



## MEMORANDUM

TO: National Officers; National Council of Administration; Department Commanders; Department Adjutants; Department Service Officers, Past Commanders-in-Chief

FROM: Thomas J. Tradewell, Sr., Commander-in-Chief

DATE: October 10 - 22, 2009

SUBJECT: Moscow – Trip Report

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### **Background**

I traveled to Russia and Italy from Oct. 10-22, 2009, with Assistant Adjutant General and Washington Office Executive Director Robert E. Wallace, to learn firsthand the progress being made on the POW/MIA issue with the Russian government. We also received briefings from U.S. diplomatic and military officials, and met with Russian veterans' organization members, U.S. military personnel, and members of VFW Post #8862 in Vicenza, Italy.

One of the top priorities of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States is the fullest possible accounting of all military personnel from our wars and conflicts. Our visit to Moscow afforded us the opportunity to discuss unaccounted-for U.S. military personnel that the Russian military archives could have information on that would help determine their fates. We also had the opportunity to meet with the leadership of two prominent Russian veterans' organizations in Moscow and one in St. Petersburg to voice our concern about the lack of progress from the Russian government in helping to resolve the fate of missing American service members. We did so as VFW members and concerned U.S. veterans and citizens.

The U.S. government believes access to the Russian military archives is a key to helping to resolve the fate of many missing American military personnel from WWII, Korea, Vietnam and the Cold War. The U.S.-Russia Joint Commission on Prisoners of War and Missing Personnel was created by President George H.W. Bush and former Russian

President Boris Yeltsin to gain the correct access in a timely manner. Under Russian President Vladimir Putin, however, the Joint Commission's status was lowered, which resulted in the elimination of Russian staff, which effectively shut down the Commission in June 2004. In July 2009, when President Barack Obama visited the Russian Federation, he and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev passed Diplomatic Notes and agreed that the Commission would be reestablished. To date, the Russians have not followed through.

The goal of this trip was to urge everyone we contacted on the Russian side to urge their government to appoint a Russian co-chairman, which would reestablish the Joint Commission and move the process forward. We also asked their support to encourage the Russian government to provide U.S. researchers immediate access to their military archives so the work can begin.

The Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office, based at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, provided escorts officers and translators for our entire visit. They are led by Army Lt. Col. Larry Beisel and his deputy, Mr. Henry Eastman.

### **Moscow, Russia**

On the morning of Oct. 12, we participated in a joint ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at the Kremlin with members of the Committee of Warrior Internationalists and the Combat Brotherhood, two prominent Russian veterans' organizations. The Tomb is in honor of a World War II veteran.

Following the ceremony, we met with the Federation Council Committee on Defense and Security. The Federation Council is their Upper House of Parliament, equal to our U.S. Senate. The meeting was chaired by Vice Chairman Evgeny A. Serebrennikov.

The vice chairman opened the meeting by explaining the Federation Council and the responsibilities of the committee, and that the government is paying a lot of attention to veterans and their issues, with special attention being given to the social protection of veterans and their families. While there is much discussion about creating a Ministry of Veterans Affairs in Russia, he said the political will is not there yet. He acknowledged the many programs and support that the U.S. government provides for its veterans, and was happy to welcome the VFW on its third visit before the committee.

The vice chairman also spoke at length of the many programs taking place in Russia to honor WWII veterans, as well as their work to create Russian veterans' cemeteries, similar to our Arlington National Cemetery. He was well aware of the U.S.-Russia Joint Commission on POW/MIAs. He also mentioned the Russian Federation's work on searching for remains of their own unaccounted-for service members.

I thanked the vice chairman for hosting us, and told him of our opportunity earlier that day to pay our respects at their Tomb of the Unknown. I expressed the sincere concern that the VFW and the American people have for our unaccounted-for service members,

and explained why the VFW works so hard on the POW/MIA issue to bring closure for the families.

I requested the committee's assistance in urging their government to appoint a co-chairman to the Joint Commission, as well as allowing U.S. researchers to have immediate access to their military archives.

