietnam War, they also work on cases from other wars. For example, investigators recently identified the remains of a B-24 crew whose aircraft crashed in the Amazon. The bomber was on its way to North Africa, after making a stop in Brazil.

"We found over 20,000 bone fragments of the 10 men aboard the plane and we were able to make positive identifications on seven of the crew," Holland said.

Members of the commissions also heard from Col. Michael Spinello, director of the U.S. Army Casualty and Memorial Affairs. Among that group's responsibilities is helping provide burial assistance to the families of service members who have died on active duty, military retirees and veterans.

Military honor guards are available for burial services of veterans, but with a catch, Spinello said.

"Unfortunately, we cannot provide these special details in many areas because we don't have sufficient manpower at all locations to serve all veterans."

Clear McVay, says cruiser historian

A dream deferred for 50 years finally came true for the crew of the ill-fated *USS Indianapolis (CA-35)*, said one of the cruiser's chief supporters.

"The survivors have said to me many times, 'We don't want this memorial for us, we want it for our buddies who didn't make it,'" said Pat Finneran, executive director of the *USS Indianapolis* Memorial.

Finneran was guest speaker before 71 guests at the annual National Historian's Luncheon, held Saturday at the Indianapolis Athletic Club. National Historian Carl Wipperman introduced Finneran, and recognized special guests. PNC Erle Cocke Jr. introduced American Legion Founder John Gable, 94, Hartford City, Ind., accompanied to Saturday's luncheon by his son, James Gable.

Besides Gable, the lone surviving American Legion Founder is George Washington Bentley, of Minnesota, 97, chairman of the executive board of American Legion Founders, Ltd.

Finneran brought along a video on the history of the *USS Indianapolis*, and its status as one of the Navy's premier capital ships.

Launched in 1931 and commissioned the next year, the *Indianapolis* was the pride of the Navy, and became known as President Roosevelt's "ship of state" because he used the ship extensively in his trans-Atlantic travels.

> 'We don't want this memorial for us, we want it for ourbuddies who didn't make it.'

After Pearl Harbor, the heavy cruiser amassed an impressive battle record, earning 10 battle stars in Pacific action. Because of its speed and reputation, it was chosen to transport key components of the atomic bomb to Tinian for the Hiroshima mission. After a record-setting run from California to Tinian – averaging a speed of 26.2 knots – Capt. Charles McVay off-loaded his secret cargo on July 26.

McVay was ordered to Leyte Gulf to rendezvous with the battleship *USS Idaho* for gunnery practice. But the single, coded message to the *Idaho* was garbled in transmission, so the battleship's captain didn't know the *Indianapolis* was on the way. That oversight set the stage for a major tragedy.

Just after midnight, July 30, 1945, halfway between the Philippines and Guam, a Japanese submarine sank the *Indianapolis*. The crew's four-day ordeal has been well-documented. Of the 1,197 officers and men aboard, about 880 men, many badly wounded, made it into the water. After a nightmarish struggle against thirst, heat, fatigue and shark attacks, rescuers picked up just 317 survivors.

Finneran urged Legionnaires to keep the legacy of the *Indianapolis* alive in their Departments and Posts, and urged they join a campaign to convince the Navy to exonerate Capt. McVay, whose career was ruined after he was made the Navy's fall guy.

The impressive national memorial to the *USS Indianapolis* is located in a memorial plaza along her namesake city's Canal Walk, near the intersection of Walnut and Senate streets.

Health reform needed; action unlikely soon, says VA's top counsel

The VA recognizes the need for reform, but officials don't expect Congress to pass any meaningful bill this session, according to the department's general counsel.

"Although we have an eligibility reform bill, it may not go very far," said VA General Counsel Mary Lou Keener, speaking before members of the National VA&R Commission last Friday.

VA officials, including Keener, have been mum on details about plans to find congressional sponsors for the department's own reform measure.

Keener said the bill likely will expand the VA's sharing authority to enter into service contracts with other agencies and providers, authority restricted under United States Code, Chapter 17 of Title 38.

