



## POW/MIA Accounting in Vietnam: Successes and Challenges

Ron Ward, JPAC Casualty Resolution Specialist  
45th Annual League of Families Meeting  
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Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, and most importantly, the families of those service members and civilians still missing from the war in Vietnam. It is truly an honor to be asked to speak to you here, after a busy year of POW/MIA accounting work in Vietnam. I regret that due to a busy operational schedule, I was unable to be with you last year, but I hope the update we provided on JPAC Detachment 2's operations was helpful. This year, the League has asked my colleagues and me to review successes and challenges in the accounting efforts in Vietnam and Laos. As the Casualty Resolution Specialist at Detachment 2, I'll update you on the situation in Vietnam.

First, a brief update on investigation and recovery operations in Vietnam. As you know, one of the primary responsibilities of the detachments in Southeast Asia is to coordinate and manage a number of investigation and recovery missions each year, missions which we call Joint Field Activities -- or JFAs. In Vietnam, since the last League meeting, we have conducted four JFAs which included a total of four Research and Investigation Teams, four Investigation Teams, twelve Recovery Teams, and five Vietnam Recovery Teams. The two types of investigation teams (the RIT and the IT) investigated a total of 135 cases, including dozens of witness interviews and site surveys. The two types of recovery teams (the RTs and the VRTs) excavated a total of 22 sites, and these excavations resulted in five repatriations of remains. Three more remains repatriations were the result of Field Forensic Review examinations, for a total of eight repatriations this year. Though these numbers -- raw totals of operations conducted -- are not necessarily the best measure of success, they do illustrate the huge amount of effort JPAC expended this year to find answers and repatriate the remains of missing and unaccounted-for in Vietnam. We can consider these efforts to be a success in these challenging times when sites are being lost to development and the memories of the witnesses are fading, not to mention budget challenges on the part of the U.S. Government.

Another success this year was the further improvement and refinement of research and investigation efforts in Vietnam. We are at a point in the evolution of this issue when many of the unresolved cases must be considered "cold cases," at least in the language of homicide investigators. It is often the job of Det 2's Research and Investigation Team -- or RIT -- to go "back to the drawing board" on many of these cases in order to find new avenues of investigation. This involves a constant and intensive effort to research U.S. and Vietnamese archival and historical materials, filtering through hundreds of witnesses for potential information on cases, and reporting all this information for assessment by our analysts and for edification of the families. Stony Beach specialists in Vietnam are an important part of this process; they stay informed of JPAC's operations and regularly contribute information based on their efforts. The professional military investigators in our Vietnamese counterpart organization, the Vietnam Office for Seeking Missing Persons -- or VNOSMP -- also support this process by working with local veterans' chapters to compile exhaustive lists of veterans belonging to wartime NVA and VC units that were involved in U.S. losses. They then provide the names of witnesses who have information on POW/MIA cases to the RIT, which interviews those individuals in great detail. As I said to you in 2011, successful investigations require persistence, good analysis by our operators, and good faith cooperation by the Vietnamese government. Let me give you an example.

This case hasn't been completely resolved, so I'll have to speak in generalities to respect the privacy of the family. But it is a good example of how the investigation methods being used are reviving hope, using the persistence-analysis-cooperation formula. The case involves two crewmembers of an RF-4C aircraft on a reconnaissance mission over Laos in 1970. After reporting they had accomplished their mission, the crew disappeared from radar and was never heard from again. The aircraft's last known location was in Laos, so the country of loss in U.S. government records was Laos. In the years after JTF-FA, and later JPAC, gained access to Laos for POW/MIA search operations, the case was investigated multiple times, with negative results. Teams even found a crash site in Laos initially thought to be associated with the case, but the results of the excavation indicated it was a different aircraft. The case was at a standstill. In its review of the case, the RIT noted that a Vietnamese language archival document, the shoot-down record for the NVA's Group 559, contained an entry that said an F-4 had been shot down by the

