

# **DRAFT REPORT**

**VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA  
POW/MIA COMMITTEE  
VETERANS INITIATIVE PROGRAM MISSION TRIP 2007**

**Gary Jones, chairman POW/MIA Committee  
William Duker, Director of Veterans Initiative Program**

**Team members were Jack Devine, VVA vice president; Gary Jones, Chairman POW/MIA Committee; Bill Duker, Director, Veterans Initiative Program; Bob Maras, Past Chairman, VITF.**

**The 2007 mission began for us on October 9, 2007 and ended on November 1, 2007.**

**We took with us information on five cases accounting for 165 KIA and 3 POW's. The documents and uniform items were very gratefully received in that they had a high possibility of identifying a family. We have now provided information on a potential total of 9439 KIA's and 1092 POW's.**

**Prior to departure we visited the Defense POW/MIA Office in Washington and were given a good briefing on what was happening in country from their perspective. From this briefing we took talking points and insight with us that proved to be very useful. Also, we correspond with Steve Thompson at JPAC Headquarters at Hickham Air Force Base, Hawaii for headquarters input.**

**Upon arrival in Hanoi we quickly meet with the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command, Detachment 2 (JPAC). At JPAC, Det 2 we met with LTC. James Saenz the Det. 2 Commander, Ron Ward the Casualty Resolution Specialist and Linguist, Buddy Newell. We have known and worked with both Buddy and Ron for many years. Ron just recently replaced Gary Flanagan, another dedicated individual who retired after many years of service with JPAC. Ron is the perfect choice for the position. The primary reason we meet with JPAC before any of our other meetings with the Vietnamese is to get an update on what JPAC is doing and how we can assist them when we do meet with the Vietnamese both in Hanoi and throughout the rest of Vietnam.**

**At both DPMO and JPAC there were two major areas of concern we were requested to address in our meetings with Vietnamese officials; increased access to archival material and increased unilateral investigations, particularly relating to the Last Known Alive (LKA) cases. At all stops the Vietnamese assured us that they intend to do their best to cooperate on this issue. Most support, I believe will come from the Vietnamese Veterans level. We did receive some leads on U.S. casualties, which we have caused to be forwarded to JPAC.**

**We begin our meetings in Hanoi. Our first meeting is with our sponsoring agency, the Vietnam Union of Friendship Organizations (VOFO) and Vietnam-USA Society (VUFO/VUSA). Mr. Vu Xuan Hong chaired the meeting. Mr. Hong holds many titles to include elected membership in National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Also in attendance with VUFO and VUSA were Hoang Cong Thuy and Bui Van Nghi. We have known and worked with both Mr. Hong and Mr. Thuy since the beginning of the Veterans Initiative Task Force, the predecessor of the Veterans Initiative Program. Mr. Nghi has for many years been our translator and trip coordinator and is considered by us to be a member of our delegation. The discussion primarily involved a political and economic overview of the relationship of our two countries. We all agreed that the relationship between VVA and VUFO/VUSA was strong and productive**

**Veterans Association of Vietnam:**

**The meetings with the Veterans Association of Vietnam (VAVN), both with the Executive Central Committee in Hanoi and at the Provincial level throughout the country, were remarkable in that they had just recently elected new leadership. Although we were familiar with many of the members present, we also met a number of new leaders. The newly elected Vice President of the VAVN Executive Committee is Lt. Gen. Hai. Lt. Gen. Hai served as the North Vietnamese Vice-Air Marshal during the war. These leadership changes reinforced and encouraged our relationships between the VAVN and the VVA and our mission. All the meetings with the VAVN were positive, they were familiar with our program and our delegates, were appreciative of what we are trying to accomplish and pledged to continue to assist in the recovery of Americans still unaccounted**

for from the war. We assured them that our intentions were to continue in our efforts to do the same for their families. What sets our program apart from others is the veteran-to-veteran, face-to-face approach.

**Ministry of Foreign Affairs:**

A very important meeting for us is The Vietnam Office of Seeking Missing Personnel (MFA/VNOSMP). We met for the first time with Pham Binh Minh, Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In the past we have met with the Director of the VNOSMP, Mr. Ba Hung. We were told that he is also heading up the Americas desk at the MFA and would be unable to meet with us on this trip. He sent his regrets and best wishes. Many of us have known Ba Hung for many years and we have worked closely with him. Deputy Minister Minh was very knowledgeable about our program and provided current information concerning the MFA and VNOSMP. We discussed the requests to increase access to archival material and unilateral investigations. Mr. Minh did mention that information from U S veterans relating to the whereabouts of soldiers that fought for the South Vietnamese Government during the war would be important as well. To our knowledge, VVA has never received any information pertaining to unaccounted South Vietnamese soldiers. However, we consider this request to be a very positive development.

