

Russia / Poland / Italy – Trip Report

October 11 - 22, 2008

By

Commander-in-Chief Glen Gardner

BACKGROUND

On October 11, 2008, I, accompanied by Assistant Adjutant General and Washington Office Executive Director Robert E. Wallace, traveled to Russia, Poland and Italy. We returned to the United States on October 22, 2008.

PURPOSE

The trip gave us the opportunity to learn firsthand the progress being made on the POW/MIA issue with the Russian government, receive briefings from US diplomatic and military officials, meet with veteran organization members in Russia and Poland, and visit with US military personnel stationed in Italy. During our trip we also had the opportunity to visit with members of VFW Post 8862 in Vicenza, Italy.

In addition to the above, we traveled with a letter urging the Russian government to address the fate of a World War II US Army veteran last known alive in a Russian military hospital. Our goal was to give the letter to all we met with, and then give it to the Director of the Military Archives and Museum in St. Petersburg. We accomplished this, and all who received copies of the letter pledged support to determine the fate of this brave American.

MOSCOW, RUSSIA

The purpose of our visit to Moscow was to discuss with US and Russian governmental personnel the progress being made on the resolution of US military personnel from World War II, the Cold War, and the Korean and Vietnam Wars that are still unaccounted for. We also met with the leadership of two prominent Russian veterans' organizations to voice our concern about the lack of progress from the Russian government in resolving the fate of missing American service members.

The US government believes that one of the keys to resolving the fate of missing American military personnel from WWII, Korea, the Cold War and Vietnam is gaining access to Russian military archives. The United States-Russia Joint Commission on Prisoners of War and Missing In Action (USRJC) was set up by President George H.W. Bush and former Russian President Boris Yelstin to accomplish this mission. The Commission was formed at the Presidential level in order to gain the correct access in a timely manner. Under the administration of Russian President Vladimir Putin, the Commission was lowered in status, and in June 2004 the Russian Federation eliminated their staff which shut down the Commission.

One of the priorities of this trip to Russia, as well as past trips, has been to encourage all we come in contact with on the Russian side to urge their government to reestablish the Commission and move the process forward. We were informed that a proposal to accomplish this has been given to the US from the Russians. US government personnel are reviewing the proposal to ensure that all of the necessary requirements are met. The VFW is hopeful that an agreement can be reached and the work of the Commission can resume.

The Joint Commission Support Directorate (JCSD) of the Defense Prisoner of War/Missing Personnel Office (DPMO), based at the US Embassy in Moscow, and headed by US Army Lt. Colonel Larry Beisel, along with Mr. Henry Eastman, his deputy, and their staffs, support the US-Russia Joint Commission as well as conduct archival research and field investigations. LTC Beisel and members of his staff were our Escort Officers during our time in Russia.

On the morning of October 13, 2008, at the request of Mr. Alexander Zakharov of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, we met with Mr. Leonid A. Kazinets, the President of a leading Russian construction corporation specializing in elite business and housing construction.

Mr. Kazinets was interested in learning from us how the US Department of Veterans Affairs constructs and leases space for medical centers, outpatient clinics, nursing homes and other facilities. We discussed the overall structure of VA and the construction and lease arrangements we were familiar with.

Following our meeting, we went directly to Red Square and participated in a joint wreath-laying ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier with members of the Committee of Warrior Internationalists and the Combat Brotherhood, two prominent Russian veteran organizations. The Tomb is in honor of a World War II veteran.

We next participated in a working lunch with the Combat Brotherhood Veterans Organization. Our meeting was with Retired Colonel Gennady Shorokhov, Vice Chairman, and a number of their leaders. We have a formal Agreement of Friendship with them, and a number of their leadership have visited the VFW Washington Office and attended our National Convention in Salt Lake City. In addition, we have an agreement with them to urge all of the world's veterans to support their respective governments in the war on terror.

Opening remarks were made by Mr. Shorokhov. And although these remarks were very political in nature, he emphasized that veteran-to-veteran communications were necessary in order to assist veterans of all nations, many who suffer similar disabilities. Veterans should be able to put politics aside.

We requested that the Combat Brotherhood urge their government to reestablish the US- Russia Joint Commission on Prisoners of War and Missing In Action. We emphasized the need for this to become a reality once again due to the humanitarian

issue the Commission addresses. We also emphasized that the MIA issue is one of the VFW's highest priorities.

