



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: Brian J. Duffy, Senior Vice Commander-in-Chief

Date: April 15, 2016

Re: 2016 POW/MIA Fact-Finding Trip to Southeast Asia

Overview

I departed for Southeast Asia on March 5, 2016, with Bob Wallace, Assistant Adjutant General and Executive Director of the VFW Washington Office and we returned home March 23, 2016. The purpose of the trip was to obtain firsthand knowledge of search and recovery operations to help determine the fate of some 1,620 missing and unaccounted-for American service members and civilians from the Vietnam War.

As a post-Vietnam veteran, I was honored to walk the ground where many VFW comrades served, as well as to personally witness America's commitment to bring our fallen home. It was also an honor to personally thank the U.S. military and civilians who are tasked with fulfilling the soldier's pledge — the men and women assigned to the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA), at their operational headquarters in Hawaii and in three of their detachments in Thailand, Laos and Vietnam. I was very pleased to learn that many were already VFW members, and that they were very appreciative of our unwavering support of their mission and of MIA families everywhere.

On our way back to the States we visited with VFW comrades in Saipan and Guam to hear their concerns about VA health care and benefits, and met with assigned military personnel from all branches to hear of their concerns regarding quality of life issues and the budget.

Hawaii

Our visit started with a meeting at Camp H.M. Smith with the Chief of Staff of U.S. Pacific Command, Army Maj. Gen. Eric Wendt. We discussed the challenges the command faces, especially China's expansion in the South China Sea, North Korea, and the possible return of sequestration and its impact on PACOM, which is America's largest geographical combatant command. The general said PACOM is fully engaged and paying attention. We discussed the purpose of our trip and the VFW's commitment to the fullest possible accounting of missing

Americans from all wars. I also took the opportunity to talk about the VFW and the many programs we provide for military personnel and their families, as well as for veterans.

We then visited the new headquarters of DPAA-West at Hickam Air Force Base, which is the operational arm of DPAA's worldwide mission. We received an in-depth mission briefing and tour from its Deputy Director, Army Brig. Gen. Mark Spindler, and members of his staff.

Of the 83,000 missing Americans from our nation's wars going back to World War II, only an estimated 25,000 to 35,000 are actually recoverable. This is due to the nature of war, such as ships sinking, catastrophic explosions, and aircraft disappearing off radar scopes. A full 75 percent of the missing are in the PACOM area of operation, from World War II to Korea, Vietnam and the Cold War.

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 paperwork also impact research and investigation efforts.

DPAA is maximizing the use of technology and aggressively expanding its public-private partnerships to increase operations while upholding strict scientific standards. We also discussed the battleship USS Oklahoma remains that were recently disinterred, and the positive identification results through DNA.

General Spindler stressed the importance of communication with families and Veteran Service Organizations, and emphasized that VSO representatives are now invited to DPAA-hosted Family Updates around the country. I was very impressed with the tour of the building and the size of the lab that is used to identify remains.

For more information on DPAA, go to <http://www.dpaa.mil/>.

The following day we spent with U.S. Coast Guard District 14 in Honolulu, where we received a briefing and toured a Coast Guard Cutter and other patrol boats. The mission of the Coast Guard in the Pacific is Maritime Security, Maritime Safety, Protect Natural Resources, Maritime Mobility and National Defense, and their assets include both air and sea platforms.

I wanted to visit the Coast Guard because they have a vital Homeland Security mission, as well as a National Defense mission that not everyone understands. We had the opportunity to meet with a number of Coast Guardsmen and share the VFW story about the many programs we have for their benefit, as well as our work in Washington, DC. We also discussed sequestration and the impact another round could have on their mission. We then had lunch with a few members and had a free flowing discussion about life in today's Coast Guard.

For more information about the U.S. Coast Guard in Hawaii, visit <http://www.uscg.mil/d14/>.

