

Southeast Asia – Trip Report

March 13 – 26, 2008

By

Senior Vice Commander-in-Chief Glen Gardner

BACKGROUND

On March 13, 2008, I, along with Assistant Adjutant General and Executive Director of the VFW Washington Office Robert E. Wallace, left the Continental United States to visit Hawaii, Thailand, Vietnam and Laos and returned home on Friday March 28, 2008.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this trip was to continue the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States' mandate to gain firsthand knowledge and facts of the ongoing US and host nation's efforts to resolve the fate of our missing and unaccounted for American personnel from the War in Vietnam. In addition to meeting with US military and diplomatic personnel, we had the opportunity to meet with veterans of the governments of Vietnam and Laos, as well as their respective government officials involved with the MIA issue and a non-government organization in Vietnam.

HAWAII

We arrived in Honolulu late on the afternoon of the 13th and were met at the airport by State Commander Richard Wong and his wife who gave us a traditional Hawaiian welcome.

The following day we participated in an early morning repatriation of remains of four Americans. The remains were two individuals from Vietnam, one from Laos and one from World War II. The ceremony consisted of full military honors for the individuals, only fitting for an American military person killed in the line of duty. It was a very moving experience and one that I will never forget.

Numerous military and civilians attend each of these repatriation ceremonies as a tribute to these brave individuals. I was especially pleased to see a high attendance of VFW and Auxiliary members showing their respect.

Once back on American soil, the remains are brought to the Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii (CILHI) located on Hickam Air Force Base for identification and return to their loved ones. CILHI is part of the Joint Personnel Accounting Command (JPAC).

From the Repatriation Ceremony we were brought to JPAC headquarters for a full command briefing on their operations, which included a tour and a detailed briefing on the operation of the Identification Laboratory.

The JPAC Command consists of 425 dedicated individuals headquartered in Hawaii. Detachment One is located in Bangkok, Thailand; Detachment Two in Hanoi, Vietnam; and Detachment Three in Vientiane, Laos. Detachment Four is the Worldwide Detachment and is located in Honolulu. JPAC's main mission is the recovery, identification and repatriation of the remains of Americans missing and unaccounted for from all wars. JPAC's chain of command is through the Pacific Command located in Hawaii.

The majority of JPAC's attention and resources have been dedicated to Southeast Asia, but as remains from World War II continue to be located, I believe we will see more assets focused in that direction as well. If and when the US is allowed back into North Korea, perhaps more resources will be devoted to that arena too.

The main concern of all Detachments is resolving the "Last-Known-Alive" cases. These are cases where Americans were photographed or believed to have survived a plane crash but were never returned home. Through dedicated communication, JPAC is also attempting to get DNA samples from family members of those missing and unaccounted for in order to assist in accelerating the identification process once remains are found. JPAC is also working diligently with its Vietnamese counterpart to allow for more underwater recovery operations. The primary unresolved issue is the use of American ships in territorial waters.

The US has 1,763 Americans unaccounted for in Southeast Asia. Vietnam has 1,353, Cambodia 55, Laos 348 and China 7 missing Americans.

For more detailed information on JPAC please go to www.jpac.pacom.mil.

Following our JPAC briefing, we joined our escort for lunch. This young man was a Reservist who was activated and assigned to Pacific Command Public Affairs. He is a veteran of Bosnia and Kosovo, and he has been to both Iraq and Afghanistan as a television reporter, his civilian profession. He resides and works in the Watertown, New York area, which is the home of the 10th Mountain Division and Ft. Drum.

After lunch we were taken to the Headquarters United States Pacific Command and were given a very frank briefing by Major General Vern T. Miyagi, Mobilization Assistant to the Commander US Pacific Command. The General is a member of the Hawaii National Guard and has been mobilized because of the war.

Pacific Command is responsible for an area that includes, 51 percent of the world, 60 percent of the world's population, 41 countries, 20 territories and possessions, and ten US territories, as well as dealing with the six largest armed forces on the globe: Peoples Republic of China, United States, Russia, India, North Korea, and the Republic of Korea. In addition, 27 percent of US trade takes place in Pacific Command's area of responsibility. When the African Command stands up, PACOM will lose a portion of its area of responsibility.

Forces from the Command from all branches of the military are serving in Iraq and Afghanistan and other parts of the region. They are conducting fighting missions and humanitarian missions, as well as a variety of other operations.

