

USMC Breakfast – 11.9.13

Howdy.

It is SUCH an honor to be here this morning in a room full of United States Marines and their families!! Thank you all for your service. My name is Karoni Forrester. I am the daughter of Capt. Ronald W Forrester, USMC and the first cousin of Maj Craig Forrester, USMC. We too are a Marine Corps family – a very PROUD Marine family at that! With me today is my favorite person, my daughter Lilian.

This morning, I want to share with you my father's story, and then want to talk about the POW/MIA issue. You see, my father, Capt Ron Forrester, is still Missing in Action in Vietnam.

Let me start by telling you a bit about my dad. Ron Forrester is the son of two of the most incredible people I have ever known. He is the brother of two. He is a twin. He is a husband, a nephew and a cousin. He is a best friend. He is an uncle. He is a grandfather. He is a Fighting Texas Aggie. He is a United States Marine. He is MY father. He is Missing.

Daddy was destined to serve from a young age. He always wanted to be a pilot. There's an old family story about the time my dad, at age 5, decided it was time for him to make his first "jump." His plan was to jump from the roof of the house using his bed sheet as a parachute. Luckily his brothers thought he was NUTS and quickly recruited my grandfather to ensure the young pilot descended from the roof the same way he got up there. The oak tree in the front yard.

After looking through old photos, his younger brother wrote, "The Bible is prophetic. So, too, are the family photos. Like the photo of Ronny at age three. He is riding on one of those carnival airplanes that are suspended by chains and fly low in a circle. His big brown eyes reveal a sense of mission. Then there's this one...Here, at attention, rigidly stands that young aspirant with a toy rifle. Here, he struts with a toy airplane held high in the air by extended arm. In this one, Douglas MacArthur could not have looked more arrogant than my brother decked out in an helmet. For those with an eye to see, the photographs foretold his future."

Dad grew up in Odessa, TX and following high school graduation he set off for College Station where he earned a degree in Civil Engineering from Texas A&M and was commissioned as an officer in the United States Marine Corps. He married my mother just a few days later and the young couple set off for Pensacola, FL where

my father began flight training to become a Bombardier Navigator on the esteemed A6-A Intruder. About 10 months later, I arrived on the scene. After being stationed at Cherry Point, NC for a year and a half, Daddy deployed to Vietnam. He was stationed in Nam Phong Thailand, lovingly referred to as The Rose Garden. From there, the Marines would fly over Laos into North Vietnam to bomb strategic targets.

Daddy's last letter home to us was on Christmas Day, 1972. He was concerned about whether the Cowboys were gonna start Roger Staubach. He said this year Christmas was just another working day for him, but he'd have another next year. He signed the letter the way he signed them all, "Give Karoni a kiss for me."

Two days after Christmas, 1972, my father and his pilot, Capt Jim Chipman went on a night solo mission to take out a bridge on HWY 1. They hit that bridge. I've been told Marines don't miss their targets. Shortly after dropping their bombs, Triple A hit the A6-A. Daddy and Jim did not return to the garden that night. They are Missing in Action.

The war ended. Operation Homecoming commenced to return our POWs. All MIA families waited with baited breath to see if our loved ones name was on the list. 2500 American families were disappointed. My family was one of them.

In the beginning, most families were isolated from one another. We were told not to talk to anyone about it because it could put our loved one in danger. That worked for a while...but some very strong and stubborn MIA wives and mothers came together in 1970 and formed the National League of POW/MIA Families. Some of you may have never heard of the National League of POW/MIA Families, but you all know our flag. It's the black and white flag with the silhouette of the prisoner with bowed head, with the words You Are Not Forgotten. It has become a universal symbol for POW/MIA. That's the League. While I had attended a family meeting in the Dallas area when I was 14, I was sixteen before I learned about the League and went to my national League meeting in DC. I was overwhelmed to meet other families in the same position as ours. There were others who were experiencing the same uncertainties, frustrations and pain. I was comforted to meet concerned citizens who gave their time to the issue even though they had no one missing in their family. I have been a member of the League for over 27 years, have been the Texas State Coordinator for the past 12 years, have been on the National Board of Directors for the past five years, currently serving as Vice Chair. After all this time members of the League have become a family – sometimes dysfunctional,

but a family nonetheless - and we're a family who continues to demand answers from our government, to work for the fullest possible accounting.

Together, we celebrate every success story – and we DO have success stories. We are still getting answers and bringing home remains of our missing. In the past 40 years, we've been able to account for 940 MIAs. Just recently, a friend of mine finally got an answer about her father's fate. I can't imagine how that must feel, but I can tell you I want to find out!

Today, there are 1643 Americans who remain unaccounted for in Southeast Asia. 207 of our missing are United States Marines. 105 of our missing are Texans.