We were invited to tour and received a presentation at the Center for Landmine/UXO Clearing Technology (BOMICEN). This Center is part of the Ministry of National Defense (MOD), which is responsible for landmine, and UXO clearing. The delegation was told that 12% of Vietnam contains UXO and landmines totaling around 800,000 tons. Hundreds of examples of UXO and landmines were on display at the Center. We were also told that approximately 100,000 Vietnamese, many of them children, have been killed or wounded by UXO and landmines since the end of the war. In the course of locating, investigating and recovering remains a most serious threat to US military, Vietnamese military and civilians is the unexploded ordinance, which has saturated the country from the French wars, WW2 and the American war. The threat is particularly vicious in that children make up the largest number of victims in the country. This became a talking point for us at all stops. The major needs on the part of the Vietnamese UXO personnel is for education, location and

safety equipment. Any witness that might be able to assist in location or placement of UXO would be most welcome to assist the teams in country. Quang Tri Province in particular and I Corps in general has the largest number of UXO and landmines.

**Ministry Of National Defense:**

Our last meeting with Vietnamese officials in Hanoi was with the Ministry of National Defense (MOD). The MOD is made up of uniformed active duty military. The MOD is the agency that receives the original material and information that we bring on our trips. Senior Colonel Nguyen Quang Bieu chaired the meeting. He and other senior officers provided our delegation with a detailed review of recent events that lasted over two hours. Because of improved relations between our two countries, Vietnam is considering placing a Military Attaché at the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington, D C. He also discussed the increased Military to Military (MIL to MIL) cooperation with the US Military relating to UXO clearing, Avian Flu, HIV/AIDS treatment and education and Dioxin (Agent Orange) hot spot clean up. They expressed the need for increased international assistance from not only governments but Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) as well.

We were also given a report on the last twelve mass gravesites as a result of information VVA has provided through the Veterans Initiative. They have recovered sixty-nine remains from these twelve sites but are continuing to excavate. These are often very difficult because many are in Quang Tri province and there are large amounts of UXO that has to be cleared first. Also it often requires clearing out areas where rubber trees are now growing and the farmers must be reimbursed for the economic loss. The weather is another factor that slows down the process.

**US Embassy:**

We try to meet with the U S Embassy staff and when available the US Ambassador after all our meetings with the Vietnamese in Hanoi has been completed. This gives us a chance to provide them with copies of the cases we returned to the Vietnamese and report on how our meetings went and what we learned. They in turn brief us on any issues that they feel will assist us as we travel throughout the country. The new Ambassador, Mr. Michael W. Michalak was traveling and unable to meet with us. However, we were able to meet with Mr. Jonathan M. Alois, Deputy Chief of Mission who gave us a

very detailed and valuable briefing on current events affecting the relationship between the United States and Vietnam.

The evening prior to leaving Vietnam for Laos we had a dinner meeting with JPAC. As with the U S Embassy, it gives us an opportunity to relate to them the results of our meetings with the Vietnamese.

#### **South:**

We move south with meetings in the provinces of Thua Thien-Hue, Quang Tri, Da Nang City and Ho Chi Minh City. At all locations we met with the VAVN, Peoples Committees and/or Department of Foreign Affairs. The issues that were discussed in our meetings in Hanoi were very similar in the meetings with the VAVN and Provincial Government Authorities. In Ho Chi Minh City, besides our customary meeting with the VAVN, we also meet with the Ho Chi Minh City Union of Friendship Organization (HUFO) and the United States Consulate.

At the U S Consulate we were fortunate to meet with the new Consul General, Mr. Kenneth J. Fairfax. Also in attendance were Economic Officers Dovas A. Saulys and Douglas Sonnek. The meetings with the Consulate are similar to the ones we have with the Embassy. We provide them with copies of the information that we turned over to the Vietnamese and report on our trip. They in turn update us on their perspective of the climate and various situations that they address on a daily basis. The briefings that we receive from both the U S Embassies in Vietnam and Laos and the U S Consulate in Vietnam are invaluable to us. This sharing of information provides a clearer picture to everyone of the changes, and in some areas, the progress being made.

We are very grateful and respectful of the outstanding caliber of the personnel serving the embassies in both countries. We thank them all very much for the very much-appreciated efforts they put forth in hosting host while handling a very busy schedule.

#### **LAOS:**

We arrived in Vientiane on 17 October and were met by LCDR Troy Carr, Executive officer and TSgt Patrick Lippold of JPAC, Det 3 and Harvey Somers, Chief of the Economic/Political Section of the US Embassy who assisted us in processing through Immigration and Customs. The situation in terms of sponsorship differs from that of Vietnam. In Vietnam we need an official government agency to

arrange our meetings. Where as in Laos, JPAC and the U S Embassy graciously schedules all of our meetings and assists us with transportation and hotel bookings, etc.