In addition to the war, the Command faces several important issues: maintaining stability in the region through diplomatic and joint military operations with friendly nations, the threat of terrorism, and illegal trafficking of drugs, weapons and people, to name a few.

After the briefing it was obvious to me that the US military needs to tell their story better. Many of the tasks required at all levels of our Armed Forces, from war fighting, to diplomatic missions, to trade issues, our military personnel are out front representing our nation as they maintain our national and homeland security. In my view, most Americans are unaware of what we ask of these volunteers and how brilliantly they perform on a daily basis.

Following the briefings, we returned to our hotel, had an early dinner. Early the next day we left Hawaii for Bangkok, Thailand.

THAILAND

We arrived in Bangkok late Sunday evening and were met by representatives of Detachment One and brought to our hotel.

Early the following morning, we were escorted to the United States Embassy where we spent the morning in briefings with the Detachment Commander Lt. Colonel Peter Huddle, USAF, the US Ambassador Eric John and Rear Admiral Donna Crisp, USN, the new Commander of JPAC who was in Bangkok for her first visit since taking command.

Detachment One is responsible for the administrative and logistical support required to conduct the field operations in Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Thailand and Burma. In addition to serving as the logistical hub for operations in Southeast Asia, the Detachment has responsibility for the investigative and field operations in Cambodia and Burma.

During our meeting with the Ambassador, he gave us his very candid assessment of the relationship with Thailand, as well as US relations in the region. I found him to be a very honest and straightforward individual.

We then spent an hour meeting with Rear Admiral Donna Crisp, US Navy, the new Commander of JPAC. The Admiral was very open with us concerning her vision for the Command and her desire to continue to expand the Command's relationship with the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the US. She very candidly explained that she and many are hopeful that the Command is once again allowed into North Korea and other parts

of the world in order to conduct field operations and to bring missing and unaccounted for service members' remains home.

I believe this would be very positive; however, if this does happen resources are likely to be so strained that we may see a reduction in activity in Southeast Asia, even though there is still much work to be done in that area of the world. If we do see a reduction of activity, then we must voice our unified concern and work hard for additional funding to assist in bringing closure to more families quicker.

After meeting with the Admiral, we hosted a luncheon at a local Bangkok Hotel for 30 VFW members, Colonel Huddle, Admiral Crisp and her aide. During lunch we had the opportunity to discuss several VFW matters that the local folks were concerned about including how to change the face of the VFW.

The remainder of the day we relaxed before our early morning flight to Hanoi.

VIETNAM

We were met and escorted by members of the US Vietnam Friendship Society, a group that the US Embassy uses to help American visitors get around the country. VFW has used them for a number of years because of their reliability, and quality translation capabilities.

The following day we started out with an early morning meeting with Tran Dac Loi, Executive Vice President of Friendship Organizations, which the US Vietnam Friendship Society is a part of. This non-governmental organization is very politically tied to the Vietnamese government as a number of their leaders are part of the Communist Party hierarchy.

We discussed the changes in Vietnam from the environmental issues in the country, to the development of resorts on China Beach, and the recent tourism expansion and infrastructure improvements to the country. We also also discussed, rather openly, the MIA issue and the importance the VFW places upon it.

Vietnam has approximately 300,000 of their own still missing and unaccounted for from the war years. While he did not say so, I believe that he clearly understands why the VFW continues to visit Vietnam and push their government for increased cooperation, access to more archives, and underwater investigations of those unaccounted for.

Friendship Organizations was very thankful for the VFW's support of normalized relations and trade expansion between the countries. They also encouraged us to have Vietnam Veterans and their families visit Vietnam.

Our next stop was The Veterans Association of Vietnam, where we met with (Retired) Col. Ta Hung. The Colonel is the Director of External Affairs for the association and is a former Defense Attaché of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in Hungary and India.

We had a very good discussion of the MIA issue, as well as veteran-to-veteran issues concerning health care and programs for all of their nation's veterans. The Colonel also informed us that the Vietnam Veterans Association is a member of the World Veterans Association. I found this very interesting as well as the fact that they participate in conferences held by the organization, especially in Southeast Asia. It is clear that the Vietnam Veterans Association wants very much to be seen in a positive manner by other nation's veterans.

Colonel Ta Hung is a veteran of 1972 battles, and he stressed that it is good that former enemies can now be friends and help expand relations and understanding between nations. He emphasized that Vietnam does not discriminate between former South Vietnam veterans and those veterans from the North.

We discussed at length the VFW's intense desire for more access for JPAC to assist in bringing closure to the MIA issue sooner rather than later.