The vice chairman and his fellow committee member pledged to do what they could to urge their government to act. Then he looked at us and apologized that the U.S. had not been given access to the archives. We then had a discussion about many veteran-related issues, but especially about educating the youth about the sacrifices of veterans.

Mr. Alexander Zakoroff, from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, then spoke about the Joint Commission and its work, and expressed his hope that Russia and the U.S. could share ideas about veterans.

Following the Federation Council meeting, we lunched with retired Col. Gennady Shorokhov, Vice Chairman of the Combat Brotherhood veterans' organization. We discussed in detail the importance of the U.S.-Russia Joint Commission, and the good relationship his organization has with the VFW.

We requested that the Combat Brotherhood urge their government to appoint a co-chairman for the Joint Commission, and to work to have his government allow U.S. researchers immediate access to their military archives. The Combat Brotherhood pledged to work with DPMO staff in Moscow until the Russian government acts.

The Combat Brotherhood works with other Russian organizations to urge their government to provide more services to veterans. They acknowledge that veterans are not a priority with their 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, DC, and have received VA briefings on health care, benefits and the cemetery administration, as well as toured the Washington VA Medical Center. They know what their goal is. Mr. Shorokhov emphasized that veteran-to-veteran communications is necessary in order to assist veterans of all nations, many of whom suffer from similar disabilities.

Our next meeting was with the president and CEO of Lukoil Corporation, Mr. Vagit Alekperov, at their corporate headquarters. Lukoil is the largest nongovernmental corporation within the Russian Federation, and has a number of gas stations in the northeastern United States. Lukoil for a number of years provided some funding for the Commonwealth of Independent States Committee of Warrior Internationalists for their work on searching for MIAs in Afghanistan, as well as other activities, such as hiring Russian veterans. Also attending were retired Gen. Lt. Ruslan Aushev, the Chairman of the Committee of Warrior Internationalists, and Mr. Alexander Zakoroff from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Mr. Alekperov was familiar with the U.S.-Russia Joint Commission on POW/MIAs. We then requested his assistance in urging the Russian government to appoint a co-chair to the Joint Commission and to allow U.S. researchers immediate access to their military archives. He agreed he would do so.

We next attended a working dinner in our honor hosted by General Aushev, Chairman of the Commonwealth of Independent States Committee of Warrior Internationalists. Also attending was a representative of Lukoil, Mr. Zakoroff, and a few members of the general's committee.

Dinner conversation centered on veterans' rehabilitation programs and the MIA issue. The committee is very concerned about missing Russian soldiers who served in Afghanistan, as well as the welfare of Russian veterans. We discussed a variety of issues veterans face. Mental health issues, especially for Afghan veterans, is a major issue for them. They are also working to create health care for veterans and a Ministry of Veterans Affairs.

General Aushev has attended two VFW National Conventions and one Washington Conference, so he is familiar with the VFW and our work on veterans' issues in Congress. He has been very helpful to the U.S. government in bringing the workings of the Joint Commission forward, and he understands the importance of the humanitarian issue for the VFW, for American veterans, and for the families of the missing.

General Aushev pledged to increase the efforts of his organization in support of the U.S.-Russia Joint Commission, and to urge his government to appoint a co-chairman and give U.S. researchers immediate access to Russia's military archives.

The general told us that there are 271 missing Russian service members from their war in Afghanistan. His organization travels to Afghanistan three to four times a year on the MIA issue. He believes that 30 may still be alive, though some may want to stay. We told General Aushev that we would ask the U.S. government to provide any possible assistance to the Russian government in locating their missing in Afghanistan.

General Aushev once again suggested that an International Conference be held for nations who have fought in Iraq and Afghanistan to discuss and share information on health and readjustment issues of returning veterans. He also suggested that the first conference be held in the United States, and that the number of participants be limited, though other U.S. veterans' organizations should be included. We stated that we believe such a conference could become a reality once the U.S.-Russia Joint Commission is re-established and working. We agreed to follow-up on the International Conference proposal once that occurs.

On Oct. 13, we were briefed by the U.S. Embassy Defense Attaché, Air Force Brig. Gen. Dan Eagle, who provided an excellent overview of the Russian military.

