



MEMORANDUM

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

From: Hal Roesch, Junior Vice Commander-in-Chief

Date: May 14, 2019

Re: 2019 POW/MIA Fact-Finding Trip

Overview

I departed CONUS on March 9, 2019, for a fact-finding trip to Thailand and Vietnam to observe and learn more about search and recovery operations that help determine the fate of missing and unaccounted-for American service members and civilians from the Vietnam War. I was accompanied by Adjutant General Kevin Jones and Bob Wallace, the Assistant Adjutant General and Executive Director of the VFW Washington Office. This was my and Kevin's first such trip, and it proved to be a very educational experience that we will never forget. We returned to CONUS on March 22, 2019.

Prior to our departure, we were briefed by the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) at their headquarters in Arlington, Va. During the briefing we discussed the recovery site we would be visiting in Vietnam. We learned that VFW leaders had visited the same site over the past two years, but this time new information obtained from a member of the unit moved the actual helicopter crash site to a nearby hill. This new information was learned at a Special Operations Conference.

We agreed that leading up to and during our National Convention in Orlando we will urge our members to bring forward any information they may have on missing Americans, as well as missing Vietnamese soldiers. DPAA staff attending our convention will then evaluate the information. We believe this extra push will benefit the overall Full Accounting Mission.

We spoke with many service members during the trip, told the VFW story, and talked about the many programs we provide to service members, veterans and their families. We explained our Veterans Service and Legislative programs, and how they benefit service members and veterans. Most of them were unaware of our Unmet Needs and Help a Hero Scholarship programs. We were also pleased to recruit nine new members for the VFW during the trip, three of whom as life

members. Continuing to tell our story about who we are, what we do, and who we do it for, sells our VFW to potential members. For more information on DPAA, go to <http://www.dpaa.mil/>.

Thailand

In Bangkok we started our visit by having lunch with VFW Department of Pacific Areas Junior Vice Commander Ken Stein and a number of District 5 members. Those who reside overseas have unique challenges that we in CONUS do not face, so it was very informative to hear their concerns about health care and mail delivery, as well as their membership challenges. It is reassuring to meet these members who reside, so far, from the flag pole and to listen to their dedication to the VFW. And I am proud to say both District 5 and the Department of the Pacific are also well over 100 percent in membership, too.

The following day, Air Force MSgt. Brianna Oberg, a VFW life member and IT/Communications specialist for DPAA Detachment 1, escorted us over to her headquarters, which is located inside the U.S. Embassy compound. MSgt. Oberg, who was filling in for her commander and deputy commander who were out on travel, was scheduled to depart the next day to provide IT/Comms support to a sister Detachment in Vietnam.

Detachment 1 is responsible for recovery operations in Burma, Cambodia, India and Thailand, in addition to their support functions for Detachment 2 in Hanoi, Vietnam, and Detachment 3 in Vientiane, Laos. They are DPAA's forward-based, regional air, logistics and support hub for the POW/MIA accounting mission in Indo-Pacific and Southeast Asia.

There are 741 still unaccounted-for Americans in Burma, 48 in Cambodia, 399 in India and 4 in Thailand. The challenges the Detachment faces in the countries they deal with are remote sites, aging witnesses, terrain changes, government bureaucracies and political situations out of their control.

We next met with Peter Haymond, Charge d'Affaires, and members of his embassy staff for an open discussion about the U.S.-Thai relationship, and economic and political situations.

The U.S. Embassy in Thailand houses 49 different U.S. federal agencies and is one of the largest U.S. embassies in the world. Embassy staff work with U.S. military retirees and veterans on their issues, but one problem is they don't know how many American veterans reside in the country. Our relationship with Thailand is very strong, based on the number of U.S. corporations doing business in the country, which has a strong economy. Mr. Haymond and his staff emphasized their strong support for the DPAA mission.

We then hosted lunch for DPAA staff and four U.S. Marine security guards. They were all very pleased with being stationed in Bangkok and their quality of life programs. Their concerns ranged from benefits and the GI Bill to health care, and eventually transitioning into veterans' status. We took the opportunity to discuss the VFW and the many programs we conduct that directly benefit service members and their families. A few of the participants were already VFW members.

