



## MEMORANDUM

To: National Officers, National Council of Administration, Department Commanders, Department Adjutants, and Past Commanders-in-Chief

From: Keith E. Harman, Senior Vice Commander-in-Chief *Keith E. Harman*

Date: April 3, 2017

Re: 2017 POW/MIA Fact-Finding Trip to Southeast Asia (March 4-17, 2017)

### **OVERVIEW**

I departed for Southeast Asia on March 4, 2017, to obtain firsthand knowledge of ongoing search and recovery operations for some 1,610 missing and unaccounted-for American service members and civilians from the Vietnam War, as well as to learn more about recovery missions for World War II, Korea and Cold War losses. I was accompanied by Joe Davis, director of VFW Communications, Publications & Public Affairs. Our travels took us to Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam and the People's Republic of China.

This was my first trip back to Vietnam since I departed it in 1969. I have to admit to being somewhat bitter over the years, but not now, not after personally witnessing America's commitment to return our fallen home, and not after meeting numerous host-country officials who are crucial to the success of America's Full Accounting Mission. It was an honor to personally thank the U.S. military and Department of Defense civilians assigned to the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA), who are tasked with fulfilling the soldier's pledge to never leave a fallen comrade on the battlefield. It was also an honor to extend our organization's appreciation to host-country government officials for their support of an American humanitarian mission.

Of the 83,000 missing Americans from our nation's wars going back to World War II, only about a third are actually recoverable. This is due to the nature of war—overwater losses, catastrophic explosions, and aircraft simply disappearing off radar scopes. A full 75 percent of our missing are in the Pacific and East Asia area of operation. The challenges that DPAA teams face in the field depend greatly on location and circumstances of loss. Unexploded ordinance is an ever-present danger, and terrain and climate are significant environmental challenges. Aging

witnesses with fading memories and incomplete after-action/incident reports also impact research and investigation efforts.

Aside from DPAA personnel we met with military assigned to four U.S. Embassy Defense Attaché Offices, as well as their Marine Security Guard detachments, to hear their concerns regarding quality of life issues and the budget's impact on their ability to accomplish their mission. Everywhere we went we told the VFW story of service to others, plus left behind numerous brochures regarding our legislative and veteran's service programs, our Unmet Needs emergency assistance grants, and our youth and veteran scholarship programs. We also discussed supporting annual service member of the year awards programs.

Journeying to Southeast Asia also gave me an opportunity to meet with almost a dozen VFW comrades residing in Thailand and Cambodia to hear their concerns. Communication is key with all our members, but even more so for those residing in foreign countries. Their concerns about VA's Foreign Medical Program travel reimbursements and service officer access to the VA's Veterans Benefits Management System web portal were noted, the VBMS issue especially, since this also impacts VFW service officers in Europe. The issue centers entirely on Internet security, since folks residing overseas can only use that country's Internet service provider. VFW National Veterans Service is in discussions with the VA Central Office and the Departments of Pacific Areas and Europe on ways to resolve the overseas remote access issue.



*Lunch meeting in Bangkok with seven comrades from District 5, VFW Department of the Pacific.*

Learn more about the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency's worldwide mission at <http://www.dpaa.mil/>, and the VA's Foreign Medical Program at <https://www.va.gov/PURCHASEDCARE/programs/veterans/fmp/>.

## **THAILAND**

Our first meeting in Bangkok was with DPAA Detachment 1, which has operational responsibility for search and recovery operations in Cambodia, Burma and India, and provides logistical support to operations being conducted by Det. 2 in Vietnam and Det. 3 in Laos. We met with the Det. 1 deputy commander, Army Maj. John Lee, as well as members of the Detachment.

Det. 1 faces numerous logistical and environmental challenges when operating in Burma and India, which are all World War II "Hump" mission losses. The loss sites are very remote, plus there are sometimes border and host-country political issues that require a number of approvals from different government agencies. All that, plus a guaranteed emergency medevac capability,

must be established before any American team commences work. There are currently 426 Americans missing in India, 740 in Burma, and 49 in Cambodia, where the U.S. enjoys its best working relationship. The Detachment looks for opportunities to expand its partnerships, and works closely with U.S. Ambassadors in the host nations for support.

Regarding sequestration and the budget, we learned how the ongoing Continuing Resolution, or CR, impacts recovery operations. A large chunk of money in the fourth quarter of the fiscal year does the mission no good because the bulk of annual operations are obligated in the first and second quarters. Whether it is possible for DPAA to have advance appropriations similar to VA healthcare, or perhaps a carryover authority for unobligated funds from one fiscal year into the next, is worth further discussion.