The American Legion is poised to unveil its own plan for basic reform of the VA health-care system, one expected to be announced at this week's plenary sessions.

Keener also said any plan VA comes up with must maintain the department's commitment to service-connected veterans they are mandated to serve, and any reform measure must take into account Capitol Hill's drive to reduce the federal budget deficit.

"We will never get anything through Congress that isn't budget neutral," Keener said.

She also dismissed the possibility of the VA proposing major changes to allow veterans to pay for care in VA facilities with Medicare dollars.

The Department of Health and Human Services, she said, won't kick loose those funds without a fight.

"It's too hot a regulatory issue," Keener said. ❑

Flag phone bank sends message to U.S. Senate

A special telephone bank has been set up so that Legion family members can contact their senators' offices and encourage non-cosponsors to support **Senate Joint Resolution 31.**

The Senate is expected to vote on the measure in October, the CFA reports.

The phone bank, which is being operated by the Citizens Flag Alliance, is located in the East Chamber of the Indiana Convention Center.

Flag supporters also will have the opportunity to contact their senators with special post cards prepared by the CFA. The cards are preaddressed to members of the Senate.

Legion family members are encouraged to take the time to fill out the cards, which the CFA will mail. ❑

Blood draw continues

The Central Indiana Regional Blood Center continues its drive in Rooms 107 and 108 today.

Hours of collection are 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. The draw will continue Tuesday at the same location and time.

Friday was the first day of collections, and blood center officials report that 66 units were donated by American Legion family members.

There were 328 units donated at the 1990 National Convention in Indianapolis. ❑

Nat'l Headquarters tours still available

American Legion family members visiting from out of town may want to take time out from their convention activities to tour The American Legion National Headquarters building at 700 N. Pennsylvania St.

Tours will continue from Monday, Sept. 4 through Friday, Sept. 8, between 8:15 a.m. and 3:45 p.m. Individuals and groups are directed to the National Executive Committee room on the fourth floor, where tour groups will be formed.

Highlights of the tour include the NEC room, Emil Blackmore Museum, library, National Commander's office, and the Harry Colmery exhibit, the latter of which features Colmery's hand-written draft of the original 1944 GI Bill of Rights for veterans.

Tours also will be conducted for The American Legion's facilities at Park 100 at the same hours and dates mentioned above.

Those interested must arrange for their transportation to and from the tour sites.

Tonawandas band hits high note at contest

The American Legion Band of the Tonawandas, N.Y., has hit a high note again with the judges of The American Legion National Band Contest.

The band won first place in competition Saturday at the historic Circle Theater in downtown Indianapolis, scoring 95.66 points from the judges. The Tonawandas band has won top honors at several previous conventions.

Winning the second-place spot with 93.66 points was the Joliet (Ill.) American Legion Band, which was last year's champion at the National Convention in Minneapolis.

Third-place winner at this year's competition was Greater Kansas City America Legion Band.

The National Senior Color Guard competition also was held this last weekend at the Indiana Convention Center. First through third-place winners in the contest are listed below:

OPEN CLASS

• Spirit of 469 (Auxiliary); Apple Core Post 370; Patriots Post 183

SENIOR COLOR GUARD—MILITARY CLASS (AMERICAN LEGION)

• Post 500 (Speedway, Ind.) Honor Guard; Rough Riders Military Color Guard (Cleveland, Ohio); Roadrunners Color Guard Post 110 (Lockport, N.Y.)

SENIOR COLOR GUARD—MILITARY CLASS (OPEN ELIGIBILITY)

• Pure Heaven Unit 37 (Ames, Iowa); SAL Squadron 27; Lady Vanguard Winslow-Holbrook-Merrit Auxiliary Unit 1.

Kansas couple said 'we do' on the day surrender signed

Legionnaire George Ball spent nearly four years dodging Japanese bullets and malaria, but he couldn't escape a determined young woman from his hometown of El Dorado, Kan.