#### **US Embassy:**

Shortly after arrival we transferred to the U S Embassy and JPAC offices. Our first meeting was with the new Ambassador to Laos, Ravic R. Huso, and Charge de Affairs Mary Grace McGeehan. We also met with other U S Embassy officials to include Joshua Archibald the Economy/Commercial Officer and Scott Oringderff, Special Agent with the Drug Enforcement Agency.

#### **JPAC Det 3:**

Later that day we met up with Bill Gadoury, Casualty Resolution Specialist for JPAC, Det 3. Bill has been with Det.3 for many years and has been extremely supportive of our program. Bill is fluent in Lao and his knowledge of the historical and current issues is invaluable. He accompanies us to all official meetings with the Lao officials. Besides the meetings at the Embassy we were taken to the JPAC, Det 3 Offices and housing area. This is the heart and soul of JPAC operations in Laos. Bill Gadoury gave us an extensive briefing.

#### **Lao Veterans Federation:**

The following day we first met with Lt. Gen Nkhon Sisanon, president of the Lao Veterans Federation. We discussed many subjects pertaining to the POW/MIA issue encouraging the Lao veterans to continue providing information on any Americans still unaccounted from the war, especially any Last Known Alive (LKA) cases. Although the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defense work closely with JPAC, he assured us the Lao veterans do provide information and would continue to do so. The major situation he wanted to discuss with us and elicit our assistance was with the UXO problem. This came as no surprise to us as we know that through are discussions with JPAC and others, the existence of UXO in Laos is by far the worst in Southeast Asia. We stated that we would explore how VVA might be able to provide some assistance. In Lao, the Veterans Association is just now beginning to consider the Laotian losses and how to deal with them. Consequently, they are poorly prepared to work on recovery problems. We also have found no information so far regarding Laotian MIA' s to take back to

them. Never the less they have been very cooperative in working with JPAC in the field in locating our losses.

Our next meeting was with Mr. Southam Sakonhninhom, Director General, Europe and Americas Department for the Ministry Of Foreign Affairs (MFA). Mr. Sakonhninhom and his office work very closely with JPAC and the Embassy on the POW/MIA issue in Laos. We expressed our gratitude to him for his excellent support to help resolve American cases. We shared with him our conversation with the Lao Veterans Federation and he stated his appreciation to assist them, especially with the UXO problem.

Although we were unable to adjust our itinerary, the timing for our visit to Laos came at an extremely busy time for both the Embassy and JPAC. As with JPAC in Vietnam, JPAC in Laos is just beginning to set up for the most recent Joint Field Activities (JFA). As a result we were unable to meet with the new JPAC, Det 3 Commander, LTC Brandt Deck who was in the field with the new arrivals. Also, the Lao and the U S Military were in the middle of working together on a Military to Military (MIL to MIL) exercise. However, in spite of our delegation adding to an already busy week for them, everyone at JPAC and the Embassy went out of their way to make sure we accomplished our mission. We truly appreciate their assistance during a busy and difficult time.

#### **CONCLUSION:**

I can't say enough about the high quality of individuals who work for JPAC, from the Headquarters in Hawaii to the Detachments we work with in Southeast Asia. They always go out of their way to support us and appreciate what we are trying to accomplish.

The U S Embassies in Vietnam and Laos, along with the U S Consulate in Vietnam continue to provide us with information that gives us a better picture as to what we need to be aware of throughout our visits. They are addressing some very difficult and complicated issues and are succeeding to bring the respective countries together.

Many sensitive political issues, particularly in Vietnam, were brought to our attention in our various meetings. We explained to them, as in the past, if it does not directly relate to what the mandates of the VVA Resolutions require, we are unable to respond in a public forum. We believe that this is the way it should be. For us to succeed we must stay focused on the issue. We acknowledge

**that not everyone agrees with this approach. However, those that we work most closely with and who we trust to be the most knowledgeable on the POW/MIA issue agree that this is the strength of our program. As long as we work mostly veteran to veteran, we will continue to gain the trust and cooperation of everyone with whom we interact. Thus we can continue to assist in the resolution of this most difficult and painful issue.**

**The message this team carries back to the membership is that this program is considered on the international and national levels as being an unprecedented successful example of veteran effort to resolve the most painful issues of war and to develop a relationship between people who understand that war must end for each person and each country. This is one of VVA's most outstanding programs and we on the team thank you for giving us the opportunity to serve. Your continued support is of great importance on so many levels.**

**Respectfully submitted,**

**Gary Jones, chairman, POW/MIA  
Bill Duker, director, Veterans Initiative Program**