Our next stop was at Joint U.S. Military Advisory Group-Thailand, where we met with Army Col. Wayne Turnbull, who wears three hats as Senior Defense Official, Defense Attaché, and Chief, U.S. Military Advisory Group-Thailand. The mission of JUSMAGTHAI is security cooperation, the

export of U.S. military hardware through the Foreign Military Sales program, and joint military exercises. They also house the support functions for military personnel based in Bangkok, as well as U.S. military retiree affairs. As a result of their long standing relationship with the host country, U.S. forces are able to train throughout Thailand, as well as use military airports to refuel.

We discussed our many programs for service members, especially our Service Officers and how they assist transitioning service members and veterans with their VA claims. Before departing, we were given a tour and had the opportunity to meet one of their volunteers in the Retiree Affairs Office.

Our last stop of the day was with Captain Droulliard of the Region 3, U.S. Marines Security Guards. The region is responsible for Embassy Guards in East Asia and the Pacific. We had the opportunity to discuss the issues and challenges the Marine Security Guards face in the region.

Learn more about the U.S. Embassy to Thailand at <https://th.usembassy.gov/>.

Laos

The following day we flew to Laos where we were met by the Detachment 3 commander, Army Lt. Col. Roy Horikawa, and Casualty Resolution specialist Joshua Maskovich, who were our escorts in the capital city of Vientiane.

Our first meeting was with Deputy Chief of Mission Colin Crosby, as the ambassador was on travel. The meeting was very free flowing and informative. Unexploded ordinance and ongoing demining operations are a key to our relationship with Laos, which was heavily bombed during the Vietnam War, and from which an untold number of UXOs still remain. The DPAA mission is also very important to the relationship.

Due to government bureaucracy, U.S. companies wanting to do business in Laos have hurdles they must overcome. Health care is not what we are used to and the very ill are sent to Thailand for care. China is investing big in health care and in other areas, and as a result are gaining influence in the country. Some students are educated out-of-country, with Australia and New Zealand being countries they have exchange programs with, as well as China.

We tried to meet with the head of the Laos POW/MIA Committee, Ambassador Phomma, but were unable to do so due to scheduling conflicts.

We next received a detailed briefing on the work of Detachment 3, whose mission is the fullest possible accounting of 288 missing and unaccounted-for Americans in Laos.

Due to the terrain, helicopters are usually necessary to reach most sites. Weather is another factor that influences site work, as well as the number of UXOs that are in the vicinity of every site, and which must be located and removed before any excavation begins. These issues, coupled with aging witnesses and acidic soil, just add to the challenges the Detachment faces. The goal of the Detachment is to work themselves out of a job.

The Detachment does medical outreach to locals at sites which is a positive win for all.

We had lunch with Detachment staff and four Marine Security Guards from the Embassy. There is not much to do in Laos so the Marines occupy themselves with exercise and other physical activities, as well as travel to Thailand. We took the opportunity to discuss the many programs we have that benefit service members and their families, such as Unmet Needs, Help a Hero Scholarships, and our Service Officers. We also explained our Legislative Advocacy and answered any questions they had. A very positive interaction with young Marines.

We next met with the Defense Attache', Army Lt. Col. T.J. Bouchillon. Laos has a military strength of around 30,000 who perform primarily a homeland security mission using Vietnamese, Russian and Chinese equipment. The U.S. conducts some training for the Lao army, and we have a Military Medical Program that works on infectious diseases and pandemic threats. We also work with them on counter-narcotics issues to help prevent the flow of narcotics from China and Burma. The Lao military has no NCO corps, but the U.S. remains optimistic about their future.

Vietnam

The following day we traveled to Saigon where we met with Army CW2 Jose Colon Feliciano and his Research and Investigation Team. A RIT Team is comprised of 10-14 members who are primarily analysts and linguists. Their job is to research archives in the host nation (museums, government archives, etc.); investigate any Last Known Alive leads (still our number one priority); and obtain oral histories from host-nation military and governmental officials who may have more information about a particular region or battle. The RIT Team noted that the Vietnamese are very cooperative, and any time new information is obtained a new case is opened.

