Little by little, the effort to find and identify Vietnam War dead and missing is yielding results.

The POW/MIA flag, above, has come to symbolize the ongoing search for unaccounted-for military service personnel in Vietnam.

The Search Goes On

By Bruce D. Callander

Fighting in Vietnam ended three decades ago, but, for the families of more than 600 Air Force members, the war still is not over. Their loved ones are among the more than 1,800 United States service members still listed as unaccounted for in Southeast Asia.

When the war officially ended in 1973, the United States declared exactly 2,583 airmen, soldiers, sailors, and marines to be unaccounted-for prisoners, missing, or “killed in action/body not recovered.” As of February 2005, the military services had accounted for more than 700 of those troops.

Nor have the Air Force and the other services forgotten those service members who still are missing. They continue to search for lost members from the Vietnam War and other conflicts. The Air Force’s point man for the effort is Jim Russell, chief of the Missing Persons Branch at the Air Force Personnel Center, Randolph AFB, Tex.

“I have a counterpart in each service,” Russell said. “Our role is to deal with the families. We have a lot of unaccounted-for service members from the different wars, and the goal, obviously, is to bring our fallen heroes
home for proper burial honors and ceremony and to bring closure for the families. ... Our role is to help them work through all that.”

Russell’s office maintains contact with about 3,000 family members, a substantial number of them relatives of members lost in the Vietnam War. Attention to that issue increased in 1987 with the appointment of retired Army Gen. John W. Vessey Jr., a former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, as special emissary to Hanoi. He has had considerable success in opening a dialogue with Vietnamese officials on this issue.

**Main Players**

Leading the Pentagon effort is the Defense Prisoner of War/Missing Personnel Office (DPMO). Headed by a deputy assistant secretary of defense, it coordinates the efforts of the services and oversees the operations in the field. There is also an operational agency, the Joint POW/MIA Command (JPAC) in Hawaii.

That agency, which came into being in October 2003, combines previous organizations that were in Hawaii and, before that, Southeast Asia and Thailand.

JPAC, located on the island of Oahu, was created by the merger of the 30-year-old US Army Central Identification Laboratory (CIL) in Hawaii and the 11-year-old Joint Task Force-Full Accounting. The present 425-person organization has representatives from all services and is commanded by a flag officer. A key element of the command, the Central Identification Laboratory is said to be the largest forensic anthropology lab in the world.

The five main tasks of the JPAC are to:

- Gather information on missing members and determine where each was lost.
- Negotiate through the State Department and other agencies for access to the area involved.
- Investigate the location and establish whether it is likely to have been the site of a loss.
- Send in experts to recover remains.
- Make a positive identification and notify the families.

The process is long and arduous, but JPAC says CIL identifies, on average, two Americans each week. However, the entire recovery and identification process can take years.

Knowing that an airplane went down, and finding the actual crash site, are two different things.

“After the Air Force started participating, we had one Korean War identification just last year. Unfortunately, the access hasn’t materialized to the extent we would like, but, even so, we still had enough toprepare an operation and, in fact, we did. We had an operation. It may have been optimism to think that North Korea would allow a significant amount of access to their area, so we could go look for the unaccounted for. Unfortunately, the access hasn’t materialized to the extent we would like, but, even so, we still had enough to prepare an operation and, in fact, we did. We had one Korean War identification just last year.

The unfortunate point, however, is that a lot of those witnesses are dying. Time is our enemy, here. From the Korean War standpoint, we’re talking 50 years ago. So, even if a person was 20 years old at the time, that means he’s 70 now. And, from our standpoint, ... and this is something that negotiators try to use with the foreign countries, ... the family members that we represent, they’re dying off, too. The thing that we try to portray is that this is a humanitarian mission. This isn’t a military operation and there isn’t any secret agenda, although that sometimes is a hard point to make because there are military people involved in this process. But it is not a big intelligence scheme. It really is a humanitarian mission.”

**Before Vietnam**

The cases of military aviation members who went missing or became POWs during World War II and earlier conflicts are handled by the Army because air activities were conducted under that branch until 1947.

The all-service total for World War II is about 78,000. Although most have long since been declared dead, the services still turn up new information about members lost in that conflict.

“Every so often, you see articles about somebody,” said Jim Russell, chief of the Air Force’s Missing Persons Branch. “A French farmer digs up the field and runs into a plane. They did some World War II recovery work in Burma just last year.”

Judith A. Grojean, chief of media relations at the Air Force Personnel Center, was personally involved with just such an incident. “When I was doing protocol work for the Army in 1995,” she said, “we were observing the 50th anniversary of World War II in Germany. We followed the path of an infantry unit, and when we talked to the town folk we met, it was not uncommon to hear about farmers out plowing and remains appearing. While I was there, a man came to me and said he had been up in an attic and found the backpacks of something like 15 soldiers. They had the identification numbers in them and everything, and he turned them over to us. So it is not uncommon that they continue to find remains, and when they do, they turn them over to proper authorities. There were some big battles there in the 1940s and many lost lives.”

