

Personal Opinion of SAL Cmdr.: Because of 9-11 we have other reasons to look at the meaning of Missing In Action. Now there is another pressing reminder for Missing In Action. There has been returned 55 boxes of remains from the Korean War.

## **History behind POW/MIA Flag Ceremony**

**By POW/MIA Advocate L. Michael Nanney**

8 years ago, this December I stood with my wife and about 20 other patriots outside a mortuary in Greer, SC holding flags to honor the Korean ex-POW Dick Raby whose service was being conducted. One of the eulogies being presented was by a co-founder of the Korean Ex-POW organization, Bill Norwood. Bill and his wife Liz had traveled from their home in Tennessee to present a eulogy for one of his buddies. They were joined by 4 other Korean War POWs.

Bill poked his head out of the door and asked if I had a POW/MIA flag. After I commented that I always carry one he told me to fold it and bring it in. He wanted to use it and me as part of his eulogy. I had known Bill for a couple of years having met him at **The Ride Home** with hundreds of other Prisoners of War and the families of the Missing In Action and was pleased I could comply. There were 2 Korean veterans (Tom Comshaw and Joe Frasson) in the flag line. I enlisted their help in folding the flag. Bill had taught me that the POW/MIA flag is folded in a triangle to honor the American flag. When I entered the chapel, Bill directed me to a seat near the front. He presented his eulogy and at the end called me to the front. In his eulogy Bill had mentioned the importance of never forgetting the sacrifices made for our country. He spoke of how

those POWs standing there couldn't forget and wouldn't forget. He then directed me to present the folded flag to Reba Raby, Dick's widow. Together we saluted and I retired. It wasn't too long after that there was another funeral. Again, it was another POW from Korea, James Pruitt. I had often visited James at the VA Hospital in Asheville. Again, Bill there to present a eulogy asked if I had a flag and if I would repeat the presentation to the family. I agreed and following the first funeral I sought a veteran to assist in folding the flag outside of the chapel. While we folded the flag. I explained the folding and how I was going to present the flag to James' widow. There was a young man sitting on a low wall next to us who had tears streaming down his face. He was one of James children. He stood and asked where he could buy another flag. James, his father, had promised the POW/MIA flag to his daughter. That morning and never before then, I had placed a second flag in the car. There is more to this story. We were experiencing a terrible thunderstorm to the point the funeral directors were afraid to leave the building and decided to hold the complete service in the chapel. When cued by Bill I walked up to the casket. This time as agreed upon with Bill I touched the POW/MIA flag to the stars on the casket. Turning I said that this flag was meant to be our reminder of our commitment to never forget. The storm raged. I reached out to a Korean veteran Don Hacker who handed me the other flag. I walked back to where James' daughter sat. Only Bill and my friend knew that I brought in a second flag. I knelt in front of James' daughter and said, "Your Father wanted you to have this." The storm abruptly ceased. For a moment there was nothing – an awesome silence and then the family broke into tears.

Since then I've been assisted in doing a WWII pilot Ted Harris who was shot down over Europe (4 participated in the presentation).

Then there came a dear friend that I often visited in the VA Hospital and another Korean Ex-POW who I helped get his Purple Heart. Joe Ford followed and my wife Brenda assisted in the presentation.

A Vietnam POW followed. Nat Henry that was held for over 5 years as a prisoner of war (that was a 2-flag ceremony – one to wife Becki and one to their son John).

Two MIAs from Vietnam followed – one of which was a distant relative (Cameron Flack) and the other (Bunyan Price) in which Monica and Curtis Cash helped. Both presentations went to surviving sisters.

A MIA-sailor Frank Wood from USS Oklahoma followed. Six members of the family received American flags by an Admiral.

And then there was Bill's.

I always ask if I can do the presentation. I start with the funeral director who usually directs me to whoever is doing the eulogy. In Bill Norwood's case that was another Ex-POW from Korea and a close friend of Bill's, Elliot Sortillo. Elliot directed me to Liz, Bill's wife of more than 60 years. Liz was more than aware of the ceremony. She had heard Bill and I speak of it. She agreed. By now we called the ceremony the **POW/MIA Flag Ceremony** that was invented by Bill Norwood. Bill was OK with that. I brought out a 4x6 POW/MIA flag and invited several veterans (Moe Moyer and Reggie Lord) to assist in its folding. All had known, admired and loved Bill Norwood. As we folded the flag I recited the history behind the ceremony – one that Bill knew I used. At the appropriate time Kat McLaughlin, a POW/MIA advocate (also a good friend of Bill and Liz) walked with me to the front of the church's chapel and with the added touch of the Rolling Thunder President Joe Duncan standing guard, we all touched the flag to the stars on the casket. Turning to face the congregation I stated,

“This ceremony is the invention of Bill Norwood who with his wife Liz traveled the country honoring Prisoners of War who had passed as well as those Missing in Action that had been identified. Bill gave me this ceremony to carry on the legacy. **I accepted.** “On this flag is printed the words ‘We Will Not Forget.’ We present this flag to the family to affirm the message and to recognize our responsibility to ‘Not Forget.’” We presented the flag to Liz, placing the flag in her hands, saluted the flag and retired. Bill’s Grandson and his 2 sons were sitting in the front row of the chapel. They did not know that their Grandfather was the inventor.

More to the history: Robert Fletcher, another Korean Ex-POW passed and was being buried in Arlington National Cemetery. I couldn’t attend but Monica and Curtis would be there. Bill knew the Cash family. They had just visited Bill shortly before his passing. I sent Monica via email a copy of the latest scrip for the ceremony and they were able to present the ceremony for the first time in Arlington.

If I could add one more offering to the ceremony? Before the salute the presenter or presenters add to the congregation, “Raise your right hand. Do you accept the obligation of this flag and to pass the legacy of this ceremony of Bill Norwood? If so answer, ‘I accept.’” Salute the POW/MIA flag and retire.



Mike Nanney and Kat McLaughlin presenting POW/MIA Flag Ceremony at Bill Norwood's service. Standing guard is Rolling Thunder President TN Joe Duncan.