The Pentagon's five-year rule for DOD civilians assigned overseas is also an issue, as is the temporary civilian hiring freeze. The success of America's Full Accounting Mission depends on the relationships that are created and maintained by career DOD civilians, yet the five-year rule greatly reduces experience and continuity, and essentially treats career civilians as if they were U.S. military members, who rotate in and out of assignments every few years.

I pledged the VFW will continue to fight for full mission funding, as well as to work with the Pentagon to grant waivers to the five-year rule for mission critical positions. Continuity matters greatly when dealing with foreign governments.

We also met with U.S. Ambassador to Thailand Glyn Davies, the commander of Joint U.S. Military Advisory Group-Thailand (JUSMAGTHAI), Army Col. Rocky Harder, and the commander and first sergeant of Marine Security Group (MSG) Region 3, Lt. Col. Jonathan Vaughn and 1st Sgt. Leon Banta.

On the civilian diplomatic side, the temporary hiring freeze hurts. So, too, does the lack of guidance coming from Washington because so few people have been nominated to fill senior State Department positions. The State Department is a large organization with an internal hierarchy that specializes in regions, countries and issues. Apparently a hiring freeze or lack of nominees is somewhat normal with new administrations, but not both at the same time.

On the military side, the purpose of JUSMAGTHAI is to facilitate security cooperation, the export of U.S. military hardware through foreign military sales, and joint military exercises. There are from 120 to 180 active-duty military normally assigned to the U.S. Embassy to Thailand. During Exercise Cobra Gold, the number of U.S. military in-country can swell beyond 1,200.

Marine Security Group Region 3 has operational control over 24 MSG detachments assigned to U.S. Embassies and Consulates in 17 countries in East Asia and the Pacific. We were fortunate to visit with four of them during our travels.

Learn more about our U.S. Embassy in Thailand at <http://bangkok.usembassy.gov/index.html>.

## CAMBODIA

We were met at the Phnom Penh airport by the DPAA Det. 1 commander, Air Force Lt. Col. Kevin Pritz, and casualty resolution specialist Vina Chhouk. Both were in-country to oversee an ongoing recovery operation in the northern part of Cambodia, as well as to join us in our discussions with U.S. and host-country government officials.



*With Mr. Sieng Lapresse, POW/MIA liaison with the Cambodian government and a Gold Star father.*

There were 90 missing and unaccounted-for Americans in Cambodia following the conclusion of the Vietnam War in 1973 and the ill-fated SS Mayaguez rescue attempt in 1975. Forty-one have been recovered, identified and returned home to their families.

At the Ministry of Interior we met Mr. Sieng Lapresse, who holds the rank of Secretary of State, and is an advisor to the Royal Government of Cambodia. According to Colonel Pritz and Stony Beach POW/MIA Investigator Eric Phillips, Mr. Lapresse is the key reason why America's Full

Accounting Mission has great host-country support. Aside from the humanitarian aspect of the mission, I believe his strong support is through personal relevance as a Gold Star father. I learned his son, U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Anthony Lapresse Sieng, died in a helicopter accident in Honduras in 2002. He is buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

The 49 Americans currently listed as MIA are the toughest of the tough to resolve because the Khmer Rouge's four-year destruction of libraries, and subsequent genocide of an estimated 1.7 million fellow Cambodians, left few records or witnesses. The ongoing recovery operation is an aircraft crash that left a 1,500-square-meter debris field, yet DPAA is hopeful because the site is undisturbed, as local villagers did not scavenge metal after the crash. There is another hopeful site, but a border dispute with neighboring Laos has to be resolved before U.S. teams are able to return to the location.



*On the Mekong River aboard a former Vietnam War riverine boat with members of VFW Post 11575, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.*

Our meeting with U.S. Ambassador William Heidt and Deputy Chief of Mission Julie Chung confirmed all that we had heard earlier. Cambodia fully supports America's Full Accounting Mission, and we are all grateful for their cooperation and support.

Learn more about our U.S. Embassy in Cambodia at <https://kh.usembassy.gov/>.

## VIETNAM

We then flew to Da Nang, where 48 years ago I was greeted by an airfield mortar attack within 30 minutes of arriving. This time I was met by the Det. 2 commander, Army Lt. Col. Romel Pajimula, who leads the busiest of DPAA's four worldwide detachments.