The Combat Brotherhood pledged to work with DPMO staff in Moscow until the Russian government acts. During the meeting we also took the opportunity to request assistance in determining the fate of an American Army soldier who was last known alive in a Russian medical facility during WWII. Mr. Shorokhov accepted the letter and pledged to obtain the information requested.

The Combat Brotherhood works with other organizations urging their government to provide more services to veterans. They acknowledge that veterans are not a priority with the Russian government. The goal of all Russian veterans, but especially those who served in Afghanistan, is to change that. Members of the organization have visited Washington and have received VA briefings on health care, benefits, and the cemetery administration, as well as a tour of the Washington (DC) VA Medical Center. They know what their goal is.

Mr. Shorokhov will be visiting Washington, DC in February 2009 with a delegation of Russian veterans, and he has asked that we help facilitate meetings with VA, DPMO, and others while they are here. We agreed to assist as much as possible.

We next visited and received briefings from the retired General-Lieutenant Ruslan Aushev, the Chairman of the Commonwealth of Independent States Committee of Warrior Internationalists. This organization is very concerned with rehabilitation issues of veterans and the MIA issue of Russian veterans who served in Afghanistan. We also have an Agreement of Friendship with this organization, and they too have visited the VFW in Washington.

General Aushev started the meeting out by thanking VFW for the opportunity to attend our recent National Convention in Orlando. He also expressed his thanks for the hospitality and explained that he has reported to all the success he witnessed at the VFW Convention. He informed us that his organization is planning to hold a congress in May 2009 and will invite the VFW to attend.

General Aushev promised to expand the efforts of his organization to support the work of the USRJC. He also spoke at length of the desire of members of the Federation Council (Upper House of Parliament) and the Minister of Foreign Affairs to support the workings of the USRJC and that access would be granted when requested. (The US Government is currently reviewing the documents sent from the Russian side to determine if they allow us to perform the needed work.) We thanked the General for his work on behalf of all American families who have loved ones unaccounted for.

I then presented the General with a copy of the letter we carried requesting information on the American soldier last known alive in a Russian military hospital. General Aushev pledged to do all he could to find the information.

During our conversation, I told the General that I had recently visited China and requested that the Chinese urge the North Koreans to work with the US government to resolve the fate of missing Americans in Korea. General Aushev replied that his organization has a representative in Korea and he would work through that channel also. He also noted that other channels may be available such as Federation Council Members or Friendship Societies.

The General then requested a reciprocal request from the US side. He stated that there are 271 missing Russian service members from the war in Afghanistan. His organization travels to Afghanistan three to four times a year on the MIA issue. He believes that maybe 30 still may be alive and that some of them may want to stay. He asked if we could request assistance from US and Coalition Commands that come in contact with local residents in investigating the fate of those personnel. He also requested that the US government assist with DNA identification.

General Aushev stressed that they were only seeking information, and that if assistance could be rendered by the US Armed Forces, it would go a long way in countering disinformation and strike a blow against those who say a second Cold War is brewing. He then added that this work is a sacred duty. I pledged to contact the Department of Defense on this matter and that the fate of missing and unaccounted-for Americans was a very important mission for the VFW. We both agreed that veterans must help veterans.

We then discussed a variety of issues veterans face. Mental health issues, especially for the Afghanistan veterans, are a major concern for them. They are also working to create health care for veterans and a Ministry of Veterans Affairs. We discussed in detail the new GI Bill legislation and the budget for the US Department of Veterans Affairs. The General stated that the \$90 billion budget for the US Department of Veteran Affairs was twice the national budget of Ukraine.

General Aushev suggested that an International Conference be held with nations who have fought in Iraq and Afghanistan to discuss issues and share information on health and readjustment issues of returning veterans. He also suggested that the first conference be held in the United States, that the number of participants be limited, and that other US Veterans Organizations be included. I agreed to have the Washington staff look into this proposal.

Our next meeting was with the Federation Council Committee on Defense and Security. The Federation Council is their Upper House of Parliament, equal to the US Senate. The meeting was chaired by Deputy Chairman Major-General Viktor Nikolayevich. Three other members of the Committee were also present.

The Chairman opened the meeting by outlining the responsibilities of the Committee and its five subcommittees. He stated that the Russian Federation has accomplished a great deal in the past few years to ensure the social protection of service members, and they understand that those who serve should be fairly compensated. He applauded the

support the US government provides for its veterans and acknowledged that the US had solutions to problems Russia has as well.

I thanked the Chairman and told the Committee how thankful US veterans are for the benefits they are entitled to, and that the VFW would be happy to share information on veterans programs with them.

