POW/MIA Operations in Laos

Detachment Three

Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA)

Vientiane, Lao People’s Democratic Republic
Summary

- 33 years of JFAs in Laos: 282 identified, 291 unaccounted for; 69 Lao sites on MEL
- Constrained by terrain, weather, UXO and Lao government
- 2016: breakthrough in US-Lao relations
- Increases to size, scope, and effectiveness of JFAs
- Goal: “work ourselves out of a job” in Laos by 2030
Wartime Historical Background

U.S. conducted operations to interdict the HCM Trail, support the Royal Lao Government, and bomb North Vietnam.
Det-3 Historical Background

- In the 1980s, the U.S. conducted episodic recovery efforts with high-level policy and technical meetings.
- April 1988: Continuous combined searches began in earnest in Laos.
- Jan 1992: Detachment-3 was officially established as one of three geographically separated Detachments under Joint Task Force-Full Accounting.
- 147 Joint Field Activities (JFA) conducted since 1985.
- U.S. Team Size Increases:
  1985: 30
  1994: 40
  2000: 53
  2017: 65

Since 1992, the U.S. has organized its accounting efforts into large-scale field operations which continue today.
Terrain is extremely challenging and usually requires helicopter support to reach sites.
**Weather**

**Northeast Monsoons**  
October to May  
“Good Weather”  
Haze, Smoke and Fog

**Southeast Monsoon**  
June to September  
“Poor Weather”  
Rain and Clouds

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_Fog and low ceilings frustrate flight operations in the mountainous areas, especially the border region._
Virtually every MEL site in Laos is contaminated with UXO
Lao Government Constraints

- Limited JFA Windows: 2 35-day and 2-45 day JFAs per year
- Troop Cap: 53 until 2017
- Limited Work Hours: 8:00 to 4:00; Depart basecamp 7:30, return by 4:30
- Helicopter Usage
- Lao POW/MIA Team escort
  - Limited to 5 US Teams and 2 “Basecamps”
  - Lao official in every vehicle

Lao government constraints place an upper limit on progress each year
State of Play in 2016

• Episodic access
  • Continually suspending and reopening sites

• Commuter model:
  • Lodge in guest houses and drive/fly to sites each day
  • 30-40% of work time lost to weather delays
  • $6.8M of $8.8M operations budget for helicopters

• Troop cap of 53

Had this model continued it would have taken 25+ years to excavate the MEL
Breakthrough: 2016 Tech Talks

- Synchronized negotiations with Presidential visit
- 2016: Bivouacking on “case by case” basis; troop cap increased to 65
- 2017: Addition of fifth monsoon season JFA
- Vastly improved working-level relations
- Projected 2018: 85 troop cap
- Projected 2019: Continuous operations

A focused negotiation strategy, synchronized across the interagency, produced the most significant Lao concessions in two decades.
Key Initiatives: Bivouacking

- Maximizes work time and focus on site, minimizes weather delays
- Secured Lao “case-by-case” approval in 2016, beginning March 2017
- 2017 Crawl Phase: Single bivouac site with RTs commuting to sites by ground
- 2018 Walk Phase: RTs bivouacked individually at excavation sites, resupplied by ground
- 2019 Run Phase: RTs individually bivouacked and resupplied by helicopter at remote sites; transition from one site cluster to next

Bivouacking increases productivity, reduces costs, and enables larger size and scope of operations. Saved $3.5M in FY17 alone.
Key Initiatives: Troop Cap

• 2016: Lao approved increase from 53 to 65, effective March 2017

• 2017: Requested increase to 85, “requires further study”

• 2018: Renewed request, indications it will be granted at September Consultations

• Manpower limitations, 85 likely final increase

Bivouacking allows us to support larger JFA teams in the field.
Key Initiatives: Increase Scope of JFAs

- 2017: Lao approved additional Monsoon Season JFA each year starting July 2018
  - Limited number of potential sites
  - Increases rate of recoveries
  - Allows major JFAs to focus on major site clusters
  - Provides platform for investigations
- Continuous operational model starting in FY20
  - Continuous excavation from one monsoon season to next; RTs turnover in place
  - Requires increase to size of Lao MIA Team
  - From 160 to 210 work days per year

Continuous Operations will drastically increase the efficacy and efficiency of recoveries, but will be manpower intensive.
Key Initiatives: Contracted UXO Clearance

• FY16: Excavation at three sites halted due to high UXO threat

• US and Lao constraints on EOD

• 2017: Secured Lao approval for contracted UXO clearance in support of recovery operations

• 2017-2018: Pilot Clearance Project
  • 2 Heavily contaminated sites
  • Validated ability to clear while preserving evidence

• 2018 and beyond: refinement and shift to “hybrid teams” integrating contractors into RTs

Many sites in Laos are impossible to safely excavate without contracted UXO clearance.
“Working Ourselves out of a Job”

- With further Lao concessions and enough resources, it is possible to fully excavate the MEL by 2030
- Requires sense of urgency from highest levels of Lao government
  - 2030 vision
  - High-level engagement
- Resources
  - Skilled manpower
  - Partnerships
- Focused excavation and engagement strategy

We have an historic opportunity to build on recent successes and set conditions for achieving the fullest possible accounting in Laos.