



MEMORANDUM

To: Commander-in-Chief Keith Harman

Cc: National Officers, National Council of Administration, Department Commanders, Department Senior Vice Commanders, Department Junior Vice Commanders, Department Adjutants, and Past Commanders-in-Chief

From: Robert E. Wallace
Assistant Adjutant General & Executive Director, VFW Washington Office

Date: November 22, 2017

Re: U.S.-Russia Joint Commission on POW/MIAs

Background

At the invitation of the U.S. Co-Chairman of the U.S.-Russia Joint Commission on POW/MIAs (USRJC), and with the concurrence of the Russian Co-Chairman, I was assigned by VFW Commander-in-Chief Keith Harman to represent the organization as an observer to the XXI Plenum of the Commission in Moscow, Russia. The VFW was the only Veterans Service Organization invited. I departed the United States on Nov. 4 and returned Nov. 11, and was joined in Moscow by a representative of the National League of Families of POW/MIAs of Southeast Asia.

The USRJC was established in 1992 by President George H. W. Bush and Russian President Boris Yeltsin. Its purpose is to determine the fates of missing and unaccounted for American and Soviet service members from World War II, the Korean War, the Cold War and Vietnam, as well as unaccounted-for Russians from their 10-year war in Afghanistan.

After an 11-year break, this year's plenum was the second consecutive meeting to be held since the sessions resumed last year in Washington, D.C. Through most of the interim years, VFW senior leadership had traveled to Moscow to urge the Russian Government to re-establish their side of the Commission. We had met with Russian veterans, members of

their Duma, Federation Council, and Ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs to solicit their assistance and commitment to this humanitarian mission, so we are pleased the Commission is now meeting hopefully on a regular basis.

The Russian Government currently has five staff in Washington working in our National Archives to help determine the fate of missing Soviet service members. Unfortunately, due to the current political environment between our two countries, staffing reciprocity does not exist. Commission staff in the U.S. Embassy in Moscow have been furloughed, and our government now has to send individuals over on a rotating basis. It is hoped that some type of contracts can be developed to re-hire the Russian nationals for archival research projects.

For more information on the U.S.-Russia Joint Commission on POW/MIAs, go to <http://www.dpaa.mil/Resources/Fact-Sheets/Article-View/Article/569603/us-russia-joint-commission-on-powmias/>.

Commission Activities

I was able to attend both opening and closing sessions, and visit the four USRJC working group meetings. I had the opportunity to speak at the closing session, as well as at the Vietnam working group meeting. I was an observer at the World War II, Korea and Cold War meetings.

I was very impressed by the sincerity and directness of U.S. Commission members, as they detailed individual cases that we want the Russians to investigate. Archival access is an ongoing issue that must be resolved in order to obtain answers to the fates of missing Americans. The obvious next step is for the Russians to make progress on the cases presented.

I attended a Commission reception hosted by U.S. Ambassador to Russia Jon Huntsman and his wife, Mary Kaye, at their residence. The Ambassador delivered powerful, unscripted remarks about his commitment to the POW/MIA mission, and on the importance of the Commission's work in finding answers for U.S. and Russian family members about their missing loved ones.

I also had the opportunity, along with National League of POW/MIA Families board chairwoman Ms. Ann Mills Griffiths, to meet with Ambassador Huntsman two days later, where he repeated his full support for the mission once again.

In addition, I had the opportunity to meet with Russian veterans who VFW has worked with in the past, and urged them to push their national leaders to break down the walls of the archives.

On a side note, this year marks the centennial of the Bolshevik Revolution that toppled Tsar Nicholas II, and our hosts ensured we were so informed. I was able to view a military parade in Red Square with many participants dressed in former uniforms. I was given a

briefing and tour of their Air Defense Museum in the nearby town of Balashikha, and toured exhibits dedicated to paratroopers, Russian Air-Cosmic Forces, and one about Russia's current involvement in Syria. I also presented a wreath at the Russian Federal Military Cemetery on behalf of the VFW. Our wreath, as well as a Commission wreath and a National League of POW/MIA Families wreath, were the first American wreaths ever placed in the cemetery.

Next Step

I was urged by both sides of the Commission for VFW to resume its senior leader visits to Russia in either late summer or early fall 2018. The visit would be similar to those conducted in the past, with meetings with Commission members, Russian Veterans Organizations, and their Duma and Federation Council to thank them for getting the Commission going again, as well as to urge them to figure out how to resolve cases that require access to their highest level archives. We would also meet with U.S. Embassy and assigned military personnel.

This invitation will be a topic of discussion for the VFW Senior Vice Commander-in-Chief as he plans his year. VFW senior leadership had previously visited Russia every year between 2004 and 2013, but the fact-finding trip was paused in 2014, when Russian troops entered the Ukraine.

Conclusion

The trip was very positive and I thank both the U.S. and Russian side of the Commission for extending the invitation to the VFW, as well as to Commander-in-Chief Harman for assigning me to attend.

The trip also reinforces that our VFW is the lead VSO on the POW/MIA issue.