We also had the opportunity to dine with VFW Department of Hawaii Commander Randy Grant and Senior Vice Commander Lane Martin to discuss membership challenges and opportunities in the islands, as well as the upcoming Western Conference, which will be held in Honolulu in November.

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 Detachment 2 in Vietnam and Detachment 3 in Laos. We met with the Detachment 1 Commander, Air Force Lt. Col. Kevin Pritz, and his Deputy, Army Maj. John Lee, as well as members of the Detachment.

The Detachment faces numerous logistical challenges when operating in Burma and India. The loss sites are very remote, plus there are border issues and host country political issues that often require a number of approvals from different government agencies before a shovel is ever put into the ground. 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. Over lunch with Detachment staff, we had the opportunity to discuss the VFW's many troop support programs, as well as our Veterans Service and Legislative programs.

Our next stop was at the Joint U.S. Military Advisory Group Thailand, where we received a briefing from its Deputy, Mr. Vicker. The purpose of JUSMAGTHAI is for security cooperation, the export of U.S. military hardware through foreign military sales, and joint military exercises. There are 120 active-duty military assigned to the U.S. Embassy in Thailand.

Thailand has the third largest military budget in Southeast Asia, and they allow the U.S. access to training sites as well as airports for refueling. JUSMAGTHAI also provides military retirees and the VFW with office space for assisting veterans and dependents with VA benefits.

We next visited the U.S. Embassy and met with Deputy Chief of Mission Patrick Murphy to discuss the U.S. relationship with Thailand, as well as defense and economic issues. We also discussed the political climate in Thailand, where the military has run the country since the 2014 coup. Elections are scheduled to be held in 2017.

Mr. Murphy discussed the importance of the Full Accounting Mission and thanked the VFW for our strong support of same. He then asked if we could assist the Embassy when they traveled around Thailand meeting with Americans, especially U.S. veterans. We immediately thought of service work and have referred Embassy staff to the VFW Department of the Pacific Adjutant Bear Hudson, who resides in Thailand.

The following day we attended a luncheon with VFW Pacific Department Commander Homer Kempton, Adjutant Bear Hudson, and a number of VFW members. We had a very informative conversation about the challenges and opportunities for the VFW in Thailand.

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

Laos

We next visited Laos where we met with the Detachment 3 Deputy Commander, Navy Lt. Cmdr. Chris Williams, and Bill Gadoury, Casualty Resolution Specialist, as well as U.S. Embassy staff.

There are 300 unaccounted for Americans in Laos. Currently there are 74 sites on the master excavation list, which totals 104 individuals. Challenges faced operating in Laos are terrain, weather, unexploded ordinance, and a declining number of eyewitnesses. Due to lack of

infrastructure and terrain, helicopters are required to reach most sites. All operations must be heavily coordinated with the Lao government, and the U.S. is restricted to 53 American personnel per operation. The teams generally operate out of pre-established base camps and either fly or drive to their recovery sites.

We then met with the Deputy Director of the Lao Veterans Association, Brig. Gen. Khamhom, to whom we extended the VFW's appreciation of his country's support of the Full Accounting Mission. We also discussed America's investment to quality of life issues like clean water, and ongoing demining operations to help Laos destroy unexploded ordinances. The general thanked the VFW for our involvement in the MIA issue, and for our support of his nation. In closing we invited his organization to visit the VFW Washington Office.

Our next meeting was with the U.S. Defense Attaché, Army Lt. Col. William Boswell, and Leo Spivey, a Defense Intelligence Agency representative for Stony Beach, which is an investigative arm of the Full Accounting Mission. All investigations and interviews with locals must be coordinated with the Lao government. The Lao military has old equipment and has no expectations to fight. Their focus is entirely inside the borders of the country. They also do not take advantage of joint U.S. military training opportunities.

We then met with Deputy Chief of Mission Michael Kline to discuss the VFW and our commitment to the POW/MIA mission and the U.S./Lao relationship. The last visit of the day was to the Lao National Museum, which was very interesting.

