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Laos Excavating the Recent Past

More than a decade after U.S. military forces quit Viet Nam, a team of American recovery specialists was permitted to enter Laos for a two-week examination of the crash site of an AC-130 Spectre gunship. The area was being scoured for the remains of 13 U.S. crewmen still listed as missing in action. The joint mission, which included Laotian soldiers and government officials as well as U.S. specialists, worked at its task in a dense patch of jungle 25 miles northeast of the city of Pakse. The search is a continuation of the U.S. Government's long-term effort to discover the fate of 2,483 Americans unaccounted for in Southeast Asia. TIME Bangkok Bureau Chief James Willwerth was part of a small group allowed by the Laotian government to visit the site. His report:

Gold light slants through tall trees and casts long shadows across the tufted stalks of elephant grass as we arrive at the crash site in the late afternoon. Suddenly, the dense undergrowth gives way to an unnatural clearing of dirty gray sand littered with the half-recognizable detritus of the shattered gunship: broken wheel struts, a bent propeller blade, rusted armor plating, scraps of the fuselage. Resembling patches of smudged snow, remnants of the plane's once white fiber-glass insulating material are scattered everywhere. Earlier, crews of olive-clad Laotian soldiers and Americans in T shirts and grimy Levi's had cut a working area roughly the size of a baseball diamond, first by clearing the dense undergrowth and then by dropping to their hands and knees in shoulder-to-shoulder skirmish lines for a preliminary search of the area. Among the items unearthed were bits of human bones, a scattering of teeth and what the crews will describe only as "some personal effects." For the untrained, the bone fragments would be hard to recognize, often looking like nothing more than pieces of gray pumice the size of a cigar stub.

At the clearing's center, three Americans are working with shovels at the bottom of a metal-and-fiber-glass-filled hole about ten feet deep. This is the impact point where the AC-130 crashed to earth. To facilitate the search, the team first sliced the ground open with hunting knives and then cut away the soil an inch at a time. Now the men pass shovelfuls of dirt to Laotian soldiers waiting with sifters, who shake the dirt back and forth. The Americans wrap a winch line around a nearby tree to help pull a piece of rusted metal out of

the hard-packed soil. "I don't have any idea what it is," says Navy Lieut. Commander Loren E. Decker Jr., a tall, muscular man standing at the bottom of the deep hole. "It's so mangled, you can't tell."

In the hot, dank Laotian jungle, very little seems clear. While some identification of the human remains and personal effects will probably be possible, the evidence the Pentagon technicians are finding is not as good as they hoped. The fires and explosions at the crash site were too fierce to leave much of anything. "This probably had the most intense impact and secondary explosions of any crash site I've ever investigated," says Army Major Johnie Webb, head of the Pentagon's Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii, where the remains will be taken. "That is going to make identifications even more difficult."

The American team starts work each day at 7 a.m. They break in the midday heat for a two-hour C-ration lunch and rest period, then work until 5 p.m. Dinner is C rations again, washed down by military-style "emergency water" in gray soft-drink-size cans. Aside from the routine jungle hazards there is an additional problem: the excavation contains what Army Lieut. Colonel Joseph B. Harvey describes as "a significant amount" of live ammunition. It has been piled inside a display area marked off by yellow ribbons. The team's two ordnance-disposal specialists will dump it back into the fully excavated hole at week's end and blow it up.

The long-range problems for MIA recovery in Southeast Asia are not disposed of so easily. Laos let negotiations drag for more than three years before allowing this team's visit. Unlike Viet Nam and Kampuchea (formerly Cambodia), + Laos does maintain diplomatic relations with the U.S., though at the charge d'affaires level. But the Laotians here made it very clear that continued cooperation on the MIA issue is contingent upon generous U.S. aid.

U.S. law prohibits direct aid to Laos other than for humanitarian purposes. Laos is a tiny, isolated country of nearly 4 million where the annual per capita income is about \$100. At the U.S. embassy in Vientiane, Charge d'Affaires Theresa A. Tull points out that the U.S. recently donated 5,000 tons of rice to Laos to help it survive a bad harvest. But Tull is firm when asked if the U.S. plans to open financial doors for Laos on the basis of the one crash-site excavation. "We need more than a single event," she says. "We need a sustained pattern of cooperation."

Hanoi and its Southeast Asian allies will probably continue to make available small quantities of MIA remains, using the maneuver as a way of gaining political or financial leverage. But political machinations are not important to the men who do the digging in the jungle. "We've got several more crash sites that we would like to look at," says Harvey. Behind him Laotian soldiers pluck bone shards from the sifting pans and hand them to a U.S. soldier who puts them in a canvas bag the size of a woman's purse. "But so far we've got one site and no more promises," says Harvey. "It's going awfully slowly."

It is nearly 5 o'clock now, and the men in the pit are beginning to emerge wearily. Navy Lieut. Commander

Decker is the last man left in, a solitary figure warmed by the fading gold of the afternoon sun. Like the others, he is a kind of archaeologist exhuming not the distant past but a recent one, searching not for fossils and amulets but for the bones and traces of lost colleagues.

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