

Date: February 14, 2024

Bill number: SB431

Disposition: Neutral

Conferee: Kelly K. McKeague

Organization and Title: Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, Director

Dear Chairman Thompson and Members of the Committee,

I lead the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, which is charged with the sacred mission of searching for, recovering, and identifying the remains of Americans missing from World War II through the Iraq Wars. Although there are tens of thousands still missing from these wars, each one has a unique story and a family who longingly waits for closure on their loved one's loss. These cases are complex and DPAA's work is painstaking, so it is incredible when we are able to identify someone, particularly for his family and his community.

The Soldier being considered for a permanent memorial through this bill is one of these incredible identifications, which DPAA made on March 2, 2021. The story of U.S. Army Chaplain (Captain) Emil Kapaun is well-chronicled, especially the inordinate heroism, perseverance, selflessness, and charity he displayed during the Korean War, on both the battlefield and in the POW Camp, where he died on May 23, 1951. Not widely known are all that led to the identification of his remains.

In the infamous POW Camp Five, the guards buried most of the deceased prisoners in mass graves; Father Kapaun was buried in a single grave. The terms of the 1953 Armistice dictated the exchange of remains, but only 2,994 were repatriated to the U.S and 7,483 are still missing because mass graves were not exhumed and single grave exhumations were haphazard; but Father Kapaun's was. After receiving the 2,994 remains, the U.S. Army Laboratory in Japan did the best they could in trying to identify, but were not able to give a name to 848 Servicemen, all of whom were sent to the national cemetery in Honolulu and interred as Unknowns in 1956; an eight-year DPAA project to disinter all these Korean War began in 2018 and the Unknown that was Father Kapaun was disinterred in the summer of 2019. Before being sent to Honolulu, all the remains were treated with formaldehyde which destroys DNA; when tested, Father Kapaun's remains yielded DNA.

Using multiple lines of evidence and various analyses, DPAA scientists endeavor through a meticulous process to try to identify remains recovered or disinterred. After the unknown remains were matched across five lines of evidence, on March 2, 2021, Chaplain (Captain) Emil Kapaun was identified. Now home in his beloved Kansas, Father Kapaun serves as a model and an inspiration not just for Kansans and Americans, but also for people around the world. With a remarkable life marked as much by heroism as it was humility, Father Kapaun would most likely shirk from a memorial. But it is exactly because his story is such an inspiration that something tangibly and appropriately memorializes that story.

Respectfully submitted --- Kelly K. McKeague