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## Jungle Hunt for Missing Airmen a U.S. Mission Searches for the Victims of a 1972 Air Crash

By Robert T. Zintl

A U.S. AC-130 Spectre gunship was in night combat over the Ho Chi Minh Trail in December 1972, when ground fire punctured its fuel line. The plane was limping back to base in Thailand when it exploded and plunged into the jungle about 25 miles northeast of Pakse, Laos. Two crewmen parachuted to safety, and a rescue helicopter recovered the partial remains of a third airman. That left 13 Americans on the plane presumed dead but designated as missing in action, a classification that encompasses 2,483 other Americans unaccounted for in Southeast Asia.

Last week the Communist government of Laos allowed a twelve-man U.S. "technical" team, including two explosives experts and a medic, to enter the country, excavate the crash site and hunt for the victims. Late in the week, a U.S. embassy spokesman in Bangkok reported that the searchers found portions of human bones that might be those of missing crewmen.

The mission, which is expected to have finished its work by Feb. 21, is the result of three years of off-and-on negotiations. In 1982 Laos permitted a visit to the scene by a group from the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia. In December 1983, U.S. military technicians were allowed to survey the site to plan an excavation. But it was not until last July that the Laotians agreed "in principle" to the search, the first official mission to recover U.S. remains in Laos since the Viet Nam War ended in 1975. Early this month, permission finally came through to begin the work.

In a parallel development, Hanoi told the U.S. two weeks ago it had "information" on additional M.I.A. remains. The Vietnamese embassy in Bangkok has said informally that five sets of remains may be turned over to the U.S. within a month. Since 1975, Viet Nam has released the remains of 93 Americans to the U.S., including the bones of six U.S. war casualties that were returned last July. The U.S., which has accused Viet Nam of hoarding American dead for diplomatic leverage, possesses one five-year-old intelligence report that says about 400 bodies of American servicemen were stored in a Hanoi warehouse.

The source of the report is a Vietnamese defector who worked as an undertaker on U.S. war dead in Hanoi. The Vietnamese have denounced these allegations as "slanderous." Conjectures about Viet Nam's maneuvering, however, were underscored last July when a U.S. military delegation traveled to Hanoi to collect the remains of the M.I.A.s. At the time, a Vietnamese official bluntly and unexpectedly informed the Americans that the transfer of the remains had been delayed since the previous April because of Hanoi's suspicions of U.S. complicity in Chinese attacks that month along Viet Nam's northern border.

Some diplomatic sources feel that Viet Nam's latest concession may be intended to deflect further U.S. criticism of its attacks on Khmer resistance camps in neighboring Kampuchea. Laos' accommodating attitude may be in response to recent U.S. overtures, including an American shipment in December of 5,000 tons of rice to alleviate the effects of a poor Laotian harvest. But no major breakthrough of the M.I.A. problem in Laos or Viet Nam seems near. "The timing has made everyone open their eyes," says one U.S. official in Bangkok. "But nothing has happened that hasn't been in the works for a long time."

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