

VFW Overseas Initiative Helps US POW/MIA Search Efforts in Russia

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WASHINGTON — The Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. is hopeful that Monday's exchange of diplomatic notes between the United States and the Russian Federation will revitalize a joint commission that was established to determine the fates of missing American personnel from past wars

Created in 1992, the U.S.-Russia Joint Commission on Prisoners of War and Missing in Action had been the key to accessing Russian military archives until a reduction in the size of their government's executive branch removed the Russian co-chairman. The U.S. government was told it was an oversight, but that oversight has kept American researchers out of Russia's central military archives since October 2006.

U.S. officials in the Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office say access to the military archives is vitally important because documents could help determine the fate of some of the 88,000 missing and unaccounted-for Americans from World War II through the end of the Cold War.

"The exchange of diplomatic notes is a very positive step forward," said VFW Commander-in-Chief Glen M. Gardner Jr., who traveled to Moscow and St. Petersburg last October to urge the Russian government to uphold their end of the Joint Commission.

Since first learning of the problem with the Commission, the VFW has been working with Russian veterans' organizations to open up a communications channel to the Russian government that was outside the normal diplomatic arena. The new access enabled Gardner to address their Federation Council Committee on Defense and Security last year, which would be similar to the U.S. Senate Committees on Armed Services and Homeland Security. His purpose was to impress upon Russian officials — from a veteran's viewpoint — just how important the return of fallen soldiers is to the families of both nations.

"The diplomatic note exchange means both governments have now reached an understanding that will hopefully reopen the archival research program to help determine the fates of missing American servicemen," he said. "The VFW sincerely appreciates the work of Russian and U.S. government and political officials, as well as that of two key

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Russian veterans' organizations—the Warrior Internationalists and the Combat Brotherhood—for helping to get the Joint Commission moving again.”

Gardner was the fifth consecutive VFW national commander to journey to Russia on a veteran-to-veteran initiative to help account for missing American servicemen, as well as to help Russian veterans create a government organization similar to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. He said the VFW's initiative in Russia is proving just as beneficial to the POW/MIA mission as its relationship with Vietnamese veterans' organizations. The VFW is the only American veterans' organization to return to Vietnam every year since 1991.

“I am very proud of the VFW's lead role in helping to breathe new life into the U.S.-Russia Joint Commission,” said Gardner, a Vietnam veteran from Round Rock, Texas. “The Full Accounting Mission fulfills a soldier's promise to never leave a fallen comrade behind on the battlefield, and that is one humanitarian issue that veterans and the government of all nations can support.”

For more on U.S. efforts to account for missing and unaccounted-for Americans, go to the Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office website at <http:http://www.dtic.mil/dpmo>, or the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command website at <http:http://www.jpac.pacom.mil>.