A U.S. Military First: The War in Afghanistan Ended With Zero M.I.A.s

After two decades of combat, there were no American troops missing in action, reflecting a major shift in military priorities.

By Dave Philipps

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When the last American military cargo jet flew out of Afghanistan in August, marking the end of the United States' longest war, it also signaled a largely overlooked accomplishment. For the first time in the nation's history, a major conflict was ending without the U.S. military leaving any troops behind: no one missing in action behind enemy lines, and no nameless, unidentified bones to be solemnly interred in the Tomb of the Unknowns.

It is a stunning change from previous wars that ended with thousands of troops forever lost, their families left to wonder what had happened to them.

Christopher Vanek, a retired colonel who commanded the Army's 75th Ranger Regiment, spent a combined six and a half years deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan, and took part in a number of high-profile search-and-rescue operations. He said rescues became the priority. Even for low-ranking troops with little strategic importance, he said, the military spared no effort to find the missing.

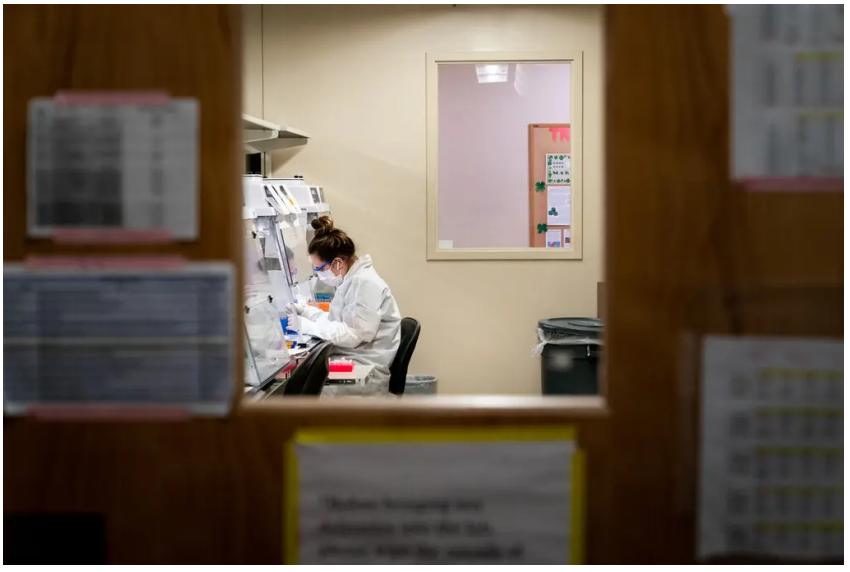
When two Navy sailors were missing in 2010 in Logar Province, south of Kabul, "all combat operations came to a screeching halt," Mr. Vanek recalled. "We had 150 aircraft working on trying to find them. We put Special Ops in some dangerous situations. We refocused our entire effort from fighting and killing Al Qaeda to recovering these men."

The bodies of both sailors were located and retrieved several days later.

There are several reasons no one was left behind this time. In Afghanistan, combat smoldered more often than it blazed, and lacked the large-scale chaos that led to many losses in the past. Modern DNA analysis can identify any service member from a sample of just a few shards of bone. And unlike the jungles of Vietnam or the surf-pounded beaches of Tarawa Atoll, it was comparably difficult to lose sight of a comrade in the dry, open terrain of Afghanistan.

But the driving factor, experts say, is a military culture that has changed considerably since the draft ended in the 1970s. That culture now makes the recovery of troops — dead or alive — one of the military's highest priorities.

"It has come to be seen as almost a sacred commitment from the nation to those who serve," Mr. Vanek said. "It's hard to overstate the amount of resources that were committed to look for someone who was lost."