Vietnamese 35th Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion on the same day as that RF-4C. A check of all the U.S. aircraft shot down by the 35th Battalion during that period indicated that its operating area was not in Laos, but just across the border, in Quang Binh Province of Vietnam. Convinced of the possibility the 35th could be the shoot-down unit and that the location could be in Vietnam, not Laos, the RIT asked the military investigators in the VNOSMP to find members of the 35th AAA Battalion. This involved working with veterans' chapters of Group 559 and its subordinates, compiling a list of dozens of potential witnesses and filtering through the witnesses until they discovered someone who knew about the circumstance of this case. Lo and behold, the VNOSMP did find witnesses from the 35th who knew about this case and who provided leads on the final disposition of the two American crewmembers. The RIT turned these witnesses over to the field investigation team -- or IT -- which is in the process of investigating this site in Vietnam during the ongoing JFA. While we are not certain what the outcome of that field investigation will be, we can be certain that persistence, good analysis, and cooperation between us and the Vietnamese have given this case, and others like it, another chance. Of course, our hope is that the investigation will eventually lead to the location, repatriation and identification of the crewmembers' remains, but we are also happy to be able to provide significant information on these two service members, whose fate for so long was completely shrouded in mystery, to their families.

Another area in which we've had good success in Vietnam this year is trilateral operations. I think most of you know that this program involves taking Vietnamese witnesses to areas in Laos and Cambodia along the old Ho Chi Minh Trail to point out crash and burial sites. Between JPAC's Det 1 in Thailand, Det 2 in Vietnam, Det 3 in Laos, and the governments of those three countries, we have conducted four trilateral operations in the past year. These trilateral operations were very successful, resulting in remains repatriations for two out of the four operations. The idea of taking Vietnamese witnesses to Cambodia or Laos seems simple, but it requires using the persistence-analysis-cooperation method. Let me give you an example of one of the trilateral cases on which we were successful this year.

In May of 1970, a U.S. Army UH-1 helicopter was on a resupply flight from Tay Ninh Province in South Vietnam to a fire support base near the border with Cambodia. A storm

caused the crew to stray off course, and the aircraft was shot down by enemy fire and crash-landed in the middle of a Vietnamese unit in Cambodia. Of the eight individuals onboard the helicopter, one escaped at the time of the incident, two surrendered and were returned after the war, two died in captivity and their remains were returned, leaving three still unaccounted-for. This case was investigated about ten times in Cambodia and a few times in Vietnam, with negative results. It, too, was at a standstill. Then a RIT researcher discovered two captured Vietnamese documents in Texas Tech University's archives. One document was an after-action report from the NVA anti-aircraft unit that shot down the helicopter, and the document included the detail that a radio unit designated "H3" had been at the scene. The second document was a status report from the "H3" radio unit, giving the name of its political officer at the time of the incident. The RIT passed this information to the VNOSMP, requesting that they find the political officer. Not long after, the VNOSMP not only found the political officer named in the document, but also one of his subordinates who had been involved in burying the three Americans who, it turns out, were killed at the site. We took these witnesses to Cambodia on three separate occasions to have them help narrow down the burial location. This site was excavated three times in an attempt to find the remains. The Stony Beach specialist in Cambodia was very helpful during these trips, providing expert advice and analytic support. In March of this year, a JPAC excavation team recovered possible human remains from the site, and these remains were repatriated from Cambodia to the U.S. in three flag-draped transfer cases. This case, despite having reached what seemed to be an impasse, was put back on track by persistence, good analysis, and good cooperation. The remains are undergoing forensic analysis at JPAC's Laboratory. This case represents a success for our investigators, but all potential trilateral cases face a challenging process of research to develop leads and a race against time to find witnesses before it is too late. There are currently several other trilateral operations planned for the upcoming year.

Archival Research, as a means to help solve POW/MIA cases in Vietnam, has long been of special interest to the League, as well as being a priority for the U.S. government. After a brief phase in the early 1990s of providing some pertinent documents from their archives, the Vietnamese government ushered in a long period of inactivity in this area, providing almost no archival documents or research for a decade. You may recall that in March 2011, a League

delegation, headed by Ann Mills-Griffiths and Richard Childress, secured a tentative agreement from the Vietnamese military to renew an archival research program. Beginning in May 2012, after further discussions with the Vietnamese, we began receiving potentially POW/MIA-related information and research from Vietnam's military archives. To date, we have received 37 separate sanitized documents and accompanying analysis, totaling 790 pages, and we have found that some of this information correlates directly to a number of unresolved cases in Vietnam and Laos. Analysts at JPAC, DPMO and Stony Beach are incorporating this new information into their analysis on these cases. The Stony Beach specialists in Vietnam have been very helpful in assisting with the translations of these documents from Vietnamese to English. But even before the information is translated and sent to the community of U.S. analysts in Hawaii and Washington D.C., Det 2 and Vietnamese investigators make immediate use of the information in our investigations. By requesting certain key documents, we help guide the VNOSMP's unilateral research efforts towards order-of-battle information related to specific losses. This greatly improves chances for case resolution, especially for cases in the "cold case" category. The archival research program is ongoing, and we believe it will continue to provide information on the missing and unaccounted-for and ultimately may lead to an accounting for them.