The next day we journeyed two hours west into the central highlands of Quang Nam Province. There we were hosted to lunch by three deputy directors of the VNOSMP, or Vietnam Office for Seeking Missing Persons, a government organization comprised of representatives from the Vietnamese Ministries of Defense, Foreign Affairs and Public Security.



*Making the effort to thank the troops for what they do out in the field means everything. With a DPAA recovery team in Quang Nam Province, two hours west of Da Nang, Vietnam.*

I was able to relay the VFW's sincere appreciation for their support of the Full Accounting Mission, as well as to personally thank a 17-member recovery team comprised of U.S. military and DOD civilian personnel, who were working a helicopter crash site on a 45-degree slope, and in 90-degree, high-humidity heat. Despite the environmental conditions, their morale could not have been higher. They were searching for a fellow American whose family continues to wait for their loved one to come home from his war. They wanted to help bring closure to that family, and I was proud to thank them on behalf of our entire organization for their service and dedication to mission.

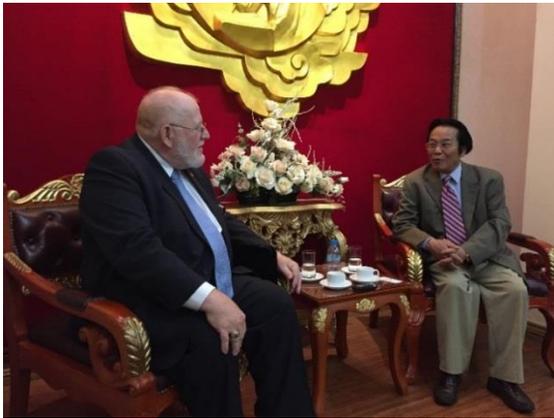
That evening we dined with three Vietnam veterans who DPAA had flown over from the States to add eyewitness perspective to past battles. The next day we flew to Hanoi for a full mission briefing by the Det. 2 deputy commander, Marine Corps Maj. Chad Bonecutter.

Excluding losses in Laos (298), Cambodia (49) and China (7), there are 1,260 unaccounted-for Americans within Vietnam's borders. DPAA's three main recovery challenges are:

- Time: American MIA families are aging and want resolution, and Vietnamese witnesses are growing older, too;
- Environmental: Acidic soil, high-humidity, and economic growth and development that threatens to literally pave over potential loss sites; and
- Regional Political Atmosphere: Vietnam has allowed America to dig holes throughout their country for nearly four decades. As a military organization, DPAA will continue its mission until ordered to stop, but host countries also have a say regarding the where and when, to include if the loss site could be unsafe as the result of internal or external strife.



*With former Deputy Chief of Staff of the Vietnamese Army, Gen. Nguyen Song Phi, vice president of the Vietnam Veterans Association.*



*With former Vietnamese Ambassador to the U.S. Nguyen Tam Chien, president of the Vietnam-USA Society and vice president of the Vietnam Union of Friendship Organizations.*

The impact of the federal hiring freeze was also apparent, in that Det. 2 is authorized 24 personnel, but only 21 were assigned. We were told a waiver had been requested, but even so, it is hard to imagine a more dedicated or heavily tasked staff. Still, they insist that it's not the political (sequester, hiring freeze) that impacts mission accomplished, but rather it's the operational constraints of finding aging witnesses, documents, and having to factor in reliable weather windows for a country that is comparable in length to the distance from Jacksonville to Boston.

We then met with the former Deputy Chief of Staff of the Vietnamese Army, Gen. Nguyen Song Phi, who is vice president of the Vietnam Veterans Association, and seven other staff members. We both agreed that we are all veterans, and that the relationship our two countries enjoy today is the direct result of the Full Accounting Mission, which is important to Vietnamese families, as well. The general asked, and I agreed, to continue soliciting VFW members to return any Vietnam War memorabilia that might be personal in nature, such as wallets, photos and letters. He said his country has some 300,000 to 600,000 MIAs from the war.

I was also asked about returning personal memorabilia at our next meeting, which was with former Vietnamese Ambassador to the U.S. Nguyen Tam Chien, who is president of the Vietnam-USA Society and vice president of the Vietnam Union of

Friendship Organizations. In return, the ambassador will continue to ask his 4 million members for information leading to the recovery and identification of missing Americans.

We next met with political counselor Brett Blackshaw at the U.S. Embassy, as the ambassador and DCM were both traveling. He said the embassy greatly values the VFW's support of the Full Accounting Mission, and repeated that returning war memorabilia could further encourage more local support from aging witnesses who may not have come forward yet.