I then presented the Chairman with the letter concerning the fate of the unaccounted-for veteran of WWII. I emphasized the importance of reestablishing the USRJC and gaining access to Russian archives which contain information on missing US personnel. I requested the Committee's assistance in reestablishing the Russian side of the USRJC and restoring US access to the archives. The Chairman thought the issue had been resolved but noted that work could not be accomplished without access. He also stated that the Committee would support our request for information on the unaccounted-for American soldier.

Members of the Committee asked a variety of questions concerning the structure and funding of US veterans organizations, and questions concerning the VA. The Chairman closed the meeting by confirming the Committee's desire to work closely with the US government to resolve the POW/MIA issue, and to continue the development of veterans' organizations in Russia.

Following the meeting with the Federation Council, I was interviewed by two Russian journalists. None of the questions were related to veterans issues or the MIA issue, but rather, focused on the "hot button" political issues between the US and Russia. I answered all questions by reiterating the VFW mission of veterans and the POW/MIA issue, and I reminded them of the fact we are not part of the US government.

The last event of the day was a dinner hosted by General Aushev in our honor. Attending the dinner were members of his organization, Mr. Shorokhov, and two members of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The following day we started out at the US Embassy, where we received country briefings from Embassy personnel and a briefing by the Defense Attaché.

The Defense Attaché gave us an excellent overview of the Russian military. We perform joint exercises with them, but coordination and fighting the red tape, at times, can be very difficult. The treatment and training of their conscript Army is questionable, as is the manner in which former military personnel are treated by the government. Russia has no Department of Veterans Affairs, so veterans receive very little if any benefits. The Russian military will be downsizing the number of General Officers they have over the next few years, and a conscript soldier will only serve for a period of one year.

Training and state-of-the-art military equipment are lacking, as is their lack of current technology used in war fighting. The Russians are very concerned about our missile

defense system, as well as our relationships with Ukraine and Georgia, particularly in light of the recent Russian invasion of Georgia.

The demographics of the country are very disturbing; over 700,000 people each year leave the country. Life span for the average male is 57 due, in large part, to behavioral lifestyle. A large percentage of the population has HIV, and many of these individuals are under the age of 30. Tuberculosis affects almost half of the population, and alcoholism is very high. Russia also still has a human trafficking problem.

While Moscow has the second largest number of billionaires (after the United States), they also have a very large number of millionaires, so when you are in public you see very nicely dressed individuals, many of whom drive BMWs and Mercedes Benz vehicles.

Corruption continues to be a major issue in the country, and until serious efforts are made to clean this up, there will remain huge difference in incomes of individuals.

There is some US investment in Russia; however, the bureaucracy and laws discourage many companies from investing. The country is rich in oil and gas with areas such as Siberia still to be explored. The result is they do not look for a lot of foreign investment or partners. The world economic crisis is hitting Russia hard.

Russia has relationships with a number of nations we consider to be in support of terrorism. It is believed they do so to be an alternative to NATO. They are, however, working with the US in containing Weapons of Mass Destruction as well as Chemical and Biological Warfare. They sell weapons to rogue nations, yet are concerned about terrorism, as they have witnessed it firsthand in their own country.

The civilian leadership of the country is all communist, and the closest advisors to Mr. Putin are former KGB folks. While not President anymore, Prime Minister Putin has a 70-percent approval rating because he is seen as a strong leader, and many are making much more money than ever before.

The next US Administration needs to figure out how to handle Russia.

Our next visit was a personal tour of the Grand Kremlin Palace. The tour was arranged for us by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Following the tour, we met with the US Ambassador to Russia, John Berle. He gave us an insider's view of the US-Russian relationship. We discussed the meetings we had while in Moscow, and what we felt was accomplished and what we hoped to accomplish in St. Petersburg. The Ambassador thanked us for coming to Russia and fostering a relationship between Russian and American veterans. He felt the relationship would help the MIA issue as well as other issues.

That evening we were the guests of honor at a reception held at the Defense Attaché's home. BG Henry Nowak hosted us and a number of his staff, along with members of two prominent Russian veterans' organizations, two Ministry of Defense officials, and a member of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

ST. PETERSBURG, RUSSIA

The following day we traveled to St. Petersburg for meetings with Russian veterans who served in Afghanistan. This was also the first VFW visit to the Military Archives and Museum.

The afternoon of the 15th of October we met with members of the Union of Afghan War Veterans (AFGHANVET). AFGHANVET President Said Tulakov presided over the meeting, which was hosted by St. Petersburg Submariners Club Chairman Captain Igor Kurdin. Captain Kurdin welcomed us and expressed his pleasure with the relationships his organization had with US veterans' organizations. He stated that in the past he has assisted the USRJC in its work.