Our next stop was Hanoi, where we were briefed by the Detachment 2 deputy commander, Marine Corps Maj. Shannon Ashley and his staff. The Detachment commander, Army Lt. Col. Adam Points, was at the recovery site we visited later that week.

There are currently 1,246 missing and unaccounted-for Americans in Vietnam. The challenges the Detachment face are underwater recoveries, weather, terrain, economic development, and aging witnesses. The goal is to increase the underwater investigations, identify new strategic partners, gain more access to the Vietnamese National Archives for case research, and cultivate new leads from American veterans of the Vietnam War.

Vietnam also performs unilateral site work under the supervision of Americans to ensure the integrity of the work. This is a force multiplier, as the U.S. gets more sites excavated during the year. In the past fiscal year, 10 sets of remains were repatriated with five positive IDs already.



Meeting with members of Detachment 2, Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, at their headquarters in Hanoi, Vietnam.

This year marks the 30th anniversary of U.S. and Vietnamese working together on this humanitarian mission. Over the years, cooperation and trust has expanded and the remains of many American service members have been returned home.

The Vietnamese are asking for VFW assistance in providing information from our Vietnam veteran members about missing Vietnamese service members. We have over the years asked our members for any information they may have, and whatever we receive is turned over to DPAA to pass along to the Vietnamese for possible identification. We will continue to do so, as well as ask for the return of personal effects that may have been recovered from battlefields, such as diaries, wallets and photos. As mentioned previously, we will highlight the issue at our upcoming National Convention.

We next traveled to the U.S. Embassy where we met with the Defense Attache', Army Col. Tuan Ton, followed by a meeting with a number of Marine Security Guards and U.S. Ambassador Dan Kritenbrink.

Colonel Ton talked about the real, practical cooperation between the U.S. and Vietnamese militaries. We currently train Vietnamese in the U.S. and give their future officers knowledge of military operations as well as international relations. Former Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis visited Vietnam twice while he was Secretary, which showed the importance of the relationship.

The Ambassador told us the partnership with Vietnam was very good and that Americans are very popular. Vietnam has concerns about China and their agenda, so they balance U.S. and Chinese relations. Vietnam is the fastest growing economy in Southeast Asia and tourism is big, as is U.S. investments. Half a million tourists visit Vietnam annually, and a number of them are Americans. The Vietnamese population is young and well educated. Transportation, energy and information technology are positives. We also discussed the fact that part of the relationship with the U.S. is funding to help clean up former Agent Orange sites around the country. This is seen by the residents as a very positive development.

The Marine Security Guards were very positive about their mission and their quality of life in Vietnam. We discussed the VFW and our programs.

We then had lunch with DPAA staff where we discussed in more detail their mission and challenges. One of the big challenges is their budget, which depends on politics. VFW has and will continue to advocate for proper mission funding no matter who controls the White House or Congress, because it is the right thing to do for our missing and unaccounted-for service members and their families.

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

Next we visited the Veterans Association of Vietnam and retired Lt. Gen. Nguyen Song Phi, Vice President, and retired Sr. Col. Tran Ngoc Dan, and a few of their members. A few years ago both individuals attended our VFW National Convention and both spoke very highly of that experience.

Their organization supports social events for veterans, and works with International Veterans Organizations as well as South East Asia Veterans organizations to share ideas. A major concern they raised was helping them to locate the remains of missing and unaccounted-for Vietnamese veterans. We explained the outreach we do and will continue to do.

We explained the VFW mission and the importance of the MIA mission to our members, and we pledged to share any information we obtain about their missing with them. They talked about the veterans' organizations they work with, UXOs and Agent Orange cleanup. We will continue the dialogue and follow up with another invite to a future VFW Convention.