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

Vietnam

We were met in Ho Chi Minh City by the Detachment 2 Deputy Commander, Marine Corps Maj. David Klingensmith, and language specialist Buddy Newell, and driven to Tay Ninh City, where we dined with members of the Vietnam Office for Seeking Missing Persons, which is the host organization for all U.S. investigation and recovery operations in the country.

The following morning we drove to an excavation site about an hour away near the Cambodian border. The recovery mission was for a reconnaissance aircraft with two aboard that went missing on Sept. 26, 1967.

Visiting the site and watching the U.S. military and civilian personnel perform their work was an experience I will never forget. All ranks and branches of our military worked together with the Vietnamese to hopefully find the remains of two missing American service members. The methodical manner in which the work is done, overseen by an anthropologist, is just remarkable. The worldwide work of DPAA is truly a story that cannot be over told. The fact that the U.S. military never leaves a service member behind says so much about our nation's values. I have always supported the MIA mission, but my knowledge and appreciation of what they do daily to bring our missing home has grown exponentially. Truly an incredible experience.

I had the opportunity to thank the team members and tell the VFW story, not only about our commitment to the MIA mission but of our many programs for service members and their families. Following our visit we were hosted to lunch by the Vietnamese.

Afterwards we drove four hours back to Ho Chi Minh City before traveling the next day to Hanoi with Buddy Newell for meetings with a Vietnamese official and U.S. military and diplomatic personnel. We were met on arrival by the Detachment 2 Commander, Army Lt. Col. Romel Pajimula.

In Hanoi we received a detailed briefing of the work of Detachment 2 and the mission challenges they face, to include time, weather, terrain, aging witnesses, and economic development that threatens to permanently bury potential loss sites under buildings, highways and parking lots. The Detachment is also experiencing a turnover in staff whose historical knowledge is vast and will be very difficult to replicate. We also discussed the work of Vietnamese recovery teams that are led by six U.S. personnel, as well as underwater recovery operations.

Our next meeting was with Susan Sutton, the U.S. Embassy's Deputy Chief of Mission, to discuss the VFW's commitment to the POW/MIA mission, as well as our visit to the recovery site the day before. President Obama is expected to visit Vietnam in May and the Embassy is busy working on arrangements. The Vietnamese are very excited about the visit. The first area of cooperation between our two countries was the Full Accounting Mission. We also discussed the U.S. pivot towards Asia, China and its relationship with Vietnam, the economic positives in Vietnam, and human rights. Ms. Sutton concluded by thanking the VFW for our strong commitment to the mission, and for what we do daily for America's military, veterans and their families.

We were then briefed by Embassy staff who discussed economic opportunities for U.S. companies and others. Some of the American companies doing business in Vietnam are Ford, Coca Cola, Procter & Gamble, Nike and General Electric. I did learn it is not easy to do business in Vietnam due to their rules. Vietnam has a good workforce, but they are undertrained and underpaid. Factory workers make about \$220 per month. Half the population is under 30 and eager to learn. The Vietnamese are very entrepreneurial, but there is a need to improve their education system and start a technology boom. There are also economic and security concerns with China. Some production is already moving from China to Vietnam. Corruption is also an issue.

Tourism continues to grow in Vietnam, especially from Russia, the U.S., France, Korea and Australia. The beach areas are beautiful and bustling.

Our final meeting in Vietnam was with Ambassador Nguyen Ba Hung, Director-General, Americas Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the lead person on the MIA issue. We talked about our site visit, thanked him for the cooperation the U.S. receives on the MIA mission, and for the hospitality of his staff in the field.

The Ambassador noted the May visit of POTUS and the fact that he wants Obama to see the cooperation between our two countries. He called the VFW visits to Vietnam very positive, and encouraged us to continue them, to witness his country's cooperation on the MIA issue firsthand, as well as to recognize the challenges that go with the work.

