

**BIDEN ADMINISTRATION TRIP TO VIETNAM & POW/MIA TALKS IN DC**  
**Summary by Ann Mills Griffiths, League Board Chairman**  
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Vietnam is now consistently characterizing as "missing" both their own and US personnel, just as DPAA has been doing for some time, thereby supporting the Biden Administration's policy of no longer differentiating between being POW or MIA in a foreign country, versus known dead, body not recovered from service in your own country.

This smearing of status has been a long-time project of Deputy Foreign Minister Ha Kim Ngoc, former SRV Ambassador to the US. He led efforts a few years ago with former Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT) and his senior staff member, Tim Reiser, to formalize the term "*Vietnamese Missing in Action*" as part of US policy through DoD funding-related Congressional actions. Millions of dollars in aid to the SRV was approved by Congress to address "Legacy" issues (dioxin remediation, unexploded ordinance clearance, assistance to the disabled, etc.) which they placed on equal footing with the real foundational issue of US efforts to account for missing American personnel.

Due to President Reagan's personal interest, his Administration established the US policy to pursue accounting as a "matter of highest national priority." Knowing the US would prioritize the return of our POWs and accounting for our MIAs, the Vietnamese had an in-depth documentation process in place. It was official knowledge of this process that served as the basis for developing the US policy of reciprocity during the Reagan Administration to pursue answers as a "matter of highest national priority."

This policy focused on a step-by-step reciprocal humanitarian basis, separate from policy and political differences between the US and Vietnam. At the time, I was the only non-government participant in the US Interagency Group (IAG) that negotiated agreement with Vietnam. The intention was to encourage them to unilaterally provide both stored remains and archival documents known by the US to exist, subsequently leading to joint operations to investigate, recover and return others. The overall scope more recently includes KIA/BNRs. The reason? All US personnel previously listed as POW or MIA are now listed by DoD and pursued as remains recovery cases in policy statements and presentations.

At the end of the war, the North Vietnamese (PAVN) controlled the battlefields in North Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Anyone who did not return home to their family was obviously killed in action. The long-used number of 300,000 known dead Vietnamese whose remains were not recovered was first conveyed to the League in 1982. At that time, I expressed sympathy for the much larger number of their losses, but that their unaccounted-for personnel were not MIA. I noted they either escaped as refugees or were among the thousands group-buried in various locations by US forces.

These deceased Vietnamese are now again being cited as "missing" or MIA. Most often, such characterizations come from politically motivated senior US and SRV officials. Either they don't want to know or understand the difference or find it more in keeping with the Biden Administration policy to relegate the accounting mission to a "legacy" issue of low importance when compared to dioxin remediation, mine clearance or assistance to disabled Vietnamese.

The US Government didn't have wartime requirements to collect and store remains, nor was the US withholding archival documents on deceased Vietnamese personnel. In fact, the US government and private entities have provided several significant collections of wartime documentation to assist SRV recovery efforts, along with encouraging Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs) and individual US veterans to return captured identification media and provide the location of graves.

During President Biden's trip to Hanoi on September 10<sup>th</sup>, the Vietnamese turned over 14 items, reportedly 12 of which related to missing US personnel, including two Last Known Alive (LKA) cases. The items included ID cards, "dog tags" and even at least one passport. The Vietnamese asserted having had to search "far and wide" for this material, and on September 20<sup>th</sup>, at the US-SRV Defense Policy Dialogue, they reportedly turned over two more ID media items, specifics not yet known. Turnover of these items is most welcome and crucial for the cases represented and the impacted families. Most importantly, it signals that unilateral efforts by the Government of Vietnam can most likely bring these men home.

Hopefully, this brief summary helps all understand the background of "discussions" recently held at multiple levels between the US and Vietnam. Is it positive for the accounting mission? Not especially, unless one thinks beyond the rhetoric to the signals. Rather than a "matter of highest national priority," the accounting mission appears to warrant mention by the Biden Administration only as a "Legacy" issue, routinely in last place. The signals by Vietnam are crucial. As ever trying to be hopeful.....and moving forward.....Ann