Our next stop was at the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where we met with Le Chi Dung, Director of the Vietnamese Office for Seeking Missing Persons (VNOSMP). Mr. Le's dad was the first Vietnamese Ambassador to the United States and was involved in the visit VFW leadership made to Vietnam in 1991. We thanked him for the cooperation the Vietnamese Government provides DPAA, and discussed operations and the challenges we each face. The Director noted that President Trump had already visited Vietnam twice, as had Secretary Mattis.

He thanked the VFW for our annual visits to Vietnam, and he encouraged us to tell our membership about the level of cooperation the Vietnamese gives to this important humanitarian mission. He spoke very passionately about the mission and the responsibility that those of us alive have to resolve the fate of both missing American service members as well as missing Vietnamese soldiers.

Mr. Le asked for our assistance in locating missing Vietnamese service members and civilian personnel. We explained our program of requesting our members to bring forth any information they may have on missing Vietnamese soldiers and pledged that we will continue to ask our members for any information or artifacts that might help Vietnam recover their missing. He noted that former American service members had recently given them information about a mass grave that assisted the Vietnamese with the recovery of a number of their former soldiers. In addition, we also discussed the Agent Orange cleanup, which is a positive for the relationship.

Our last meeting of the day was with Ambassador Nguyen Tam Chien, former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, former Ambassador to the U.S., and President of the Vietnam-USA Society organization. The Ambassador is well known to VFW from his time in Washington, and his periodic visits to our Washington Office. We discussed U.S. businesses in Vietnam, the tourist/resort areas, and the MIA recovery site we were about to visit.

The next day we flew to Da Nang for a visit to an excavation site. Our first meeting in Da Nang was with the local chapter of the Veterans Association of Vietnam and with Navy Rear Adm. Jon Kreitz, the Deputy Director DPAA, as well as Detachment 2 leadership.

The purpose of the meeting was for the admiral to thank the local veterans for their support of DPAA missions. We also thanked them for their assistance and explained the importance of the MIA mission to the VFW, and that veterans working together can resolve any issue. We pledged to assist them in locating their own missing in any way we can.

The following day we traveled two hours west of Da Nang to a recovery site near Kham Duc, which is in Quang Nam Province. We were accompanied by Admiral Kreitz and Ambassador Kritenbrink.

At the site we learned that in April 1968 a helicopter crashed and burned with no survivors. Remains recovered at the time were of a Vietnamese and three Americans, who were identified by their dental records. One American soldier was not recovered, however, thus the excavation site. As noted previously at a Special Operations Conference, DPAA was informed by a member of the unit

that after the helicopter crashed, it flipped, and that he felt the missing American could be on a hill next to the original excavation site.

The experience of visiting a site where a missing American may be located, and seeing firsthand the sincere dedication of the DPAA staff and Vietnamese working the site, is something hard to put into words. It's just a very moving and remarkable experience to watch these dedicated professionals, both civilian and military, at work. We had the opportunity to speak with each of the DPAA team members individually and as a group to thank them for the work they continue to do for missing service members and their families. And we were also able to share our VFW story.

The Vietnamese hosted lunch where we engaged with our hosts as well as the ambassador, the admiral and DPAA team members. We were informed that a tooth had been recovered at the site so hopefully the missing American has been located and will soon return to his loving family.

Closing Comments

Our sincere thank you to the dedicated men and women of the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency for fulfilling a soldier's promise to never leave a fallen comrade on the battlefield. They are true professionals dedicated to the mission. Their work helps bring closure to the families of our missing and unaccounted-for service members.

We are also very appreciative of the staffs at the Departments of Defense and State who worked this trip for us.

We had the opportunity to meet with a number of service members from all branches of the military. Each one was dedicated to their mission and to their service. We took the opportunity during every meeting to tell the VFW story and the many programs we have that benefit service members, veterans and their families. We also answered any questions they had. We had very positive meetings speaking with America's finest.

A special thank you to the members of District 5, Pacific Areas, and to Department Junior Vice Commander Ken Stein, for taking the time to meet with us and share their concerns.

This was truly a very positive, educational trip, and it helps keep the VFW in the forefront on the MIA issue. My sincere appreciation to Commander-in-Chief Lawrence for assigning us this trip.