He discussed the importance of the MIA mission and asked for our assistance in locating missing Vietnamese military and civilian personnel. He noted the political sensitivity within his country for their missing. We noted that the VFW has and will continue to ask our members for any information or artifacts that might help Vietnam recover her missing.

The Ambassador then asked for our assistance in getting the U.S. government to:

- Help Vietnam locate their own missing;
- Give any documents or artifacts to POTUS so that he can give them to the Vietnamese Government when he visits; and
- Help Vietnamese researchers gain access to U.S. archives.

We agreed to discuss the above with DPAA leadership. The Ambassador again thanked us for the visit and our commitment on the MIA issue. The following day we flew to Guam and then Saipan to visit U.S. military personnel and VFW comrades.

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

Guam/Saipan

We landed in Guam and flew straight to Saipan for the day to visit VFW members headed by VFW Department of Pacific Quartermaster Pete Callaghan. We were hosted to lunch to discuss the challenges and opportunities for veterans on Saipan.

Their top issues were the lack of VA benefits counselors and the timely availability of VA health care. VA officials rarely visit Saipan to meet with veterans. There is a VA doctor on Saipan, but specialty care is mainly provided on Guam or Hawaii, which requires veterans to get appointments and work with VA to arrange transportation.

One very frustrating story came from a comrade who for two months had been unable to get an MRI appointment that his VA doctor said was needed. We sent his information to our Washington Office who quickly coordinated with the VA Central Office to arrange his appointment and necessary travel arrangements. We were glad to assist but it is unacceptable that higher intervention was required when all this should have been handled locally. As such, we added to our schedule a visit to the VA Benefits Office and Outpatient Clinic on Guam.

The Saipan VFW Post 3457 conducts many VFW programs, but with no on-island military presence, has difficulty in replenishing its ranks. I'm proud to see the Post at 103 percent based on the latest MEMSTATS report.

That evening we flew back to Guam and the following day toured U.S. Naval Base Guam with its Commanding Officer, Capt. Alfred "Andy" Anderson. The base is expanding because of the impending relocation of U.S. Marines from Okinawa. The Japanese government is paying for some of the expansion of the port facility so ships can load Marines if necessary.

We hosted a dozen sailors to lunch and had a very open and frank discussion with them about quality of life issues, sequestration, the operation tempo of constant deployments, GI Bill concerns, and VA benefits. The theme of doing more with less was expressed by many. The sailors are also concerned that civilian leadership in Washington just doesn't understand what life in today's military is all about.

When an individual service member separates from the military from Guam, they do not have the benefit of Job Fairs as they do in CONUS. One sailor suggested returning one or two months earlier so they would be able to take advantage of those fairs. Our Washington Office will explore that idea with the Defense Department and Congress.

Learn more about Naval Base Guam at http://www.cnic.navy.mil/regions/jrm/installations/navbase_guam.html.

Our last meeting of the day was at the U.S. Marine Corps Activity Guam with Col. Philip Zimmerman and Gunnery Sgt. Omar Hadley, where we discussed the relocation of Marines from Okinawa to Guam by 2022. Guam will be a good training environment for the Marines. We then met with six Marines to discuss their issues and concerns, which were the same as the sailors had expressed earlier at lunch.

Learn more about U.S. Marines on Guam at <http://www.marforpac.marines.mil/Units/MarineCorpsActivityGuam.aspx>.

That evening local VFW members hosted us to dinner where I was able to thank them and their families for all they did for the troops.

The following day we visited the 36th Wing at Andersen Air Force Base, where we received a command briefing and tour by Steve “Taz” Wolborsky, Director of Plans, Programs and Readiness. Andersen is the largest air base in the Pacific, and with the pivot to the Pacific, its importance has risen from a U.S. policy perspective. There are a number of quality of life enhancements being developed, but there is also concern that the improvements will not keep pace with the new number of troops assigned to the base, especially when as many as 5,000 Marines and 1,300 dependents are moved from Okinawa to Guam.