Our last meeting in Vietnam was with Mr. Nguyen Hong Quang, who is assistant director of the Americas Department with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He was joined by Mr. Zung, one of the three VNOSMP deputies we had met in Quang Nam Province. Both men had been posted to the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington, and both wholeheartedly agreed that the MIA accounting mission was the bridge between our two countries.

I left Vietnam a far different person than I did 48 years ago. Historians tell us that the Vietnamese fought the U.S. for 10 years, the French for a 100 and the Chinese for more than a 1,000 years. To the Vietnamese, the war is long over, which if measured by their support of our Full Accounting Mission, is 100 percent true.

Learn more about the U.S. Embassy to Vietnam at <http://vietnam.usembassy.gov/>.

## CHINA

It is difficult to visit the People's Republic of China without first thinking of them as a potential adversary, both militarily and economically. Still, we have to appreciate and recognize China's support of America's Full Accounting Mission.

We were met by Jonathan Toone from the Defense Attaché's Office at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, and escorted to our first meeting with (acting) Deputy Chief of Mission Julie Kavanagh and U.S. Naval Attaché Capt. Thomas Henderschedt.

Creating military-to-military exchange opportunities is an ongoing initiative that recognizes that including China in world events—to include under exercise conditions—is better than excluding one of the permanent five members of the UN Security Council. China has conducted anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden since 2009, and helped in the disposal of Syrian nerve gas stockpiles. China has also participated in the biennial Hawaii-based RIMPAC maritime exercise since 2014, and the annual Thailand-based Cobra Gold exercise since 2015. Still, China does engage in dangerous activities, from buzzing U.S. Navy ships in international waters to building islands out of rocks in the disputed areas of the South China Sea.

We were hosted to lunch by 11 members of the Defense Attaché Office, where we once again discussed all the VFW support programs we provide for veterans, service members and their families.



*With Joe Davis, Mr. Nguyen Hong Quang, assistant director of the America's Department with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Mr. Zung.*

Our last official meeting was with six members of the People's Liberation Army's Office of International Military Cooperation (OIMC) and the PLA Archives. We were joined by U.S. Army Attaché Col. Christopher DiCicco.

OIMC is in charge of international exchanges with foreign militaries, and according to Rear Adm. Li Ji, head of the North American and Oceania Bureau, their support of America's Full Accounting Mission is the highlight of China's mil-to-mil relationship with the U.S.

He summed up China's support with three points:

- No conditions: China has always searched for American MIAs, since we were allies during World War II. Everyone recognizes that returning the fallen to their families is a humanitarian—not a political—mission;
- No disturbance: Regardless of political events between our two countries in the



*Examining a silk scroll with Rear Adm. Li Ji, head of the North American and Oceania Bureau, People's Liberation Army's Office of International Military Cooperation*

international arena, the MIA mission will not be impacted; and

- Spare no effort: Aside from the PLA Archives, a special office has also been created with 16 officers and professionals to help in mission accomplishment.

Archival cooperation began in 2008, which not coincidentally is when the VFW began adding China to its annual MIA fact-finding mission itinerary. They said more than 100,000 documents have been searched, which resulted in more than 50 valuable clues being passed to U.S. researchers.

We thanked them for their support of the Full Accounting Mission, and requested that:

- China consider reestablishing the number of recovery missions to two per year;
- They continue to release any documents they might have regarding Korean War POW Camps;
- They invite representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to attend next year's meeting with the VFW; and
- That next year's VFW visit also include a tour of the PLA Archives.

They were agreeable to all.

Admiral Li Ji then asked if the U.S. could provide family reference samples (DNA) of our missing near the North Korean/Chinese border to expedite their own recovery efforts. That request is being forwarded to DPAA.

We returned to CONUS the next day, March 17.

Learn more about the U.S. Embassy to China at <http://beijing.usembassy-china.org.cn/>.

## **CLOSING COMMENTS**

My sincere appreciation to the U.S. Departments of State and Defense for their strong logistical and protocol support of this visit, and to U.S. Embassy military and civilian personnel stationed in Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam and China for the many courtesies extended, and especially for the open and frank briefings and discussions.

A special thank you goes to the dedicated DPAA staff we had the opportunity to interact with, and especially to the 17-member recovery team that, to date, is still working hard in the heat and on a very difficult slope to help bring closure to an American family somewhere.

This mission, and the people who perform it, are the reason America has the greatest military in the world. It was truly an honor, both personally and as the incoming national commander of the greatest veterans' organization on Earth, to thank them in the field for what they do every day for our great nation.

No One Does More!

-vfw-