The U.S. conducts joint exercises with Russia, but coordination and fighting red tape at times can be very difficult. State of the art military equipment and training are lacking in the Russian military. The treatment and training of Russian Army conscript is questionable, as is the manner in which former military personnel are treated by their government. The Russian military has been downsizing the number of general officers, and conscript soldiers now only serve for a period of one year, compared to 18 months previously. Many conscript soldiers leave the military physically abused with no job skills or education, then enter a life of substance abuse. Russia has no Department of Veterans Affairs, so they receive very little if any benefits.

Russian demographics continue to be very disturbing as over 700,000 people leave the country annually. The average male's life span is 57 due to their behavioral life style. A significant percentage of the population has HIV, with many younger than 30. Tuberculosis affects almost half of the population, and alcoholism is very high. Russia also has a human trafficking problem.

Corruption is a major problem in Russia, and until that is cleaned up, a huge difference in income levels will remain. One estimate is that 40 cents from every dollar goes to corruption.

There is very little U.S. investment in Russia, primarily because the bureaucracy and laws discourage many companies from investing, and also because Russia does not actively seek foreign investors or partners. The country is rich in oil and natural gas, with many areas still unexplored. The world economic crisis is hitting Russia very hard, so their foreign investment philosophy may change.

Russia has relations 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 sell weapons to rogue nations yet have deep concerns over terrorism, which they have witnessed inside their own country.

We were unable to meet with anyone else at the Embassy due to the visit of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton during the same timeframe.

Prior to departing for St. Petersburg, we met with the chairman and members of the Defense and Security Committee of the State Duma at their headquarters. (The Duma is equal to our U.S. Congress.) Gen. Nikolai Kovalev, the chairman, opened the meeting by expressing the importance of veterans in every country. He was especially complimentary of VFW for our work to promote a better life for veterans and their families. He emphasized that he will be chairman for two years, and that many of his committee members are Afghan war veterans.

General Kovalev was very positive about the MIA issue, and explained that periodically Russian veterans return to Afghanistan to search for remains of their missing. He was very concerned about the protection of WWII monuments, and suggested that an international law may be required to protect the monuments from destruction. (Note: The

general was referring to Russian-built WWII memorials that now reside in former USSR satellite countries. This is not a VFW issue, so we made no comment.)

I thanked General Kovalev for allowing us to visit with him and his committee, and I emphasized the VFW story and our mission of honoring veterans. I spoke at length about the U.S.-Russia Joint Commission, and the importance of helping to bring closure to the families of the missing. I then asked for his assistance and that of his committee members to urge their government to appoint a co-chair of the Joint Commission, and to allow U.S. researchers immediate access to their military archives.

The general felt that Russia would soon appoint a co-chairman to the Joint Commission, and he stated that the work should be intense on both sides. He was also very thankful for the DNA kits the U.S. government provided Russia a few years ago, and said that we veterans have common goals and common problems. His committee supports the creation of a Russian Ministry of Veterans Affairs. Their problem, as I see it, is without the political will of the rest of their government, a VA Ministry will never become reality.

### **St. Petersburg, Russia**

We arrived in St. Petersburg late in the afternoon of Oct. 13. The next day we traveled to the nearby town of Tosno to participate in a ceremony called Commemorative Watch 2009, which honors the work of young adults who team up to search WWII battle sites for the remains of Russian soldiers, and then provide them a proper burial. The ceremony honored the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the project.

Representatives of various Russian Federation Ministries as well as military units participated with the civilians involved in the project. After a brief ceremony and wreath laying at a monument in Tosno, we participated in a ceremonial program where I had the opportunity to address the audience about the VFW and our concern for missing service members. After the program, we took part in a reception and private dinner, where we were able to request support for the U.S.-Russia Joint Commission from a number of officials.

On Oct. 15, we met with members of the Union of Afghan War Veterans (AFGANVET) for lunch. AFGANVET President Said Tulakov hosted a luncheon for us at their headquarters. 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 is very involved in veterans' issues. I requested that Mr. Tulakov urge his government to appoint a co-chairman to the Joint Commission, as well as allow U.S. researchers immediate access to their military archives. He said he would follow through on our request.

