

# After 10 years a search for MIAs in Laos

By Anne Keegan  
*Chicago Tribune*

VAN VEUNE, Laos — First Sgt. David Kelly squatted in the shade and ran his fingers through a box of pebble-size chunks of earth and airplane wreckage. He was looking for human bone.

Beside him, communist Laotian soldiers in green uniforms did the same. Though none of the soldiers spoke English, they knew the word man. When a piece of bone or perhaps a human tooth was found, they announced "man" to Kelly, then dropped the fragment into a canvas sack beside him. After nine days in the jungle, many bags were filled.

For the first time in 10 years, American soldiers were back in the jungles of Indochina.

For the first time since 1975, one of the three countries in which Americans fought the Vietnam War agreed to let Americans search a crash site for the remains of men missing in action.

Outside the small Laotian village of Van Venne, amid tall jungle trees and tangled vines, 12 Americans under the command of Col. Joe Harvey of the Joint Casualty Resolution Center dug alongside 15 Laotian soldiers and three Laotian Foreign Ministry officials.

It was here, near the Kaphou River, that an AC-130 Spectre gunship crashed after being hit by enemy fire.

The plane took off from Ubon, Thailand, Dec. 21, 1972, at 5:40 p.m. for a night attack mission over Laos. It carried 16 men, nine of them officers.

At 7 p.m., it was hit by ground fire and was attempting to make it back to Thailand. Radio messages indicated that fuel was leaking inside the plane, the tail ramp was down and some crewmen were prepared to jump.

At 7:12 p.m., 20 miles from the Mekong River and Thailand, the plane lost a wing and crashed into the jungle. A second AC-130 Spectre soon flew overhead and made radio contact with a crewman, who reported that he was down but not hurt. The second plane's crew reported seeing several strobe lights on the ground.

Moonbeam (radio contact in Thailand) came on the air and asked, "Are there any survivors?"

"We have spotted several strobes and voice contact with two," replied the second Spectre. "We think there are other crew members, but we have negative radio contact."

Moonbeam: "Have you made other contact? We are picking up beepers," or radio locator signals.

"I was blown out of the aircraft," the voice of one of the survivors said from the ground. "Don't get your hopes up. I don't think too many got out."

Two and a half hours later, helicopters descended and plucked Tech. Sgt. Richard M. Williams and Sgt. Carl E. Stevens from the jungle. The remains of a third crew member were recovered the next day.

According to intelligence reports, a group of communist Pathet Lao sympathizers came upon the scene where "large ground fires" were burning. Five opened parachutes, two partly charred, lay on the ground. There were two small piles of bloody bandages.

A "friendly" team of Laotians arrived and found a man's severed arm. They left because so many Pathet Lao were around.

A second group of Pathet Lao villagers arrived, according to another intelligence report, and found the dismembered remains of four to six men.

"The villagers dug a trench one meter long, one to two meters deep and 60 centimeters wide," states the report. "All the remains were put in the trench and covered with dirt piled on top with rocks and branches."

By 10 a.m. Dec. 22, American jets were streaking overhead searching for a sign of survivors. They found nothing.

For the last 12 years, Jean McDonald of Evanston, Ill., has been asking what happened to the rest of the crew. Her son, First Lt. George McDonald, was on the plane. "How could they all have died in the crash if there were bloody bandages? Who did the bandaging? You have to be alive to do that. And who came down in the five parachutes? They didn't float down by themselves."

And what about the beeper signals? What about the plane flying over this... it saw quite a few strobe lights? And if two men survived without a scratch on them, why couldn't there have been more? Oh, these unanswered questions can drive you crazy. Year after year, you get no logical answers."

The excavation at Van Venne was to try to answer such tortured questions.

It could, at the most, answer questions for only the families of 13 men on this plane. But it also could be the first step in accounting for the estimated 2,400 still missing a decade after the war.

Digging deep, as far down as 12 feet, the team found human bones and teeth.

"We began finding remains the first day," said one team member.

In addition, the team found amid the buried wreckage parts of flight helmets, parts of parachute harnesses, sections of flight suits — even pocket knives flattened by the force of the crash and the explosions on impact.

According to Maj. Johnny Webb, the plane burned for two days and was wrecked by a chain of explosions, each one burying the wreckage deeper.

The team did not find the grave the villagers reportedly dug.

"We know there was an explosion, we know there was a wing blown off, and we know most of the plane landed right here," said Harvey, standing at the top of the pit.

Beside him lay a twisted and rusty 22mm Galling gun, one of two on the plane. Huge parts of the landing gear pulled up from the ground lay on the cleared jungle floor.

The Americans, who were asked not to wear their uniforms in Laos, bivouacked 100 yards from the crash site, at the edge of an abandoned rice paddy. Villagers stared out at them from behind the bamboo and vines.

No comment can be made yet as to how many of the plane's missing men will be accounted for after this search. It might be a month, according to Webb, before any identification of the remains can be possible. Harvey said the remains had been "very fragmented" by the force and heat of the crash.

Friday, after 12 days inside Laos, the U.S. searchers departed. They left behind the wreckage of the plane, a pile of dirt and a hole in the jungle floor.

Going with them were the remains they unearthed — clues to help answer the questions such as those that haunt Jean McDonald about what happened Dec. 21, 1972, in the tangled forest 12,000 miles from home.

The team left behind villagers and peasants who had not seen an American in 10 years. And Pathet Lao soldiers who never dreamed they'd be sitting in the shade smoking a cigarette next to an American sergeant.

## REGIONAL

**Asean calls for arms for Khmers**

Asean foreign ministers decided at a meeting in Bangkok on 11 February to go public for the first time in urging countries friendly to the Cambodian resistance to supply arms to the guerillas fighting the Vietnamese.

Until now, Asean has been officially silent on military support for the Democratic Kampuchea coalition, though member states Singapore and Thailand are known to have been giving military support to the non-communist Son Sann and Prince Norodom Sihanouk factions. China publicly supplies arms to the Khmer Rouge as well as limited supplies to the other two groups.

The appeal to the international community to supply arms to the resistance was almost hidden in the final paragraph of the ministers' communique. At a press conference, however, Thai Foreign Minister Siddhi Savetsila drew attention to the military aspect of the appeal saying: "Military support for the freedom fighters in Afghanistan is an open secret. Why not the Khmers? They are entitled to fight for their independence. They can't fight with their bare hands."

—RODNEY TASKER

**US to search for MIAs in Laos**

Laos has permitted a United States technical team to conduct a 12-day search for US servicemen missing in action — MIAs — in the area near Pakse where a US C130 aircraft crashed in 1972. The move followed the support expressed in an 18 January communique by the Indochinese foreign ministers for a "responsible" US role in Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, on 9 February officials from the US Joint Casualty Resolution Centre visited Hanoi where they reportedly obtained assurances of the return within a month of the remains of five more MIAs.

In a recent statement, the US State Department ruled out normalisation of relations with Vietnam as long as its forces remain in Cambodia and Hanoi does not provide "as full accounting as possible of our men who are still mis-

sing". In private conversations, US officials hold out the prospect that an accelerated Vietnamese effort on MIAs would improve the atmosphere and make normalisation of relations easier if and when the Cambodia problem is solved.

—NATAN CHANDA

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