Mr. Tulakov was very appreciative of our visit because it gave both sides the opportunity to exchange views and ideas on veterans and MIA issues. AFGHANVET has 3,000 members and, while small, is very involved in the issues affecting veterans. He also thanked VFW for the hospitality he received when he visited the VFW Washington Office a couple of years ago.

The discussion revolved around veterans' health and welfare issues, veteran service organizations, the US Department of Veterans Affairs, and the POW/MIA issue. Mr. Tulakov told us that veterans now hold high positions in government in Russia and this has helped to address many veteran issues. He also emphasized that the veterans of the Wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya had to fight for their rights.

Mr. Tulakov then presented me with a list of Soviet service members missing in action from the war in Afghanistan and requested any help the US government could provide. I agreed to pass the list to Department of Defense officials, which I have done.

The following day we visited the Ministry of Defense Military Medical Archives and Museum and met with Colonel Anatoly Budko, the Director. I expressed our hope that the USRJC would soon be operating again, and that the US would have access to the archives. I stressed the fact that many families are still waiting for answers about the fate of their loved ones. I then presented to the Colonel a copy of the letter of request for information on a US Army WWII veteran last known alive in a Russian military hospital. The Colonel immediately gave the letter to his Deputy (the lead researcher in the facility), who began working the request before we had even left the facility.

We were given a detailed PowerPoint presentation of the facility and a tour of the museum. One interesting point of this visit is that the Colonel met with us, even though he never received the required authorization from the Ministry of Defense.

Following the meeting at the museum, we met with the US Consul General Sheila Gwaltney in her office. We discussed the situation in Russia and the MIA issue. The Consul General was very appreciative of the VFW visit and thanked us for our work on behalf of those Americans still listed unaccounted for from all wars.

We then accepted an invitation for lunch at the headquarters of the AFGHANVET with Mr. Tulakov, where we discussed veterans' benefits and funding veterans' organizations.

The following day we left Russia for Warsaw, Poland. Prior to doing so, we had the opportunity to meet with a retired Soviet Admiral who does archival research on contract for the US side. The Admiral was very sincere and very dedicated to the POW/MIA issue.

WARSAW, POLAND

Our plane was late arriving in Warsaw the afternoon of October 17, 2008, and, as a result, we missed our meetings at the US Embassy. We were, however, brought by our escort, WO2 Dylan Hencir, to the Embassy lounge, where we had the opportunity to have informal conversations with the Defense Attaché and other embassy staff.

The following morning we met with one female and five male veterans of the Polish Army during World War II. The conversation centered on the history of Poland and World War II, and the benefits (or lack thereof) for Polish Army veterans. Health care, pharmacy prices and other benefits were discussed, as was the POW/MIA issue. The biggest problem facing World War II veterans in Poland is financial, and they said that the government does not have funds to assist them.

One veteran asked if we could get the US Department of Veterans Affairs to work with Poland and share the medical advances the US has developed in treating all veterans, but especially the older veterans. We stated we would pass the request on to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

The veterans also expressed the need to make life better for the new generation of veterans.

I explained what the VFW does, how we are organized and our key goals. I also explained our deep interest in the POW/MIA issue.

After meeting with the veterans, I could not help but think how proud they were of their service, how they wanted the younger generation to learn about World War II, and how they were the Greatest Generation of Poland. Their respect for America was very evident, and they looked to us as the symbol of freedom.

Following this meeting we met with Daniel Kubas, President of the Association of Personnel Wounded and Injured During Military Missions Abroad. Mr. Kubas is a veteran of Iraq, where he was wounded.

Since Poland broke away from Soviet control, many citizens have served in UN, NATO, and European Union missions. These missions are not recognized by the Polish government and veterans of these missions -- including Iraq and Afghanistan -- are not given medals or benefits. Mr. Kubas and his organization are working to change this, and he feels he has like-minded partners in the Polish Ministry of National Defense.

We also discussed veteran health issues, specifically mental health concerns, as well as the issue of alcoholism among Polish veterans. In addition, we discussed the POW/MIA issue.

Mr. Kubas requested we send him any information we felt might be beneficial to him and his fellow veterans and their families, which we will do. I was impressed that he and his fiancé traveled more than 600 kilometers to meet with us in Warsaw.

The following day we left Warsaw for Vicenza, Italy to visit US Army troops and VFW members of VFW Post 8862.

