

VFW Urges Russia to Restore Full MIA Accounting Support

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WASHINGTON — The Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. national commander's trip to Russia included a trip to St. Petersburg to meet with the Russian Veterans of Afghanistan organization to elicit their support of America's mission to account for military personnel who never returned home from their wars.

"We are veterans, not politicians or diplomats," said Glen Gardner, a Vietnam veteran from Round Rock, Texas. "We understand the true nature of war, and we and our families understand the sacrifices that are sometimes required. America's Full MIA Accounting Mission fulfills a soldier's pledge that we will never leave a fallen comrade behind on the battlefield. This is one issue that all military veterans from all nations can support, regardless of politics."

This is the VFW's fifth consecutive trip to Russia. Before traveling to St. Petersburg yesterday, Gardner had met in Moscow with senior U.S. officials and Russian government officials, to include the Russian Federal Assembly Committee on Defense and Security, the Federation Parliament of Russia, and the leadership of two prominent veterans' organizations.

Gardner's message was for them to use their combined influence to bring the Russian government back to the U.S.-Russia Joint Commission.

According to U.S. officials in the Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office, Russian military archives are vitally important because archival material could help to determine the fate of some of the 88,000 missing and unaccounted-for Americans going back to World War II. The Joint Commission, created in 1992, had been the key to accessing those archives, until a reduction in the size of the Russian government's executive branch removed the Russian co-chairman from the commission. The U.S. government was told it was an oversight, but American researchers continue to be banned from Russia's central military archives for the past two years.

"We need their help to move their central government forward on the full MIA accounting issue," said Gardner, who added that the VFW, in return, is helping Russian veterans to

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create a government system similar to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Gardner believes the veteran-to-veteran exchange in Russia will prove just as beneficial to the Full MIA Accounting Mission as the relationship the VFW has forged with Vietnamese veterans' organizations. The VFW is the only American veterans' organization to return to Vietnam every year since 1991.

In St. Petersburg, he met with the commandant of the Russian Military Medical Museum and World War II Archives to solicit specific information on an open American MIA case. Gardner's next stop is today in Warsaw, Poland, to meet with five Polish veterans' organizations and share information on veterans' care and VFW initiatives. His final stop will be in Vicenza, Italy, to visit U.S. military forces.