Early this year, the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) in Hawaii announced that it was sending a nine-person recovery team to New Guinea to continue recovery efforts at a site associated with a 1942 B-25 crash. Another five-person JPAC investigation team was to conduct operations in up to 15 known or suspected cases, and a three-member team was to investigate reported cases in Fiji.

In the 1990s, the services took a renewed interest in the 5,866 Americans still unaccounted for in the Korean War. “It all started when then-President Clinton asked the Department of Defense to increase the accounting effort to include the Korea and Cold War era,” said Russell.

“Each of the services was starting from scratch,” he said. “The members were lost during the 1950 to ‘53 time frame, and we hadn’t had any contact with these families since the time of the incidents. So when you think back to the Korean War, we were starting at ground zero with casualty cards with information on [them] that was literally 45 to 50 years old.

“We began trying to find family members and let them know about the accounting effort. We also wanted to know if the missing persons had any maternal relatives still alive, so we could get blood samples. We had a good response. We now have probably about 60 or 65 of those cases now represented with at least one family member.

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For that reason, it’s still important for investigators to go “in-country” and talk to local villagers. The locals in the general area may have seen or heard something. In many cases, particularly in Southeast Asia, the villagers will lead an investigative team directly to a site.

“That’s again all part of putting the pieces together before you make a commitment to do an excavation,” said Russell, “because it takes a lot of time and resources to do an archeological operation. The collecting of information ahead of time is absolutely critical.”

Still, the locals are a big help.

“How many times in your lifetime are you hoeing the field and see a parachute or a plane falling out of the sky?” Russell asked. “It’s not going to be too often, so it’s something you remember.”

In some cases, the families of the missing Americans also provide information such as preservice medical or dental records.

JPAC has six investigative teams, each with four to nine members with specialized skills. They are analysts, linguists, and medics. In some cases an anthropologist, an explosive ordnance technician, or life support technician will be added.

Pick and Shovel

Finding remains of lost servicemen is a combination of science, detective work, and archeology. “The operational work is done by JPAC,” said Russell. “They’re the ones with boots on the ground. They’re the ones that are in the jungles of Southeast Asia and the rugged terrain of North Korea working initial investigations so they can make an informed decision on making an excavation occur. Then they do what is essentially a scientific dig.”

For example, an anthropologist will be the person who conducts the archeological dig in a scientific manner, so as not to disturb anything that may be in a crash site or in a burial site.

Obviously, what they are looking for is remains.

“You get the clues up front to narrow down a given area before you commit the resources to do an excavation,” according to Russell. “Once they are pretty certain they have narrowed it down and gotten peripheral clues, then they will go in with their anthropology team to do an excavation. They very meticulously go through nearly every grain of dirt looking for any additional clues that could lead to human remains, personal effects, and so forth.”

JPAC has 18 such recovery teams, 10 of them dedicated to looking for those missing from the war in Southeast Asia. Five teams work on the Korean War missing, and three concentrate on missing Americans from World War II, the Cold War, and the Gulf War.

Command representatives said that a typical team has 10 to 14 personnel and is headed by a leader responsible for the operation, safety, and welfare of the unit. There also is a team sergeant (typically an Army sergeant first class trained in the field of mortuary affairs) and a forensic anthropologist (the only civilian team member), who oversees the scientific aspects of the recovery.

Other team members may include a linguist, medic, life-support technician, forensic photographer, explosive ordnance disposal technician, and several mortuary affairs specialists. If the mission requires, the teams also will have mountaineering specialists, communication technicians, and mechanics. A standard recovery mission may last from 35 to 60 days, depending on the location, terrain, and recovery methods.

DNA Clues

The development of DNA as a means of identification has greatly improved the process of putting names to the remains that are recovered, Russell
Only about 125 service members remain unaccounted for from the Cold War era, but a substantial percentage of those are Air Force personnel. Jim Russell, chief of the Air Force’s Missing Persons Branch, said, “Most of the Cold War incidents were reconnaissance flights over hostile territory, meaning the former Soviet Union or China or in those general areas. There were 14 such incidents that the Department of Defense considers Cold War hostile losses in which crew members were unaccounted for. I think there are five or seven Air Force incidents that represent 57 people.”

DOD figures show that 39 US military aircraft and one civilian aircraft were shot down by communist forces or crashed near communist countries while flying operational missions between 1946 and 1991. Typical of the missions involved were:

- Two RB-29s lost in 1952, one over the Sea of Japan and the other over the Pacific Ocean.
- Two RB-50s lost over the Sea of Japan, one in 1953 and the other in 1956.
- An RB-47 downed over the Bering Sea in 1955 and another lost in 1960 over the Barents Sea.
- An RB-57 lost in the Black Sea in 1965, and an EC-121 downed over the Sea of Japan in 1969.