During our meeting, the Colonel raised concerns he had about a recent US Court decision concerning the rite of Vietnamese people to bring a lawsuit against US chemical companies over the use of Agent Orange during the war in their country. Agent Orange is a very hot political topic in Vietnam, just as it continues to be in the US.

I thanked him for his continued cooperation and reiterated that while government-to-government problems may still exist, we veterans do not experience such problems. We request that the Veterans Association continue to assist in helping the US find answers to the questions of missing Americans from the war. I also reminded the Colonel that VFW members in years past have come forth with information they had concerning Vietnamese who may be missing and this information has routinely been passed to their government.

We discussed at length MIA issues and the need for further expansion of cooperation between the US and Vietnam. I raised the issues of restricted areas, underwater recovery excavations, and increased access to Vietnam archives by the US government. I pointed out that, as we all get older, those who may have the answers – on both sides – need to put the past behind them and come forward with information they may have concerning missing combatants.

This very positive conversation was a meeting of former advisories concerned about the welfare of their fellow veterans who are still unaccounted for from the War in Vietnam.

After a luncheon we hosted with JPAC members in Hanoi (where we discussed our trip in detail), we traveled to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for a meeting.

At the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, we met with Pham Binh Minh, Deputy Minister. Minister Minh was very candid with us and I used the opportunity to re-

emphasize the VFW's concerns for more access to areas of the country and archival research.

He was also very knowledgeable of the recent Agent Orange court decision as well as issues of human rights violations as raised by Congressman Chris Smith. He was very offended by Congressman Smith's bill which would hold funds from Vietnam because of alleged human rights violations. I suggested that he have the US Ambassador from Vietnam meet with Congressman Smith and invite him to visit Vietnam.

Mr. Minh also stated that people in towns and villages hear about Agent Orange and alleged human rights issues and are very concerned that the US government may not be cooperating with Vietnam. In essence, they wonder, why should they cooperate with the US on the MIA issue? I explained to him I could understand some may feel that way, but the MIA issue is a humanitarian issue and is looked upon as such by the citizens of the US as well as the world. I stated that I sincerely hoped that he would work to rid that perception from their minds and urge full cooperation. (Mr. Minh's statement concerns me because the majority of the population of Vietnam had not yet even been born at the time the war was taking place.) At the conclusion of our meeting, Mr. Minh told us that the Vietnamese government and people are watching the US elections and are neutral on the outcome. He then noted that Senator John Mc Cain is very familiar to the Vietnamese.

We then visited Vietnam's Office for Seeking Missing Persons and met with Standing Deputy Director Mr. Dinh Cong Chinh and his staff. The office is a joint effort of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Defense, and Ministry of Public Security. These are the ministries that JPAC and DPMO work with in order to visit excavation sites for investigations and excavations.

I thanked them for the cooperation our government has received from them and explained that the VFW understands that both the US and Vietnamese see this as a very sensitive humanitarian issue. I also explained that US veterans want this issue to come to closure as quickly as possible, but it will not unless the US gets more access to records and the country.

We discussed the need for information from our members and veterans as a whole that may be useful to the Vietnamese and the need for the Vietnamese government to urge their citizens to do the same. We also talked about restricted areas in the Central Highlands area, where there may be local instability and security concerns the government has for anyone going into those areas, as well as the recent Agent Orange court decision. In addition, we discussed the need for underwater excavations which, in principle, they agree to.

They also stressed that the cooperation and relations with the US government are always improving. Areas of the country which may be restricted now may not be in the future. Mr. Chinh did state that if the US had the need for specific information concerning an American unaccounted for, they would do their best to provide it. We

also discussed the "Last-Known-Alive" cases where Americans were seen, photographed or perhaps captured, but were never returned to the US.

On the morning of March 20, 2008, we traveled to Gia Lam Airport in Hanoi for a helicopter flight to Lang Son province (two hours north of Hanoi) to visit Last Known Alive Case #0706. Due to poor weather, we had to drive to the excavation site.

Case # 0706 is an F-4C aircraft crash that occurred on May 22, 1967 during a nighttime airstrike on the Northeast Railroad near Kep in Lang Son Province. The flight leader observed a large explosion east of the target, and the crew saw no parachutes and heard no electronic beacon signals. During previous excavation work, joint recovery teams found pieces of aircraft wreckage and life support equipment consistent with an F-4. Analysis of information in a Vietnamese wartime document correlates the site with Case # 0706. The site has been investigated four times in March 1994.

