

## Vietnam MIA Mission Problems

My name is Michael McDonald-Low and I'm asking for your help in bringing attention to the problems at DPAA, (Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency), that are inhibiting MIA recovery efforts in Southeast Asia: Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.

I am a former Army officer who served as an infantry platoon leader and company commander in Vietnam (D/1/20 Inf, 11th LIB, Americal) in 1967 and 1968.

In 2009, I contacted DPMO (Defense Prisoner of War/Missing Personnel Office) and JPAC (Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command) and informed them that they were going to the wrong location in their search for an MIA from my platoon - MIA case 1165 - Clifford Van Artsdalen. They had sent Investigative Teams four previous times to Vietnam in their search for 1165, without ever contacting me, his platoon leader at the time of the incident.

After three years of contacts with JPAC/DPMO, I was finally able led a JPAC Investigative Team to the mountains of the Que Son Valley near Tam Ky, Vietnam in 2012. Our goal was to find the correct location of a soldier from my platoon who was killed there - MIA 1165. The mission was successful, however I am still waiting, like many others, for approval by a DPAA Excavation Decision Board.

In September 2014, after providing advice on other ground loss cases, I was appointed as the first ever Southeast Asia (SEA) Veteran Liaison - the first Vietnam infantry veteran to be officially involved in the search for MIA's in Southeast Asia.

As the SEA Veteran Liaison, I participate in Southeast Asia MIA case analysis by reviewing existing DPAA background information and investigative reporting related to unresolved ground loss cases in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. I also conduct independent open-source research related to assigned cases, including but not limited to additional Vietnam War era veteran interviews, when applicable.

I was also invited by Alisa Stack to join the government organized PACT (Personnel Accounting Consolidation Task Force) when it was formed to review JPAC/DPMO procedures and methods in 2014. I visited JPAC as a PACT representative to review their mission procedures. I submitted a detailed report based upon those observations. Unfortunately, all of the PACT input (and money spent) had little effect in changing the agencies.

In 2016, my book, *Unaccounted*, was published and released. It is the true story of an American infantryman MIA in one of Vietnam's deadliest locations and the mission to find him 44 years later. It provides a firsthand look at a JPAC (DPAA) IT mission.

**Recovering Southeast Asia MIAs is the foundation of the MIA mission, but there is something terribly amiss at mission control - DPAA.**

The search for American MIAs of the Vietnam War has been led over the years by the government organization which has gone by many names, most recently, JPAC, DPMO and now DPAA.

After almost 50 years, there are still over 1,600 American military personnel missing in action - and considered unaccounted in Southeast Asia: Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. 1,450+ of these MIA cases fall into categories of pending an Investigation Decision Board (IDB), pending an Excavation Decision Board (EDB), or like most - still in research. There are more than 150 MIAs who have been approved for excavation, but are still waiting. Most of these are not even scheduled for excavation due to a lack of funding, and in most instances, lack of key personnel, specifically archeologists.

The priority of DPAA should be to finish the mission originally founded by the mothers of Vietnam Veterans - POW/MIA League of Families. These cases need to be given immediate priority over all other MIA cases worldwide as there is a diminishing window remaining before disintegration of all skeletal remains in the acidic soil and harsh climate of Southeast Asia.

### **How the MIA mission of DPAA is failing Vietnam Vets.**

#### **1) DPAA Hawaii**

It is refreshing to see that Mr. Kelly McKeague is the new director at DPAA. Hopefully, under his leadership things will dramatically change.

Department leadership at DPAA Hawaii has been all about self-preservation of career rather than getting the job done - it is a cult of personality. The same people, problems, attitudes, and processes that forced the creation of DPAA still exist, even after 30 Jan 2015 (the formation date). DPAA kept the same people in the same jobs in Hawaii, but placed them under new department names; the mission continued as it had in the past. The disconnect between DPAA Hawaii and DPAA in Washington, D.C. is obvious and counter-productive. A fresh direction requires new, dynamic people and leadership at the department level, not the same old career GS JPAC Hawaii "veterans" operating as they have for years.