VICENZA, ITALY

On arrival in Venice we were met by Past Department of Europe Commander Peter Luste, his wife Katie, and Department of Europe Senior Vice Commander Tom Buffington, and taken to Vicenza where we were housed.

The following day we spent with the US Army, where we received Command Briefings on the United States Army Southern European Task Force (Airborne), had lunch and visited with a number of troops. In addition, we visited and were briefed at the Warrior Transition Unit and the USO facility. We were also given a tour and briefing of the Armed Forces Network, and I was interviewed about the VFW and the programs we have to support the troops. In addition, I made a few Public Service Announcements (PSAs) that the network will run throughout Europe and in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Command is home to the famous 173rd Airborne Brigade, which has been in existence since the 1950s. The 173rd is being assigned to the European Command, which is a rapid reaction Army-led joint task force capable of being deployed within 24 hours of notification. They work closely with the host nation, as well as other NATO nations in exercises and deployments. Their pride in their unit and their service to this nation is evident when speaking with them and watching their actions. The Command has been to Afghanistan and Iraq a number of times. The stress on service members and their families is high, and the Army has programs to address all of these issues. We discussed issues the new African Command will face, as well as what the European Command presently faces.

The base is moving forward with plans to improve housing, medical facilities and quality-of-life facilities for the soldiers and their families. New construction was ongoing.

We lunched with soldiers who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, and had very open and frank discussions with them. They were most appreciative of the new GI Bill and were up to date on the changes. A number of them expressed an interest in obtaining a quality education after their service.

We were also briefed by the Deputy Garrison Commander, who is a civilian DOD employee. He discussed the improvements in quality of life being made to the base for the troops and their families.

Next we toured and were briefed on the Warrior Transition Unit and how the USO works closely with them. The unit has a number of warriors who returned from the battlefield with Traumatic Brain Injury, PTSD and other disabilities. Fellow soldiers act as the disabled soldiers' advocates and case managers, which I believe is very positive. Some of the warriors are medically discharged and others remain in the Army.

While touring the USO facility, the Director mentioned that she needed a surround sound system, which I purchased in the PX for them in the name of the VFW.

Everyone we met in an Army leadership position thanked us for what the VFW does for the troops and their families, especially when they are deployed. Post 8862 is a very important part of this military community, and everyone greatly appreciates their work.

That evening, VFW Post 8862 hosted a dinner in our honor. Fifty-five persons attended the dinner, where I had the opportunity to speak to those assembled and initiate one new member into the VFW. The Post has a membership in excess of 1,400. I also had the opportunity to meet individually with all assembled and address any issues they had.

The evening was very enjoyable and concluded our trip to Europe. It is always a pleasure to meet with US military members and VFW members and their families.

We sincerely appreciated the hospitality and friendship exhibited by all.

CONCLUSION

I continue to be honored to represent the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States everywhere I travel, but especially when I am able to reach out to our brave men and women in uniform stationed overseas.

The importance of this trip was magnified primarily by the level of Russian individuals with whom we were able to meet and discuss the POW/MIA issue. I firmly believe that our trips to Russia over the past few years are beginning to pay off, and it is my hope that we will soon see the US-Russia Joint Commission on Prisoners of War and Missing

In Action reestablished, with answers being found on missing American military personnel.

Visiting Poland, a relatively strong NATO ally, and meeting with Polish veterans was very enlightening. Veterans in Russia and Poland, as well as other parts of the world, look to us for guidance and assistance.

Vicenza was a very rewarding visit. The US Army troops we were able to spend time with continue to amaze me with their determination and "gung-ho" attitude. The VFW members of Post 8862 and their guests truly made me feel at home, and I sincerely appreciate all of the work they do in the name of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincere thanks to all in the Departments of Defense and State, as well as our VFW Washington Office staff, who made this trip possible. Special thanks to our escorts in Russia and Poland, and to Peter Luste and Tom Buffington for escorting us in Italy.

I believe that trips like this are necessary in order for the VFW to remain the preeminent veterans' organization, and maintain our high level of concern for the fate of those Americans still listed as POW/MIA from all wars. The Russian Federation holds the key to unlocking many of those individuals' fates, and by continuing to foster relationships with Russian veterans' organizations and governmental officials, we continue to assist the US government in gaining the access to Russian archives which is so desperately needed. The importance of speaking veteran-to-veteran cannot be overemphasized.

I recommend that future VFW Commander-in-Chiefs continue to make similar trips, especially to the Russian Federation.