

11. Why did the recovery and identification of crew remains take so long?

After the memorial dedication ceremony, I began receiving questions from my Combat Talon friends about the slow recovery and identification of remains that was on-going in Hawaii. When would the remains be ready for burial by the families? This was also one of my concerns. Consequently, I planned a vacation to Hawaii and asked Maj. Gen. James Hobson, former Commander of AFSOC if he had any contacts there that could introduce me to the proper agencies. He put me in touch with Brig. Gen. Jack Holbein at Special Operations Command, Pacific (SOCPAC) at Camp Smith in Honolulu on March 5, 2000. Holbein was a Combat Talon navigator who remembered me as an instructor from Pope AFB. He arranged for me to meet the right people: US Army Brig. Gen. Henry B. Axson, Commander of JTF-FA also at Camp Smith that was responsible for crash site recoveries in Southeast Asia and US Army Col. David J. Pagano at CILHI at Hickam AFB that did positive identification of recovered remains.

I arrived in Hawaii with my wife on May 24 and met with Brig. Gen. Holbein. He was most helpful. I gave him copies of my S-01 story and he made sure that they preceded our arrival to the offices we were scheduled to visit. He was puzzled why the SOCPAC, which he now commanded and was in charge of all special operations in the Pacific, had not been made aware of the crash site discovery back in 1992. I was also hoping to find out why?

Army Brig. Gen. Axson was not available to meet us, but he ensured that we received good receptions wherever we went. Lt. Col. Childress became our escort officer. He introduced us to the staff at JTF-FA where we received very detailed briefing on their function and on how their deployed teams conducted excavations at our aircraft's crash site. Staff members had many questions about my story. They were glad to talk to someone who had so much information about what to them became just a very difficult recovery operation in a remote jungle of Vietnam. Interviewing me about the S-01 mission brought their work so much closer to home.

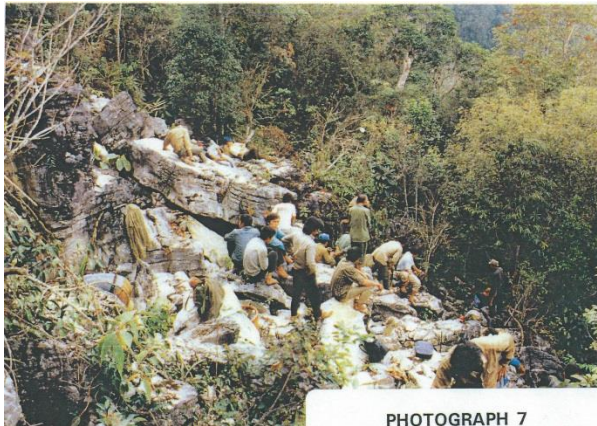
I asked why the recovery of the remains was taking so long. Their explanation was that even though their team closed the crash site in November 1993, both our and Vietnamese official kept receiving periodic reports either from or about people who claimed to have knowledge of a crash site in the same province and had some human and other aircraft remains. They were obligated to follow up on all such leads, which required locating and interviewing these individuals. This took up a lot of their time and it did not produce much more than what they already had. They showed us many photographs of the crash site and of various articles that were recovered. There were no photographs of human remains. They told us that we would see the crew remains later at CILHI.