#### **2) IDB/EDB**

The IDB (Investigation Decision Board) and EDB (Excavation Decision Board) process is a nice example of how DPAA Hawaii serves the process rather than the process serving the mission. People with no field experience are voting and running through the ringer those who know what they need to do to accomplish the mission. Policy, and External Relations and Planning have no business being involved in any IDB/EDB. Their input is not relevant to any decision relating to investigations or excavations. Their job should be to review and insure all measures are being taken to successfully accomplish the mission. To insure objectivity and fairness, all decisions regarding IDB's and EDB's should be made by a panel that consists of: DPAA J2, J2 lead investigator, IT/RT case analyst, MIA Case Consultant / Veteran Liaison, DPAA - Washington DC case leader, CIL (Central Investigation Laboratory), American Witness, and headed by Director DPAA.

#### **3) Burden of Proof Protocols**

The current recommended Burden of Proof protocols appear overly weighted on aircraft MIA's, metal object losses, and are not appropriate considerations for infantry surface losses. I believe there should be two sets of protocols, or two sets of

weighting standards: one for aircraft losses and one for surface losses. It is also important to note that all of the easy MIA cases have been completed. The toughest remaining cases are for the most part infantry surface losses.

#### 4) Ignorance of Battlefield, Enemy Tactics, Infantry Organization, Weapons and Injuries

Prior to the appointment of a SEA Veteran Liaison there were no combat veterans from Vietnam who worked on any MIA case. Consequently, many mistakes have been made over the years by investigators who are ignorant of basic combat tactics, weaponry, wounds, and circumstances they have no ability to evaluate. I have seen cases where no further action was indicated by the investigator, because he/she couldn't identify the possibility (for example) . . . that a human being could not be disintegrated by a 81mm mortar. And yet, that has happened. I believe an accurate analogy would be trying to describe the color red to a blind person.

#### 5) Failure to Properly Interview Veteran Survivors

Vietnam veterans, particularly infantrymen and Marines, are a special group that deserves special handling when you're investigating a fallen comrade. If you can't do the talk, you certainly can't do the walk. If you're an investigator you should be familiar with combat and all that it entails, otherwise you won't ask the right questions or be able to identify information that may or may not help you. In my opinion, one of JPAC's and DPMO's (And now DPAA's) biggest oversights has been their inability to identify a credible veteran witness and then obtain relevant information from that witness.

#### 6) Investigation Team (IT) / Recovery Team (RT)

The IT process needs to be more dynamic and fused. An IT leader in the field should have the authority to be able to run down leads in the field to closure. but the host nation, due to time constraints and coordination, often times do not allow further pursuit during the operation. This rigid process forces IT to visit a site at least two or more times with approval boards at DPAA in between. Meanwhile, years pass and hundreds of thousands of dollars are spent for multiple trips. An average IT mission in Vietnam carries a hefty price tag - approximately \$250,000.

Ideally, IT/RT should be combined into a single unit for investigation and recovery. When IT successfully locates an MIA location it can be years before an RT visits it. When an RT eventually gets to the site they are depending on field notes and GPS to re-identify the site. This process is haphazard even with GPS. It is absolutely necessary that the IT be involved to positively identify the location, as well as any witness, American or otherwise. This combined unit would have the flexibility in the field that is needed to immediately excavate a site that has a high potential for recovery. This could save years of waiting to return to a site and/or could even save the loss of a site that was in danger. Additionally, the new IT/RT teams should consist of a historian, analyst, Geographic Information System specialist, archeologist, and an external relations person.

#### 7) American Witnesses

An American Witness should always sit on the EDB of his MIA, particularly after providing exact coordinates and leading the team to the MIA site. Further, the input by the American Witness to the EDB will add a sense of place, importance and legitimacy to the proceeding. He should then always be invited to participate in the RT to re-verify that the correct location is being excavated. In the past there has been little transparency at DPAA particularly involving decisions concerning excavation. This shroud should be removed and the inclusion and participation in an EDB by the American Witness would go a long way towards that endeavor.

