EXTENSIONS OF REMARKS

September 21, 2001

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OF NEW YORK
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Mr. GILMAN. Mr. Speaker, I rise to bring to my colleague’s attention that tomorrow has been designated as National POW/MIA Day for 2001. This is an annual commemoration, designated by the President, for Americans to remember the service-members who were captured in wartime, and those whose ultimate fate remains unknown.

Our nation fought four major conflicts in the 20th century. In those wars, over 142,000 Americans were taken prisoner-of-war. Those servicemen and women experienced numerous hardships and treatment which could often be described only as barbaric during the course of captivity. Those Americans imprisoned by the Japanese during World War II faced the worst possible conditions in captivity and were forced to endure every depravity of their fellow men. Americans imprisoned in North Korea and Southeast Asia suffered similar treatment.

The vast majority of these individuals, over 134,000, were eventually returned to U.S. control. However, more than 17,000 did not come home, and joined the ranks of the missing-in-action. According to the Congressional research service, over 88,000 Americans remain unaccounted for from 20th century wars. The bulk of these, 78,794, are remains not recovered from World War II. Approximately 1,600 Americans remain missing from the first World War, and more than 8,100 individuals remain missing from the Korean War. Korean War figures have been notoriously inaccurate, and of this aforementioned figure, “only” 2,195 cases exist where death was not witnessed or otherwise well-documented. Regarding the Vietnam War, 1,956 Americans remain missing from that conflict, of which the defense department believes 657 are definitely dead, including 459 who were lost at sea or over water.

I have been a strong advocate of an accounting of our POW/MIA’s since I first came to the Congress in 1973. I was introduced to the issue through the experience of two friends and constituents, George and Gladys Brooks, who had lost their son in Vietnam. They were frustrated with the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia, an advocacy group for the families that continues to play a key role in this issue to this day. At the time, the POW/MIA issue did not resonate with the American public. I maintained that the POW/MIA issue was too little, if anything, live in American consciousness. In 1975–77, I served as a member of the Montgomery Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia, a body which held numerous hearings on the issue of whether live Americans were held in ourExodus from Vietnam. Subsequent to this, I co-chaired the House Select task force on this issue with my former colleague from Virginia, Lester Wolf. During this time, I made numerous trips to Southeast Asia, beginning with a trip to Hanoi in 1975.

In 1995, I introduced H.R. 945, The Missing Service Personnel Act of 1995, which was eventually incorporated into the Defense Authorization Act for FY ’96. Included in this legislation was language which provided authority to the Secretary of Defense to centralize the responsibilities for search and rescue operations under one office; instruct the Secretary to establish procedures for dealing with the families of missing persons by protecting the interests of the families; and provide a means by which the families of MIA’s can express their concerns and questions about the missing family member. It also called for greater consultation between DOD and family members, and incorporated provisions create accountability and punishment for those in DOD who refuse to follow the law in this area.

Many of the good provisions in the bill were stripped out at the request of DOD in the House/Senate conference on the following year’s authorization bill. The bulk of these, however, were overwhelmingly restored by the House in the FY 98 Defense Authorization bill.

Two years ago, I introduced legislation to declassify all of the classified documents from these hearings that were in the possession of the national archives. This resolution, which the House adopted unanimously, made available thousands of formerly secret documents, allowing family members and academic researches to examine them. While I believe the House adopted unanimously, made available thousands of formerly secret documents, allowing family members and academic researches the opportunity to review previously unavailable material, which might eventually help with securing a final resolution for some MIA cases.

...permit me to focus special recognition on those POW/MIA’s from Korea and Vietnam. Despite the prior administration’s best assurances to the contrary, many of us in Congress remained unconvinced that the Vietnamese government on this issue. Regrettably, by normalizing relations with Vietnam, I believe that we have withdrawn our leverage over the Vietnamese government on this issue.

It bears noting that we have made some progress since President Wolf. During this time, I made numerous trips to Southeast Asia, beginning with a trip to Hanoi in 1975. Clinton administration officials...