On Saturday, Sept. 2, George and Virginia Ball celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary at National Convention in Indianapolis. Way back when, did the Marine Corps veteran select Sept. 2 to get hitched because that happened to coincide with Japan's surrender aboard the *USS Missouri* in Tokyo Bay? Nope, that's too pat.

"I got tired of running and that's just when she caught me," said Ball, 71, a retired postal worker and member of El Dorado Post 81. As a member of "C" Co., 2nd Battalion, 2nd Division of 2nd Marines, Ball accumulated 38 months of overseas duty and survived combat on many Pacific battlefields, including Guadalcanal, Tarawa and Saipan.

He was just a 17-year-old kid when he left home to join the Marine Corps, on Oct. 29, 1941, partially due to a spat with his teenaged girlfriend. The separation must have done them both good, because the young couple kept in touch. Cpl. Ball came down with malaria and was shipped stateside; he spent some time in a San Diego military hospital and was discharged from the service July 25, 1945.

"He did it to get away from me, but I got him in the end," Virginia Ball jokingly said of her determination not to let a little something like World War II interfere with obtaining the object of her heart's desire.

Virginia followed George to California, and even took on a temporary job in a war plant while waiting for things to work out. They were married in a church in Los Angeles, with just two witnesses, both family members, attending. In a few months they returned home to El Dorado to start over.

"We've had a good life," said Virginia, citing two great kids, a boy and a girl, seven grandchildren and a pair of great-grandchildren. Both are active in The American Legion family, too. George capped a busy Legion career in 1991 by winning election as Kansas Department commander; and Virginia earned an enviable membership record last year as president of the Auxiliary's Fifth District.

Out of the blue, she offered some advice for today's young couples: "You know how to have a happy life? Think of the other person before you think of yourself. If both of you do that, you'll make it," she said, 50 years to the day after she caught up with George Ball. ❑

• SERVICE

Commander Joseph Mayne and SAL National Adjutant Woodrow Mudge; Le Chapeau Nationale (8 & 40) Mille Harrold-Nierman and Le Secretaire-Caissiere Nationale Helen Moore.

Past National Chaplain Michas M. Ohnstad lighted the POW-MIA candle and the spotlight was turned on the flag-draped empty chair in remembrance of those missing in action.

The ceremonial caisson of the 38th Infantry Division (Indiana National Guard) was near the stage as a reminder of those who died in World War II.

And then the haunting notes of "Taps" was sounded by two buglers, echoing throughout the cavernous convention hall, followed by singing of *"God Bless America,"* led by the Greenfield (Ind.) Community Choir. ❑

Hayes elected FODPAL president

A Marine Corps veteran of the Vietnam War has been elected president of the Foreign and Outlying Departments and Posts of The American Legion (FODPAL).

The Rev. John E. Hayes, National Executive Committee member from the Department of Mexico, was elected to that post at the annual FODPAL meeting Saturday. Hayes, who also serves on the National Economic Commission's Liaison Committee, succeeds Henry Lamb Sr. as president.

FODPAL members have memberships in Posts in 43 countries, according to a group spokesman.

National Commander William Detweiler of Louisiana also was on hand to present the International Amity Award to Col. Emmanuel V. De Ocampo, president of the Veterans Federation of the Philippines.

Past National Commander John Geiger of Illinois served as master of ceremonies.

Also elected to serve with Hayes over the next year: Ernesto Golez, Philippines (1st vice president); Andres Rosario Bordonada, Puerto Rico (2nd vice president); Douglas Haggan, France (3rd vice president); Jimmie Foster, Alaska (judge advocate); Fred Platt, China Post 1 (historian); Leroy Pulawa, Hawaii (chaplain); Sally Bennett, Mexico (sergeant-at-arms); Robert J. Conrad, Hawaii (secretary); Frank Bottigliero, France (treasurer); and Arnie Matanky, France (public relations director).

Also elected to serve: Mike Beavers, France; Francisco Santiago, Puerto Rico (assistant judge advocates); Luis Santana, Puerto Rico; Julio Roble, Philippines (assistant historians); Ramon Navarro, Philippines (assistant sergeant-at-arms). ❑

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