We visited and were briefed at the site by JPAC team members, met with the US team members and the Vietnamese at the site. The site is located on dangerous terrain on the side of a hill. The Vietnamese also had a luncheon in our honor at the site where we had the opportunity to discuss at length the recovery work being done throughout Vietnam.

Upon returning from Lang Son province, we changed clothes and visited the United States Embassy in Hanoi. At the Embassy we met with Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM), Jonathon Aloisi who extended regrets from the Ambassador who was on travel. We discussed the changes in Vietnam since the war, and the VFW's concern for the MIA issue. We reiterated our concern for more archival research and access to more of the country for investigative and excavation work. Mr. Aloisi said the hesitation on the part of Vietnam to allow US ships into their waters for excavation purposes is caused by their concern for security. US military and diplomatic personnel need to put these fears to rest in order that the recovery of Americans lost at sea can proceed.

During our meeting with Mr. Aloisi we discussed in some detail a number of programs the US has to aid the Vietnamese people. These include, but are not limited to, programs for Agent Orange cleanup of contaminated areas and health projects, forensic assistance and disaster relief.

Vietnam is a one-party state that has a high degree of corruption. China is their largest trade partner, and the people are hard working internet savvy.

The DCM suggested that VFW request a meeting with Defense Ministry officials on the next trip because he believed that the VFW breaks down walls with our veteran-to-veteran dialogue. I believe he is right on target as the VFW never tries to be or speak for the US government; we only speak as concerned veterans who want proper closure on the issue of America's MIA's from the war in Vietnam.

Our next and final meeting of the day was with the US Defense Attaché, US Army Colonel Mark B. Chakwin. Colonel Chakwin told us that the Vietnamese military equipment is old and the Vietnamese are not sensitized to global military operations. Terrorism is nonexistent due to internal controls and the bad guys are watched and stopped before they can do any harm. There is no judicial system as we know it. He also agreed that VFW should request meetings with Ministry of Defense officials on the next visit to Vietnam.

On the 21st we were briefed at JPAC Headquarters in Hanoi on their mission, concerns and successes. Marine Corps Major Lance Dowd, Deputy Commander of the unit, gave us a detailed briefing. He confirmed to us that the Vietnamese are doing some unilateral work in restricted areas with US oversight. Two of these missions have been completed. We are presently negotiating with the Vietnamese government to do additional under-water investigative and recovery excavations. One has been completed, but the obstacles are the changes that have occurred to the sea bottom due to storms and over time.

After the JPAC briefing we toured the Vietnamese Military History Museum and the Hoa Lo Prison (Hanoi Hilton). If anyone wants to see history rewritten, they need only to visit these two locations in downtown Hanoi.

The following day we flew to Ho Chi Minh City and spent Saturday evening and Easter Sunday in the city formerly known as Saigon. Early Monday afternoon we departed for Vientiane, Laos where we spent the next three days.

LAOS

We arrived in Vientiane late on Monday afternoon and were met by US Embassy and JPAC officials and taken to our hotel. The following day we had a full schedule of briefings and meetings.

We first met with the Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM), Mary Grace McGeehan who gave us regrets from the Ambassador who was on travel. The DCM expressed the full cooperation of the Embassy for the JPAC mission. She stated that they have strong working relationships with their Lao counterparts. Development is sparse, and the World Bank is working to make Laos a better place. The US is giving funds for unexploded ordinance work, counter narcotics work and JPAC support.

Following the DCM meeting we left the US Embassy and visited the Lao Veterans Federation. We met with BG Somphone Keomixay, Vice President of the Lao Veterans Federation. The President of the Federation was traveling in Vietnam and sent his best wishes to us.

The Lao Veterans Federation meets with Vietnam Veterans Association as well as the World's Veterans Organization. I thanked the General for meeting with us and expressed our gratitude to him for the cooperation JPAC receives from the Lao

government and Lao veterans. We asked for additional cooperation from veterans who, better than anyone, understand the horrors of war. We specifically asked the General to ask his members if they have any information on burial sites or crash sites of American service members. We pledged to continue to work together to help our respective governments solve the issue of those Americans still listed as MIA from the war in Vietnam. The General was very receptive.

Following the meeting we had a windshield tour of Vientiane followed by a meeting at the Foreign Ministry with H.E. Mr. Phonsavath Boupnda, Deputy Foreign Minister. The DCM joined us for this meeting.