In March 1992, the former Cold War adversaries set up the United States-Russia Joint Commission on POW/MIAs. It meets several times each year as a forum through which the two nations can look for their missing service members.

Today, there is one American still missing from Operation Desert Storm. So far in the war in Iraq, there have been numerous casualties but relatively few POWs and MIAs. One soldier is still listed as a prisoner.

“Part of our role as a liaison to the families is to work with the Department of Defense office as they schedule these meetings,” said Russell. “It’s called a Family Member Update. Defense schedules updates about eight months out of the year, and we have two other months where we have annual meetings that usually are held in Washington, D.C.”

A typical family update attracts about 10 to 15 percent of the relevant persons living within 300 miles of the meeting site. For instance, about 300 family members live within 300 miles of San Antonio; around 30 family members can be expected to show up at a family update.

The next Southeast Asia Annual Conference will be in Washington,
D.C. Regional updates are scheduled for Omaha, Neb., on July 30; Columbus, Ohio, on Aug. 27; San Diego on Sept. 24; Raleigh, N.C., on Oct. 22; and Spokane, Wash., on Nov. 19.

“These meetings are all-day events,” said Russell, “and the first portion is given to briefings. All these different agencies that work the accounting issue—the Department of Defense, the JPAC guys from Hawaii, the Armed Forces DNA [Identification] Lab, etc.—give a series of presentations about the overall effort and what their organizations do, in a general sense. They show pictures and have graphs and slides, etc., to bring the audience up to speed on the overall effort. Then the second part of the meeting is opened up to the families to ask questions on each of the general areas they were briefed on, and then time is set aside, ... a couple of hours, ... for one-on-one discussion. This is the time when a family can sit down with my case and where are we headed?”

Those Still Missing

Are some live American prisoners still being held in Vietnam? In the aftermath of the war, that question became the subject of a great political controversy which has never fully died away. In a recent study for Congressional Research Service, analyst Robert L. Goldich asserted, “Few people familiar with the issue feel that any Americans are still being held against their will” in a communist country.

However, he went on to say: “Those who believe Americans are now held, or were after the war ended, feel that, even if no specific report of live Americans has thus far met rigorous proofs, the mass of information about live Americans is compelling. Those who doubt live Americans are still held, or were after the war ended, argue that, despite vast efforts, only one live American military prisoner remained in Indochina after the war (a defector who returned in 1979).”

Washington says it won’t rule out the possibility that Americans are being held in Indochina. Since 1982, the official US position has been as follows: “Although we have thus far been unable to prove that Americans are still being held against their will, the information available to us precludes ruling out that possibility. Actions to investigate live-sighting reports receive and will continue to receive necessary priority and resources based on the assumption that at least some Americans are still held captive. Should any report prove true, we will take appropriate action to ensure the return of those involved.”

The CRS report says that, of the 1,842 Americans still listed as unaccounted for, the Pentagon continues to search for the remains of 1,175. It has given up actively looking for any of the other 667 servicemen because it believes there is no prospect of finding them, based on the circumstances of their disappearance. Examples include 468 men lost over water, or those who died in exploding aircraft in flight, with no sign of crew ejection.

Families Organize

While the Pentagon and the services do the actual investigations, the families of the MIAs and POWs have done much to keep the country aware of the issue. Russell said, “We give credit to the family organization, the National League of POW/MIA Families. This was a Vietnam group that has kept this whole mission on the front burner from a political standpoint.”

The POW/MIA flag is really their flag. At the bottom of its logo are the words “You are not forgotten.”

The league originated on the West Coast in the late 1960s, when the wife of a ranking POW questioned the government’s policy of keeping a low profile on the POW/MIA issue. She put together a loosely knit group to press for more action and information. The group was incorporated formally in 1970 and is open to the wives, children, parents, and other close relatives of Americans listed as POW/MIA.

The league now has about 1,000 members. It is run by a seven-member board of directors, and its national office in Arlington, Va., has one full-time employee, the executive director, who is the sister of a missing service member. The rest of the staff are volunteers.

Russell shares the league’s feeling that a continued effort to account for POWs and MIAs is imperative. “If I could leave a message,” he said, “it’s that this whole effort of accounting is both a matter of national purpose and a very sacred mission. It gives a hard-hitting message that we are not going to forget our fallen service members, and we’re certainly not going to forget their families.”

In September, the same message will be reflected in a POW/MIA Recognition Day. By custom, this commemoration usually is observed in Pentagon ceremonies on the third Friday in September. Local observances are set for other days by local planners.

National POW/MIA Recognition Day is one of six days specified by law on which the black POW/MIA flag is to be flown over federal facilities and cemeteries, post offices, and military installations.

Bruce D. Callander is a contributing editor of Air Force Magazine. He served tours of active duty during World War II and the Korean War and was editor of Air Force Times from 1972 to 1986. His most recent article for Air Force Magazine, “Mr. Caron’s Opus,” appeared in the April issue.