MIA RECOVERIES IN VIETNAM – ONE STEP AT A TIME

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Photos: Interim Search & Recovery Report

Manmade cave and charcoal trench inside the crash site perimeter.

Searching for the remains of my first husband, Capt. Jerry Zimmer, USMC – an F4B jet pilot, shot down in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, August 29, 1969, along with his navigator, 1st Lt. Al Graf, has given me greater appreciation for the challenges associated with this very complicated pursuit.

Families with loved ones still unaccounted-for in Southeast Asia, during one of America's most unpopular wars, will attest to the emotional toll and uncertainty that goes with the territory, but nevertheless we continue to have hope in our hearts, and put one foot in front of the other and keep going.

WHERE TO NEXT?

In August 2014, I learned that two-thirds of Jerry's and Al's crash site had been excavated to completion and that anthropologists with the recently deactivated Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC), now integrated into the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA), had closed that portion of the site with no remains found to date.

Recovered life support equipment, considered important to the future direction of Jerry's case, was sent in September 2014 to the Life Science Equipment Laboratory (LSEL) at Wright Patterson AFB in Dayton, Ohio, for analysis.

Under the direction of John Goines, Chief of the LSEL, teams work with hundreds of samples at their disposal, consisting of everything from cockpits to uniforms. Goines' group has a unique way of analyzing pertinent evidence found at a crash site that match samples in their lab to hopefully solve a piece of the identification puzzle.

Among the pieces of evidence sent to Goines were boot fragments. This seemingly innocuous evidence formed the basis of what turned out to be an important find. The fragments were from two different types of boots -- one a flight boot and the other a jungle boot. Combined with other evidence/data, Goines was able to confirm that two people were in the cockpit at the time of impact. On a personal level, I can honestly say it helps to be reminded that the incident happened quickly and that Jerry and Al did not have time to suffer. Maybe this evidence will lead to a turning point in the case.

Goines' feedback could also assist officials in making a decision about whether or not to conduct a survey of the remaining one-third portion of the site, to determine if an excavation is likely to produce remains. The first of this two-part process was recommended by the last two anthropologists to have worked at the site – Drs. Nicolette Parr, Recovery Leader/Anthropologist, RL/A - Aug. 2013; and Rebecca Taylor, RL/A - Aug. 2014. Both appeared to have found the most significant evidence while excavating their respective areas.

INTERIM SEARCH & RECOVERY REPORT

Our family recently received a 21-page Interim Search & Recovery Report, prepared by Dr. Taylor. The report is professional, detail-oriented and focuses heavily—but not entirely -- on one of two areas of the crash site, considered the most fruitful since efforts began in 2010.

As many of my blog followers know, the debris field of an F-4 crash site in a mountainous area like the Que Sons is likely to be extensive and require several phases to complete, as in the case of Jerry's and Al's site. Dr. Taylor's report provided an overview of that process.

The primary area with the most activity, as in producing numerous evidentiary items, was designated VM-02517, located in the upper portion of the site; and while the lower portion contained less evidence, it is significant to the overall case and was designated VM-02516.

Southwestern portion of upper site, with view downslope to northwest. Between upper and lower portions of site is an 80◦ slope that may have served as a catch basin for Jerry's & Al's remains.

Although VM-02517 and VM-02516 are now closed, the area in question is located between them. This mid portion comprises the last third of the site, not yet surveyed, for possible excavation.

The decision for the go-ahead to survey involves an Investigation Decision Briefing (IDB), conducted by a DPAA team at Hickam AFB in Hawaii. If approved, Detachment 2 in Hanoi, currently under the Command of LTC Julian Tran, USA, and Deputy Commander Maj. David Klingensmith, USMC, will oversee an Investigation Team (IT), deployed from Hickam. Also providing oversight for the IT process will be the Det's head of investigations, Ron Ward, and in-country partner, the Vietnamese Office Searching for Missing Persons (VNOSMP).

The survey will not be an ordinary IT operation, but rather one with specialized personnel (mountaineers) and a fully equipped team. According to Dr. Taylor, the area in question has an 80° drop, slightly to the northwest impact point of the site and a seasonal wash with 18-30° slopes traversing the southern portion of the site.

Dr. Taylor's report indicates that the team should focus on crevices, wash areas, or other natural catchments for materials that would have traveled downslope from erosion. I do know that JPAC has been successful in the past, harvesting remains under similar circumstance in Vietnam and Laos.

Overview of site during recovery operations. Red arrow highlights the location of the charcoal cave. View facing northwest. The Vietnamese are hired to clear the site, and much of it is done with basic tools.

FOLLOW THE EVIDENCE?

A significant amount of Life Support equipment was found throughout the site, especially in areas where Drs. Taylor and Parr excavated to an average depth of 30 cmbs (12"). In a few areas, Dr. Parr dug to depths between 75 - 140 cmbs (2' to 4' 7") and found evidence. All evidence was listed as "possible" Life Support equipment, since none had been analyzed at that point.

Among the 26 pieces of evidence, recovered from the upper site on Dr. Taylor's list were the boot fragments, webbing, fiberglass, seat kit fabric, lap belt material, helmet shell, anti-G suit material, wing nut to a life raft repair kit, several zipper fragments, flight suit material and seven pieces of life support equipment with no description noted.

In another section of Dr. Taylor's report, she indicated that during her Aug. 2014 excavation, the team recovered "non-diagnostic aircraft [evidence] during a survey to the northwest of VM-02517 [upper portion] in a direct azimuth to site VM-02516 [lower portion], with one larger piece being located approximately 98m northwest of the site datum in a rocky wash area. This supports previous hypotheses suggesting the debris field likely extends between the two sites."

MILITARY EXCAVATION 101

Anthropologists working to recover our MIAs in Southeast Asia use standard archaeological procedures. The first time a crash site undergoes excavation, the anthropologist assigned to a specific site works with an Explosive Ordnance Detection (EOD) technician to ensure that the site is safe, assess the site, and define the recovery scene perimeter and aircraft debris field. An EOD tech is normally present during all surveys and excavations, along with a medic, photographer and linguist.

Beyond the basics, there are many other moving parts to each excavation and certainly the soil in Vietnam is always taken into consideration to determine the condition of surface and subsurface. As many of you know, the acidic nature of Vietnam's soil is destroying our loved one's remains, so we need to find them as soon as possible.

Dr. Taylor's report contained language normally found in her discipline, such as sediment, datum, grids and transect; however, somewhat unique to a military-related excavation, there were references to bomb craters, life support gear and heavy "militia" activity in the crash site area, all of which was of special interest to me. I have always had a lot of respect for EOD technicians and have met many of them along the way but did not know much about the ordnance found at Jerry's site.

According to Dr. Taylor, several projectiles and spent shell casings of various sizes were recovered during each Joint Field Activity (JFA) conducted at Jerry's site, including several 20 mm and 7.62 mm rounds and casings. The only significant Unexploded Ordnance (UXO) recovered at the site was found in August 2014 and included the recovery of one M49A3 60mm U.S. Mortar. This was placed within the marked UXO pit, and officials were notified for disposal.

I want to take this opportunity to thank the JPAC crew, who has stayed true to the core mission during the tough times of the past couple of years. No one knows how Jerry's & Al's case will end, but please know that although the name, JPAC, has gone away, you will always be special to me. I have great confidence in the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, and in no small way, its success will be a tribute to those that came before and those that will continue the mission in the future.

Special thanks to Anthropologists Sean Tallman, Kristen Baker, Dr. Nicolette Parr and Dr. Rebecca Taylor. I am in awe of what you do, and I know that each of you brought something special to the mission.