The meeting with the Deputy Minister centered on the MIA issue, as well as changes that are occurring throughout the country. We thanked the Minister for the cooperation given by the Lao government and explained why the MIA issue is so important to the VFW. The Minister has been involved with the MIA issue for a number of years, and past VFW delegations have met with him, so he totally understands our commitment to the issue. It is also good that we continue to send the same unified humanitarian message each time VFW delegations meet with Lao as well as Vietnamese government and non-governmental officials: We are veterans concerned about the fate of our missing service members.

After the meeting we entertained at lunch JPAC staff to show our appreciation for the daily work they perform to bring closure to American families of those still unaccounted for in Laos. We also discussed our visit to Laos in detail.

We then received in-country briefings by Embassy staff. There is powerful provincial governance in Laos. The Prime Minister's platform is anti-corruption, change of governance. The country has poor medical infrastructure, and avian flu is around the country, which forces the US Center for Disease Control to have a full-time presence in Laos. They have no terrorism but do have money laundering issues. The Lao government wants to join the World Trade Organization by 2010. Money is not flaunted as most citizens are very poor. The government is in complete control of the country which has a mineral and energy wealth which has not yet been fully realized. Foreign investment in Laos is limited.

Following the country team briefings, we were briefed in detail on the operations of JPAC Detachment Three located in Vientiane, Laos where 348 Americans are still listed as MIAs. Of these cases, 139 are pending excavation, 159 are still being investigated, 41 are in the category of "no further pursuit," which means field work has been completed and no remains were found. Of the original 572 Americans unaccounted for in Laos, 224 have been identified. We conduct five Joint Field Activities per year in Laos.

The work in Laos is very dangerous due to the terrain changes over the past forty-plus years and the number of unexploded ordinances throughout the country. Due to the

location of Laos, right on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, a large number of bombing raids were made on Laotian territory.

On the evening of the 25th the DCM of the US Embassy, Mary Grace McGeehan hosted a dinner in our honor with some US and Lao diplomatic personnel attending. The dinner conversation was about the MIA issue and the cooperation the US is receiving from the Lao government.

The next day we were escorted to the Heliport where we were flown to Aiangkhouang and Houaphan Provinces to visit two Joint Excavation sites. Due to the weather in the area of the sites, the JPAC team did not travel this day. We lunched and met with them where they were staying in a nearby village.

Following our meeting we flew with the JPAC Commander and key staff for each site to the sites to walk them and see them personally.

The first investigation is of a crash that took place on December 30, 1969 of an F-4D aircraft. The mission was reconnaissance over a suspected storage area. The aircraft crashed a quarter mile from the suspected site and exploded. No parachutes were seen and neither radio calls nor beeper signals were heard. An electronic search of the area was unsuccessful. The site is large as parts of the aircraft have been found scattered across a wide area. The pilot and copilot are missing.

The second site was a U-17 aircraft that was conducting an orientation flight over Laos on April 24, 1970. The aircraft was hit by 37mm AAA. While returning to base, the aircraft failed to clear a ridge, hit some tree tops, inverted, crashed, and burned on impact. No survivors were observed. The pilot and copilot are missing. The terrain at the site is very rough and is on the side of a hill, making recovery dangerous and even more time consuming.

The following day we traveled to Bangkok for the night before returning to CONUS early the morning of March 27th.

CONCLUSIONS

The VFW must continue trips to Southeast Asia in order to continue our dialogue with Vietnamese, Laotian and Cambodian diplomatic personnel and their nation's veterans concerning our humanitarian interest in the MIA/Unaccounted for US military personnel from the war in Vietnam. Since 1991, the VFW has visited Vietnam and periodically Laos and Cambodia to re-emphasize our commitment to the fullest possible accounting of missing Americans.

This trip afforded us the opportunity to meet with dedicated individuals from the US Armed Forces and DOD civilians, and State Department officials who are making a difference every day for the families of those still unaccounted for throughout the world by performing recovery operations in rough and dangerous terrain.

The JPAC military personnel we met are a true example of professional, sincere, dedicated and determined individuals who are ensuring that their fellow service members will not be forgotten. The interesting point is that none of the JPAC military or civilian personnel going out on excavations ever served in Vietnam. They are doing it because it is the right thing to do.

I want to thank everyone from the Departments of Defense and State who helped our staff in planning this worthwhile trip, as well as the host country's diplomatic personnel that met with us.

I also want to thank the Commander-in-Chief for allowing me to travel to Southeast Asia on this very important and noble mission.

This concludes my report.