We departed Russia for Rome the next day.

### **Rome, Italy**

On Oct. 17, we traveled to the Sicily-Rome US Cemetery to lay a wreath in memory of the 7,861 brave Americans buried in the cemetery who lost their lives during World War II operations preceding the liberation of Rome. The cemetery consists of 77 acres and is managed by the American Battle Monuments Commission. This beautiful cemetery is tribute to what America does for those who were killed during World War II, and whose families chose not to have their remains returned home. For more information about this or other U.S. cemeteries overseas, logon to [www.abmc.gov](http://www.abmc.gov).

The next day we left for Vicenza, Italy, to visit U.S. Army troops and VFW members of VFW Post #8862.

### **Vicenza, Italy**

We arrived on Oct. 18 and were met by VFW Department of Europe Commander Tom Buffington and Past Department Commander Peter Luste. Both of them would serve as our escorts while in Vicenza.

The next two days we spent at Caserma Ederle with the U.S. Army. We visited and received briefings on quality of life issues, mental health programs, dependent children programs, retiree care, and military transitioning programs. We also toured a new medical facility being built on base. Military construction projects to improve quality of life facilities for soldiers and their families were evident everywhere.

We received a command briefing by the Army's Southern European Task Force (Airborne), had lunch with the troops, and received briefings and tours of their Warrior Transition Unit and USO facility.

We were also given a briefing and tour of the Armed Forces Network facility, where I was interviewed about the VFW and the many programs we have to support the troops. I also made a few Public Service Announcements that AFN aired throughout Europe, Iraq and Afghanistan.

The command is the home of the famous 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade Combat Team, the only rapid response airborne force within U.S. European Command. 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 our nation was very evident when speaking with them and watching their actions.

The 173<sup>rd</sup> has been to Afghanistan and Iraq a number of times. The stress on service members and their families is high, and the Army has instituted a number of programs to help them work through the personal issues that arise from multiple deployments. We also discussed issues and challenges facing the new U.S. Africa Command, as well as those of U.S. European Command.

The soldiers we met 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. They all thanked us for what the VFW does for the troops and their families, especially when they are deployed. VFW Post #8862 is a very important part of this military community and everyone greatly appreciated their work.

Before we departed for home, VFW Post #8862 hosted a dinner in our honor, with a number of members and spouses attending. I had the opportunity to speak and thank them for what they do for our military personnel, veterans and their families. The evening was very enjoyable. We sincerely appreciated the hospitality and friendship exhibited by all.

### **Conclusion**

I am truly honored to have the opportunity to represent the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States wherever I travel, most especially when I am able to reach out and touch our brave men and women in uniform stationed overseas, the majority of who have been to Iraq and/or Afghanistan a number of times. It is also always a pleasure to meet members of the U.S. Diplomatic Corps, their families, and of course VFW members.

Trips like these are vitally necessary because our work on the POW/MIA issue is unmatched by any other veterans' organizations. The Russian Federation holds the key to the fates of potentially thousands of missing American servicemen from WWII forward, and through the relationships only the VFW have built over the past six years, we are moving closer to reestablishing the U.S.-Russia Joint Commission, which will help bring closure to American MIA families everywhere. The importance of speaking veteran-to-veteran cannot be emphasized enough. The U.S. government recognizes our contributions to the mission, and the Russian government recognizes our sincerity in moving the Full Accounting mission forward.

Visiting the Sicily-Rome U.S. Cemetery and Vicenza were very rewarding to me. Our forces continue to amaze me with their quality and commitment, and VFW Post #8862 made me feel at home. I appreciate all the hard work they do to help maintain the positive image our military and their families have of our great organization.

I strongly recommend that future VFW Commanders-in-Chief continue to make similar trips, especially to the Russian Federation.

### **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. A very special thanks to Lt. Col. Larry Biesel and Mr. Henry Eastman, our escorts in Russia, and to Tom Buffington, Peter Luste, and the rest of our VFW members in Vicenza, Italy.