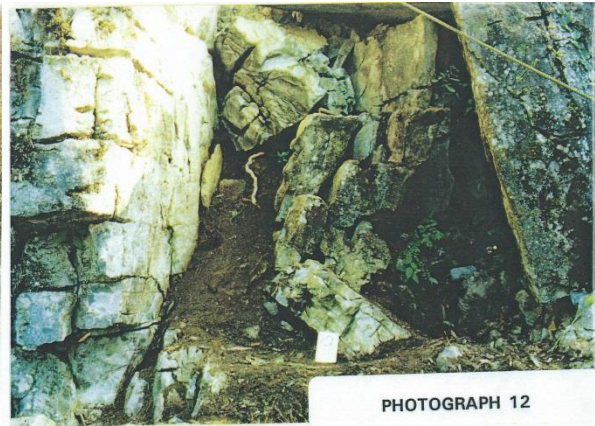
PHOTOGRAPH 5



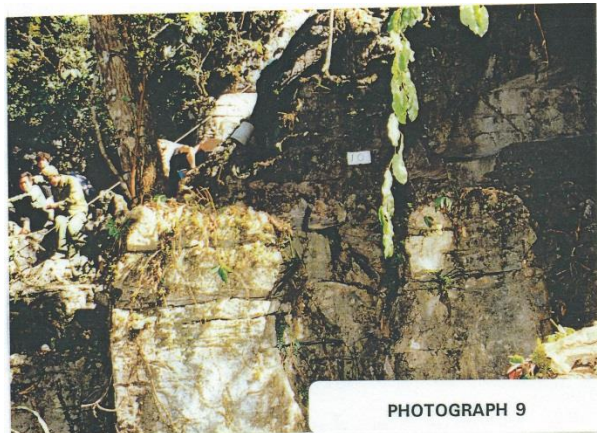
PHOTOGRAPH 10



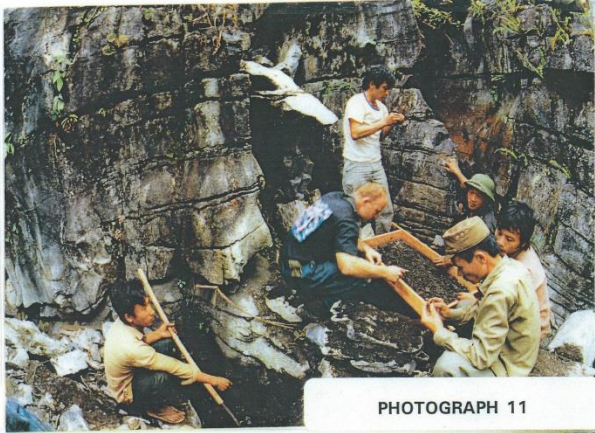
PHOTOGRAPH 7



PHOTOGRAPH 12



PHOTOGRAPH 9



PHOTOGRAPH 11

White rectangle on photograph 9 is believed to be the point of impact for the nose of the aircraft.

On our next day we went to CILHI at Hickam AFB where we met with Col. David J. Pagano. We listened to a very good briefing on how the lab conducted identification of remains they received from the JTF-FA. After the briefing, we met with various members of the staff who were interested in my published story. Several of them had Xeroxed copies of it. They wanted to question me about some crew members and aircraft configuration details.

They informed us that the identification of our crew's remains was completed as of the 10th of March. This was only five days after Maj. Gen. Hobson put me in touch with Brig. Gen. Holbein, who then approached Brig. Gen. Axson at JTF-FA. I commented that this was a fast response to a high level inquiry. However, Col. Pagano assured me that this case had been waiting for closure for a long time and that its time had finally come. Subsequent letters I received through my Freedom of Information Act inquiry confirmed that sequence of events.

Once again, staffers were eager to talk with someone who knew all the people aboard and had information about the flight. They took notes and had sheets with diagrams of the crash site. Their main interest was my story's description where each individual should have been in the aircraft at the time of the crash. They were correlating the recovered remains with crew positions inside of the aircraft. They wanted to know if the aircraft had any explosives on board and what kind they were. I assured them that all resupply bundles contained some explosives and other armaments, but that we never knew the exact nature of any of them. One forensic staffer asked if the aircraft was equipped with a chaff dispenser. He volunteered that one recovered bone fragment contained a sliver that could be from chaff. I pointed to the right side of our EWO's position where Capt. Parker sat. I even used his name. He nodded with satisfaction and thanked me for confirming his suspicion.