#### 8) Central Investigation Laboratory (CIL)

The CIL's control over the use of technology for IT needs to end. IT needs to be free to try any and all technologically that is available. CIL needs to be focused on identifications only and not be given any power over any other aspect of the organization. Senior lab leadership should be removed to improve the culture of the lab and the future version of DPAA. The archeologists should be removed from CIL and moved into the future version of the IT/RT organization.

#### 9) The Center for the Investigation of the Missing and Advancement of Geospatial Methods (CIMAG)

The CIMAG is a program in which DPAA could have served as a nexus to help direct and develop products by universities, NASA, and NGA to develop remote sensing methods to search for MIAs (particularly high altitude aircraft wreckage). The program was a low investment initiative where DPAA would have provided the problem and coordinated with other agencies to establish lines of research funding to solve the problem. Unfortunately, this initiative angered the CIL scientific director and he forced it to be cancelled.

#### 10) Skilled Archeologists - University Battlefields Initiative

There are usually only one or two archeologists working for DPAA, which slows down the IT/RT process. The University Battlefields Initiative was a proposal developed that would focus on using university personnel to conduct battlefield archaeology. The current mode of search and recovery used by DPAA is not geared toward the systematic work required of complex battlefields. The DPAA recovery model had evolved around the concept of a single location that was defined by a burial or wreckage feature rather than the complexities of a battlefield. The University Battlefields Initiative would establish endowed professorships to head programmatic in-depth archaeological studies of historic battlefields that would be chosen based on the missing casualty densities determined by DPAA researchers. Again, universities would be responsible for establishing their own funding lines through grants or other public and private support under the assumption that their affiliation with DPAA would be a benefit. When presented to several universities, each expressed a high level of interest.

#### 11) Search Methods - Advanced Technology

One of the biggest challenges DPAA will face is the excavation of surface loss cases where the loss location can only be narrowed down to a 25 meter (m) x 25m, 50m x 50m, or larger area. Most of these sites are remote and/or lightly populated

where there is little chance of a local Vietnamese or a People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) soldier corroborating an American loss from 50 years ago; too much time has passed, and the ability of a PAVN soldier or local Vietnamese to recall dates and specific locations are questionable.

The MIA remains at a loss location sites are typically small bone fragments or teeth (not metal). Currently, DPAA's only on-the-ground search tool is a metal detector. Metal artifacts (dog tags, weapon, equipment) supporting the location of an MIA are at times discovered, but in many instances PAVN and Viet Cong forces routinely stripped equipment, weapons, dog tags and personal ID of any American left behind.

A larger excavation footprint requires more efficient search methods. Use of Ground Penetrating Radar, Sonic Analysis, Magnetometry, micro aerial drones, and other promising technologies would make searches quicker and more productive in finding remains. Many companies actively involved in the development of these technologies would rush to the opportunity to use their equipment on an MIA mission.

The reality of my mission and personal work experience with DPAA is sub-par and is probably best explained by a letter I sent to Bob Maves, (next page), my DPAA senior supervisor in Hawaii. It should be noted that Mr. Maves did not respond.

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Nov. 1, 2017

Mr. Maves,

I haven't heard much from you or others at DPAA. In the past year, I have been asked but twice to look into cases. It's disappointing that I cannot be of more service, especially given the limited window of time remaining to find MIA remains in Southeast Asia.

Frankly, I don't see any change at the new DPAA that encourages me about the MIA effort in Southeast Asia. In fact, I'd have to say my skills have been utilized less and less since the reorganization. In some specific cases, I provided detailed information about an MIA that was never acknowledged nor was I given any explanation regarding its value or contribution.

Even the very basics in computer assistance, so I could access case files, has taken almost a year to accomplish.

My credentials expire tomorrow and if I thought things would change, I'd renew them.

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I appreciate any assistance you can provide. I have also sent a copy of this letter to President Trump and many other Veteran and POW/MIA organizations and media.

Sincerely,  
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