

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-13-619](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

DOD reports that more than 83,000 persons are missing from past conflicts in Vietnam, Korea, the Cold War, the Persian Gulf, and World War II. Several DOD organizations, known as the accounting community, have a role in accounting for the missing. Between 2002 and 2012, DOD accounted for an average of 72 persons each year. In 2009, Congress mandated DOD to increase its capability and capacity such that the community could account for at least 200 missing persons annually by 2015. The law also added all World War II losses to the list of conflicts for which DOD was responsible, thus increasing from about 10,000 to 83,000 the number of missing persons for whom DOD must account. A committee report accompanying the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2013 mandated GAO to review DOD's efforts to address the accounting-for goal. GAO assessed DOD's capability and capacity to accomplish the missing persons accounting mission. In doing so, GAO analyzed guidance and requirements, discussed accounting efforts and the structure of the community with community members, and surveyed accounting community members and related entities.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making nine recommendations to DOD, including for example: examining options to reorganize; clarifying responsibilities for the accounting community; improving planning, guidance, and criteria to prioritize cases; and sustaining communication. DOD generally concurred with these recommendations.

View [GAO-13-619](#). For more information, contact Brenda S. Farrell at (202) 512-3604 or farrellb@gao.gov.

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DOD's POW/MIA MISSION

Top-Level Leadership Attention Needed to Resolve Longstanding Challenges in Accounting for Missing Persons from Past Conflicts

What GAO Found

While the Department of Defense (DOD) has made some progress in promoting communication among the several organizations responsible for accounting for missing persons—known collectively as the accounting community—DOD's capability and capacity to accomplish its missing persons accounting mission is being undermined by longstanding leadership weaknesses and a fragmented organizational structure. Leadership from the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy (USD Policy) and U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) have not been able to resolve disagreements among accounting community members, thereby impacting DOD's ability to meet the mandated goal of increasing its capability and capacity to account for 200 missing persons a year by 2015. DOD averaged 72 identifications annually in the decade ending in 2012. GAO found the following areas of progress and continuing areas of weakness:

- In response to a 2009 direction from the Deputy Secretary of Defense, the accounting community has begun drafting a community-wide plan to meet the accounting-for goal, but as of July 2013 this plan had not been completed due to a fragmented approach to planning and disputes among community members. Without a community-wide plan, members have had varied success in obtaining resources to meet the goal.
- DOD is working to clarify its guidance, but roles and responsibilities for community members are not well defined, and this lack of clarity has led to overlap in key aspects of the mission such as investigations.
- DOD does not have agreements with all combatant commands to conduct operations to find missing persons outside of PACOM's area of responsibility. JPAC negotiated an updated agreement with European Command, signed in April 2013, but it has not negotiated similar agreements with any of the other four geographic combatant commands.
- While DOD has established criteria to prioritize recovery efforts for missing persons from the Vietnam War, it has not established criteria to prioritize potentially recoverable missing persons from other conflicts.
- DOD has not established mechanisms to sustain recent improvements in communication among community members.

Statute and DOD guidance assign responsibility for the accounting mission to many organizations and each reports through a different line of authority. Thus, no single entity is responsible for communitywide personnel and resources. This fragmented organizational structure has exacerbated weaknesses in leadership, and most community organizations GAO spoke to believe alternative structures would be more effective. A majority of community members GAO surveyed conveyed a lack of confidence about the organizational structure. For example, 12 out of 13 survey respondents ranked an option with a more centralized chain of command as the most effective in enabling the accounting community to achieve its mission. Until top-level leaders at USD Policy and PACOM can ensure that all mission activities are carried out with unity of effort, inefficient and potentially avoidable overlap, unexpected operational concerns, and disagreements among members could continue to hinder the mission.