There are some really incredible organizations and people working in the accounting community. Organizations like Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC), DIA's Stony Beach, Defense Prisoner of War/Missing Personnel Office (DPMO), and the Life Sciences Equipment Laboratory to name a few.

Back in 2007 I went to Southeast Asia to meet with the governments of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. While in Vietnam, I visited an excavation site where members of the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command, JPAC, worked tirelessly on an aircraft crash site searching for remains. Over the years, I have come to know many people who work for JPAC, but this was the first time I'd been with them in the field. This organization does amazing work, and the answers being provided to many WWII families, Korean families and Vietnam families have JPAC's efforts to thank.

In addition to thanking JPAC, I will be bold enough to say – because it's the truth – that any family getting answers about their missing loved ones today also have the National League of POW/MIA Families to thank. Without the work of our organization over the past 43 years, the accounting effort would not exist. Ask anyone at JPAC or DPMO, they will tell you the same thing. We are the families who wouldn't go away back then....and we're not going away now.

But here's the bad news. 1643 missing in Southeast Asia is too many and they have been missing for too long. People ask – what are the biggest challenges? My answer is three things: Time, Money and Awareness.

Time is not on our side when it comes to Southeast Asia and our window of opportunity is closing. It's an environmental window. The soil in Southeast Asia is so acidic, that it is eating remains and evidence at an extremely fast rate. There

soon will be nothing left to provide clues, much less closure. An example: When I was visiting the Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii a few years ago, there were two gurneys out in the lab with recovered remains. One held a full skeleton. The other held bone fragments that had been spread out. The full skeleton were remains of a WWII MIA. The fragments were from Vietnam. We MUST prioritize the cases in Vietnam while there is still time, before there is nothing left to find.

Money. Money always seems to be a problem, doesn't it? JPAC usually receives the funding it requests, but it is often not appropriated early enough to allow for extensive operational plans. We need to make it clear to Congress that JPAC must be fully funded and that the POW/MIA issue remains a national priority, and worthy of the dollars it takes. What message does it send to the warriors of today and tomorrow if we turn our backs on those who served yesterday?

Which brings me to the last challenge I mentioned – Awareness. So many people have no idea we have so many American servicemen who are missing. Different events are held around the country each year to raise awareness and to help educate the public, but it's still not anything you really hear about in the news. There are many simple ways to raise awareness: put a POW/MIA bumper sticker or magnetic ribbon on your car, fly the POW/MIA flag, and the best one – wear a POW/MIA bracelet. Anyone in here besides me wearing a POW/MIA bracelet? <Good for you! People ask you what it is, right?> I wear mine to honor my father, but let me tell you, it's a great conversation starter providing great opportunities to tell others that not all of our men are home yet.

Know this. The families can't do this alone. We have been blessed to have friends who stand beside us, but we need more help. Joining the League as an associate member for a whopping \$25/year is a great way to help. The size of our organization speaks to our government about how seriously the public takes this issue.

You've heard me talk a lot about Vietnam MIAs, but let me assure you, my commitment to the accounting mission is not limited to Southeast Asia. When Scott Speicher was shot down on Jan 17, 1991 over Iraq, my heart ached. He was married with two small children and all I could think was "Not again. This can't happen to anyone else." MIA families have to be loud and we have to stick together. Speicher's loss only fueled my passion for this issue. It's not just about MY dad, it's about ALL of them. Fortunately, Speicher has been accounted for as have those we had missing during our most recent war in Iraq.

But there is one I would be remiss not to mention today. One soldier we don't hear about near enough on the evening news. We have one POW from the war in Afghanistan. SGT Bowe Bergdahl was captured on June 30, 2009 by the Taliban. It is believed he is being held in Pakistan. There have been recent letters smuggled out by the Red Cross proving him to be alive. The Taliban wants to do a prisoner trade – five of theirs at Gitmo for Bowe. For the past year and a half, the US Government has been "considering" it. It's time for Bowe to come home. A couple of years ago when my cousin was heading off on his 4th tour, his 2nd to Afghanistan, I jokingly said to him, "Hey, if you run across our boy Bowe, could you help that kid out?" He said, "It sure wouldn't be the first time the Marines gave the Army a ride home." In all seriousness though – we need to raise more awareness for Bowe. My daughter and I both wear these yellow bracelets with his name. I have some extras I am giving away if anyone is interested to have one.

The POW/MIA issue is NOT over. We still have much work to do.

I really appreciate the opportunity you've given me today, to share my experiences, and the challenges we are facing in reaching the fullest possible accounting. I also want to give a quick advertisement for the Texas Capitol Vietnam Veterans Monument. We will be dedicating that on the Capitol grounds in Austin on March 29 at 10 a.m. I would love to see you there. Again, I am HONORED to be in the presence of so many American heroes. Thank you for your service and thank you for my freedom.

Semper Fi!