Again this year, the Field Forensic Review -- or FFR -- Program was a success in Vietnam. This program is a mechanism through which Det 2 investigators and JPAC scientists, in cooperation with the VNOSMP, detect, track down, and examine possible U.S. remains being held by Vietnamese citizens. Most of the information upon which these investigations were based came in the form of letters, phone calls, or emails from Vietnamese citizens to Det 2. After many years of American POW/MIA investigations in Vietnam, it is well known to most Vietnamese that the U.S. POW/MIA Office in Hanoi -- what we call Det 2 -- is the place to contact regarding possible U.S. remains. This year, Det 2 received and analyzed 68 separate pieces of information from Vietnamese citizens on possible U.S. remains. All this information is shared with the Stony Beach specialists in Vietnam, who add to the information and help develop leads. Of course, not every piece of information we receive is valid, but we take every report seriously and immediately analyze the information to determine if it could lead to American remains.

This year, based on information obtained from Vietnamese and other sources, JPAC's Lab and Det 2 investigators conducted ten FFRs in Vietnam. Three of these examinations resulted in the repatriation of remains we believe could be those of unaccounted-for Americans.

In one instance, after JPAC excavated the site of an A-4C aircraft in Bac Lieu Province, a local villager contacted the VNOSMP and reported that he had found remains near the site. The following JFA, Dr. Robert Mann and I traveled to the province and worked with the VNOSMP and local police investigators to gain access to the remains. Upon examination, Dr. Mann concluded there was enough evidence to repatriate the remains to JPAC's Lab for further forensic analysis.

In another case, Vietnamese citizens contacted Det 2 and reported they had the remains of what they believed to be an American pilot. Upon investigation, it turned out the remains were discovered on the Vietnam-Cambodia border, in the vicinity of an unresolved case in Vietnam. Dr. John Byrd, JPAC's Lab Director, conducted the remains examination at a Vietnamese government office in Tay Ninh Province and, because of the possibility the remains could be American, they were repatriated at the end of the JFA.

In yet another case, the VNOSMP reported a Vietnamese citizen discovered human remains in proximity to where JPAC had excavated a site for a case in Thua Thien-Hue Province. Again, Dr. Mann conducted this examination and concluded the remains could represent at least one, and possibly two Americans associated with this case. These remains were also repatriated to JPAC's Lab where they are undergoing forensic analysis.

One final success to note this year is that, after many years of negotiation, the Vietnamese government has lifted the restrictions on all POW/MIA-related sites in Vietnam. That means there are currently no known sites in Vietnam restricted to JPAC teams. This piece of cooperation will allow us to help ensure an accounting for the individuals associated with those sites, and we are moving quickly to complete operations at those previously-restricted sites as soon as possible.

These are just a few examples of successes in Vietnam over the past year. We are encouraged by the fact that our investigation teams continue to discover significant information related to our missing and unaccounted-for personnel, and that our recovery teams and forensic scientists continue to recover and repatriate remains believed to be those of missing Americans.

But of course, even in the wake of these encouraging successes, the challenges are profound. The number of Vietnamese witnesses who die or become incapacitated due to age-related illnesses increases each year. Changing terrain and growing infrastructure make it increasingly difficult for witnesses to discern the loss sites after so many years. And we are always cognizant of the fact that, while the families of some of the missing receive answers each year, either in the form of identifiable remains or significant information on the fate of their loved ones, others wait. It is for those of you who wait that we continue to be vigilant, to be persistent, to analyze, and to cooperate, in order to do everything we can to obtain the fullest possible accounting of Americans missing from the Vietnam War, within the lifetimes of the immediate family members.

Thank you -- Until They Are Home.