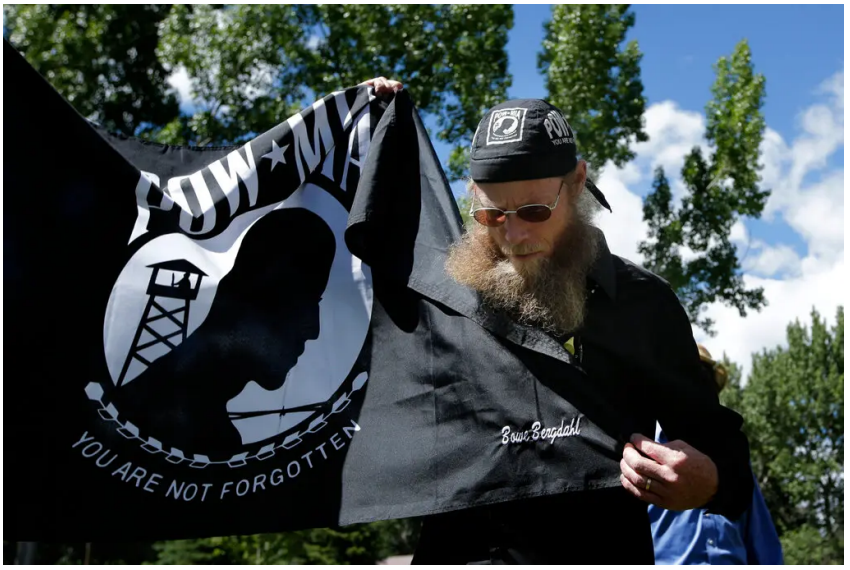


A lab where part of a DNA identification process takes place at Dover Air Force Base. Erin Schaff/The New York Times

The mission to save the Navy sailors in 2010, for instance, was a repeat of the huge scramble a year earlier after Bowe Bergdahl, an Army private, walked away from his post and was captured by the Taliban.

A number of troops were wounded searching for and trying to rescue Private Bergdahl. Mr. Vanek said he asked the commanding general at the time whether the price of the effort to save one private was too high. He recalled the general telling him, “It’s important that every service member out here knows the country will do anything in its power to ensure they are never left on the battlefield.”

Sending that message comes with real costs, which are overwhelmingly borne by the military’s most elite Special Operations forces, who were repeatedly tapped for high-risk hostage rescues and body recoveries.



The father of Pvt. Bowe Bergdahl held a POW/MIA flag embroidered with his son's name in 2013. The military scrambled to find Private Bergdahl after he walked away from his post and was captured by the Taliban. Jae C. Hong/Associated Press

“Straight rescues are hard as hell because the enemy holds all the cards,” said Jimmy Hatch, who was part of the Navy’s premier hostage rescue group, SEAL Team Six, when it tried to rescue Private Bergdahl in 2009. “You have to get close, and you have to be fast, because the enemy could kill the hostage.”

That mission did not find Private Bergdahl — he was not recovered until five years later, in a prisoner exchange with the Taliban. But it did end Mr. Hatch’s career. He was shot during the raid, went through 18 operations to reconstruct a shattered femur, and struggled with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Still, he said, trying to save the private was the right thing to do. When asked why, he paused, then said simply, “We’re Americans.”

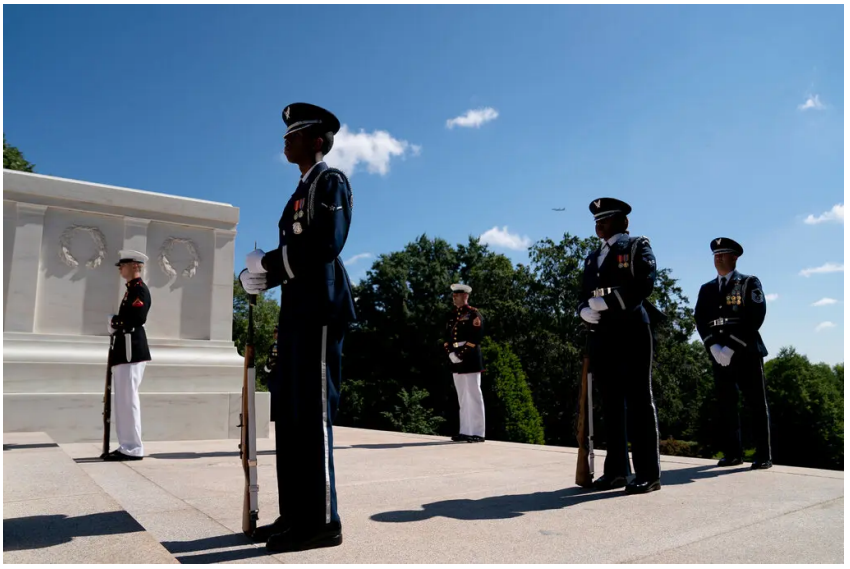
That thinking is an about-face from the way the United States once regarded the loss or capture of troops on the battlefield. For generations, they were seen as an unfortunate but unavoidable byproduct of war. In many cases, little effort was put into rescuing the captured or returning the dead to their families.