Once we finished in the conference room, we proceeded to the lab to see the remains. They informed us that normally only the family members of the deceased had access to the room we were about to enter. The room was about the size of a high school cafeteria. Instead of tables it had many rows of hospital type gurneys. About one third of them had skeletal bones carefully arranged on white sheets. We stopped not far from the door and I looked around for gurneys that had the most bones on them. Our escorting staffer pointed to the gurney right in front of us. "These are the remains of your crew." My knees went weak. On the gurney in front of us were 6 plastic bags. Five of them had 3 to 5 bone fragments and the biggest one was about the size of a small couch pillow. It had many small charred bones that might have weighed about 10 pounds. I just could not believe that eleven of my former colleagues could have been reduced to what was in front of us.

Our escort went on to explain that the five small plastic bags had remains of the only five individuals they were able to identify and that the large bag contained human bones from the crash site that were either too small or too badly burned for DNA testing. They were certain that because the remains came from that site, they belonged to the rest of the crew. I said that the Teletype message we had from the JTF-FA stated that eight sets of remains were turned in to the team during the first excavation in 1992. That was true. Natives turned in eight bags, or "sets" of remains. Each one of the "sets" did not belong to the same person. Many of the bones were not human at all and some were proven to be of mongoloid (non-American) origin. All of the identified human remains, either those turned in by the natives or the ones recovered by our own teams, were here in front of us. They were already sealed and ready for shipment to the Air Force Mortuary Services at Randolph AFB in Texas. On the table were also several blue about 2 inch thick loose leaf notebooks. They contained pertinent information that would be handed over to the families along

with the remains. I was allowed to leaf through one of them without noting the name of the crew member. When I asked whose book it was, they informed me apologetically that since I was not a family member I could not have that information. Likewise they declined to tell us which five crewmembers had been identified. We learned later from the families that they were Darcy, Eckley, Fisher, Parker, and Williams.

The very next exchange I had with the staff was also tasking. I told them that I had contacts with all the families who knew that I was in Hawaii checking on the recovery and identification process. They pleaded with me not to communicate with anyone until the Mortuary Services could make official contact with them. We understood that bringing my wife and me into the JTF-FA / CILHI loop made us virtual recovery team members. Our contact with the families after our return could create unexpected problems for the official flow of communication with the families. Now we had an obligation hold back the information we came to learn in Hawaii.

My wife Anita and I were impressed by the diligence and attention to details in both offices JTF-FA and CILHI and left convinced that the intercession by Brig. Gen. Holbein and our scheduled visit to their offices had anything to do with the coincidental closure of their long investigation. First, the JTF-FA was obligated to follow up on all reports of people who had knowledge about the crash site or who knew people from who claimed to have human remains. Each follow up required assembling a joint American and Vietnamese team to travel to convenient interview locations. Too many interviewed people either changed their stories or made references to other individuals who might have had some collected skeletal remains or dog tags of American soldiers.

Information about these interviews, which I obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, was very disappointing. Informants were hesitant, they lied very often and wasted too much time the teams had available to do productive search for American remains. Finally the JTF-FA had enough and decided to close the case. CILHI was also ready to conclude their work. They analyzed and tested trickling additional bone fragments as soon as they were ceremoniously delivered to Hawaii with proper military ceremonies at Hickam AFB. None of these passed the tests and the plastic bags we saw were what the teams obtained from the natives and what they recovered at the time of their digging in 1992 and 1993. Only dog tags and dog tag rubbings were added over the 8 year period. In hindsight, the identification process could have ended as early as 1994. However, the JTF-FA and CILHI followed their prescribed protocol and did the most thorough search and investigation they could have undertaken.

Following four photographs of remains were not included in the book. Along with the book photos, they complete the inventory of all recovered remains. All the red markings were made by the people who surrendered the remains either to the local authorities or to the JTF-FA recovery teams.



CILHI 1993-284-G-01: Skeletal Photograph 3
Shoulder and Arm Fragments. Arrows indicate left acromion
fragments



CILHI 1993-284-C-01: Skeletal Photograph 4
Rib Fragments.