We then had the opportunity to meet with the 36th Wing Commander, Air Force Brig. Gen. Andrew Toth. Our conversation touched on the impending Marine move and associated construction, the pivot to the Pacific policy, quality of life issues, and sequestration. In addition, I discussed the various VFW programs we have for service members and their families and for veterans. I emphasized our work in Washington to enhance and protect their benefits. We also discussed more interaction between the base and the local VFW, and we will have our comrades follow up on same.

Next we hosted a luncheon with eight airmen and soldiers. We had an excellent conversation about the VFW and life in today’s military, and again we heard about doing more with less resources.

During lunch an Airman informed us of an event they were having for Airmen and their families on April 29th and that they were looking for sponsorship for. VFW Post # 1509 in Guam immediately requested a MAP Grant and I was pleased to hear the grant was approved and the VFW will be taking part in the event on April 29.

Learn more about the Air Force’s 36th Wing at <http://www.andersen.af.mil/>.

Our last two meetings on Guam were with the VA Benefits Office and the VA Health Care Outpatient Clinic. The main complaint we heard from our members was local VA officials don’t communicate with local veterans. There are no town hall meetings to hear the concerns of veterans, and the Benefits Office doesn’t conduct outreach on Saipan. Our visit to the Benefits Office confirmed the complaints and we have brought these issues to the attention of senior VA officials in Washington.

The visit to the VA Outpatient Clinic also confirmed delays in health care delivery due to staffing shortages. They have the positions, but face challenges in filling them with qualified providers.

Veterans on Saipan and Guam receive specialty care at the Navy Hospital on Guam or are flown to Hawaii.

The following day we returned to CONUS.

Closing Comments

A very special thank you goes to the dedicated staff of the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency for fulfilling a soldier's promise to never leave a fallen comrade on the battlefield. Their dedication and passion for the mission, and to the families, is real and ever-present, and we will explore ways to appropriately thank those who deploy into the field. We are also grateful to the many Department of Defense and State personnel who contributed to the success of this trip, as well as for the courtesies and hospitalities extended by the many VFW members we met.

The VFW is very well known and respected overseas, and it was an honor to extend our appreciation to representatives of the governments of Laos and Vietnam for their continued support of the Full Accounting Mission.

Visiting military personnel is always a highlight for me. At every opportunity we discussed how the VFW can better assist them with our many programs, from our Sports Clip/VFW Scholarship and Military Service Programs, to our National Veterans Service Program and advocacy work on Capitol Hill, because their concerns are our concerns.

Disturbing are continued comments that service members do not feel their elected and appointed leaders in Washington understand what it's like to serve in today's military. It's an all-volunteer force that has successfully fought a two-front war for well over a decade, but a military that many now say costs too much, despite all the new threats.

We continue to hear that military personnel are doing more with less, which is compounded by the fact that sequestration — though delayed until FY 2017 — is still the law of the land afterwards. While no one can ever question the military's can-do attitude, the troops and their families are concerned that quality of life issues, education benefits, health care, and pay could be impacted by dwindling budgets.

We need our warfighters focused on the fight, which is why the VFW must redouble our efforts to use this federal election year to finally end sequestration and bring some stability back to a military that is still at war. As an organization of combat veterans, it is our obligation to care for all who serve and served, as well as their families.

A special thank you to Randy Grant, Department of Hawaii Commander and Fred Chang, Past Department Commander for meeting us at the airport on arrival in Honolulu and escorting us to our hotel. Also to Bear Hudson, Department Adjutant of the Pacific for making sure we were escorted to the luncheon with VFW members and to Shawn Watson, Past Department Commander of the Pacific for meeting us on arrival in Guam and making sure we made our flights to Saipan and home. To Brian Merenda a sincere thank you for ensuring we were on time for all of our meetings in Guam.

Thank you for the opportunity to represent our VFW. This was a very educational trip that I recommend be continued in the future.