During the Civil War, thousands of prisoners of war languished for years in dismal camps, where many died of malnutrition or disease. Soldiers who fell on the battlefield often died an anonymous death. Of those buried in military cemeteries, nearly half are listed as “unknown.”

After that war, the task of sorting out the missing was taken up not by the War Department but by a single nurse, Clara Barton, who opened a private Missing Soldiers Office that identified more than 20,000 missing soldiers between 1865 and 1867.

In World War I, all American troops were required to wear “dog tags” bearing their name, but troops who were killed on open ground were often left where they fell. “You can’t do much about them,” one private said at the time. “In most of the attacks, if they were killed, they just had to lie there until they disappeared into the mud.”

To this day, their bones still turn up occasionally in farmers’ fields.



Waiting for the president to arrive at a wreath-laying ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknowns in Arlington National Cemetery. Stefani Reynolds for The New York Times

After that war, the United States dedicated the Tomb of the Unknowns at Arlington National Cemetery to honor thousands who were lost, and the military instituted new practices to better recover and identify combat casualties. But each new improvement was overwhelmed by the chaos of the next war.

World War II left 79,000 Americans unaccounted for. The Korean War, another 8,000. Vietnam, 2,500 more. In Korea and Vietnam, rescue efforts were few and many American troops wasted away in prison, facing torture and other hardships.

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here’s more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

After Vietnam, though, the nation’s attitude began to change, according to Mark Stephensen, whose father was a fighter pilot who was shot down over North Vietnam in 1967.

Mr. Stephensen was 12 when his father’s jet crashed, and his family was given little information. Desperate for resolution, the family banded together with others to form the National League of POW/MIA Families, lobbying politicians and buttonholing generals in the halls of the Capitol to demand action. Over time, they made their cause a must-support bipartisan issue.

“Before that, people who were missing in action were not a priority,” said Mr. Stephensen, who is now vice president of the group. “The Pentagon was a ponderous bureaucracy with lots of process and no results. But they soon realized M.I.A.s were a liability. Some of the generals would rather face a hail of bullets than the anger of the league.”

President Ronald Reagan became a vocal backer and flew the organization’s black-and-white flag above the White House. Sympathetic politicians eventually made accounting for the missing a requirement for any normalization of relations with Vietnam.

The remains of Mr. Stephensen’s father were returned in 1988.

Col. Mark Stephensen went missing in action after his plane was shot down over North Vietnam in 1967. His remains weren't returned until 1988.
via Mark Stephensen

Families of missing troops have remained a potent political force, pushing for better science, more resources and bigger budgets for recovery efforts. The federal government spent $160 million in 2020 on recovering and identifying lost war dead.

Change also came from within the military, said Leonard Wong, a retired Army War College researcher who studied the growing importance that the military places on leaving no one behind.

When the military became an all-volunteer force in the 1970s, he said, conventional troops adopted many of the professional values of the elite forces like the Green Berets, including a line from the Ranger Creed: "I will never leave a fallen comrade to fall into the hands of the enemy."

"Instead of conscripts, soldiers became a profession, with professional standards," Mr. Wong said. "Leaving no one behind came to be seen as what professionals do."

He said the kind of warfare that American troops encountered in Iraq and Afghanistan only strengthened that resolve. The broad strategies of the generals often appeared muddled to the rank and file, and many troops questioned whether they were doing any good.

"In those cases, leaving no man behind can serve as a replacement for a clear, worthwhile mission," Mr. Wong said. "In a morally ambiguous war, it becomes the one true mission everyone can agree on."

He pointed out that nearly all of the Medals of Honor awarded since 2001 have been given not for achieving some tactical feat, but for risking life and limb to save others.

Even so, Mr. Hatch, the former SEAL Team Six operator, cautioned it would be a mistake for the military to congratulate itself for bringing everyone home. Mr. Hatch, who is now a student at Yale University, said he struggled for years with the psychological fallout of war, and knows many people who also felt trapped by their combat experiences.

"After I came home, there were a few years of my life where I was definitely a captive," he said. "I needed a hostage rescue from my own living room. I know people whose lives are broken, and who will never get released. I would argue they are still missing in action — they are prisoners of war."