

12. Why did media neglect to publicize the discovery of the S-01 crash site?

A story about a Joint Task Force – Full Accounting work in Southeast Asia surfaced in Bangkok, Thailand when its spokesman, Lt. Col. David Fredrikson, briefed news reporters about their recovery activities in Southeast Asia. No doubt he gave some details about the S-01 crash site, but his comments were reduced to the Associated Press article on “MIA Team Finds Human Remains in Indochina”. That Associated Press release was published on inside pages of several newspapers back home in October 1993. This story is worth reprinting here because it will illustrate how the discovery of our aircraft’s site was hidden within its general text.

U.S. specialists searching for Americans missing from the Vietnam War found human remains in all three Indochinese countries while digging at crash sites and a graveyard, a spokesman said yesterday.

If an anthropologist determines the remains found in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia could be Americans, they will be sent to U.S. Army laboratories in Honolulu for analysis, Lt. Col. David Fredrikson said.

Plane wreckage and pieces of uniforms also were found, he said.

More than 200 American specialists are working in Indochina and neighboring Thailand to account for American prisoners of war and those missing in action. Besides excavations, they are studying archive materials and interviewing people who witnessed incidents in which Americans turned up missing.

A total of 2,248 Americans are missing from the war, which ended in a 1975 Communist defeat of U.S. backed South Vietnam.

Remains were found this week in both Vietnam and Laos, said Fredrikson, chief spokesman for the Honolulu-based military unit conducting the MIA search. He said the latest remains found in Vietnam were unearthed during excavations at two plane crash sites. A total of 21 Americans are missing from the crashes at the sites.

The latest search in Vietnam began Oct. 21. U.S. officials said seven teams of investigators were fanning out over 19 provinces for a month – the most ever for a single project – to investigate as many as 143 MIA cases.

One planned excavation was of a site in the northwest where a cargo plane carrying several Americans crashed on a remote mountain peak. In an earlier search, three sets of remains were found.

The remains in Laos were found at a plane crash site and a graveyard in the southern provinces of Saravane and Xekong. Another crash site will be excavated later.

The three-week Laos project began Oct. 19. The teams are investigating six priority cases and up to 17 other cases if time permits.

Most of those missing in Laos were airmen shot down while bombing Laotian Communist insurgents or the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Earlier this month, remains also were found in Cambodia.

Lt. Col. Dow Rogers, detachment commander at the time of the aircraft loss, brought this article to the 1995 Nha Trang Reunion Association meeting in Dallas, TX. We scrutinized its content with MSgt. Charles Timms, who also served in our unit's administrative office at that time, and did not connect it to our aircraft. Again, we were blinded by our conception about how big our aircraft loss was. It was the biggest loss of life involving one single aircraft in North Vietnam, so we expected a clearer and bigger story than that one. The story rambled somewhat and addressed recovered bodies at several sites. We were focused on eleven of ours and the part of the story that fit our location mentioned only three.

The most compelling reason for not connecting this AP story to our lost aircraft was Sergeant Timms' prior search for the current status of the MIA crew. On 16 Sep 1993, he sent a letter to the Secretary of the Air Force inquiring about the MIA status of all eleven crew members. His inquiry was forwarded to the Air Force Military Personnel Command Office for Missing Persons and Inquiries Division for his answer. That came on 12 October 1993. He received eleven almost identical letters which gave four different dates for changes of their status from MIA to KIA. Three crewmembers had their status changed on following dates: Wenaas changed on 8 June 1977, Williams on 24 June 1977 and Van Buren on August 29 1977. The other eight had their dates changed to the following year on 27 April of 1978. How could that be? They all died on the same day!

But the different dates for the MIA to KIA changes were not our preoccupation at that time. There was no statement on any of the letters that the crew remains were located one year before. Sergeant Timms failed to ask the Secretary of the Air Force about the search for the crash site. Consequently, that very important point was not addressed. Therefore at that 1975 reunion in Dallas we concluded that the newspaper story was not about our still missing, but now officially KIA crew.

It is unfortunate that so many years after the Vietnam War or media did not pay more attention to the events in that part of the world. It must have been because we lived on and had bigger news with the fall of the Iron Curtain, break-up of the Soviet Union, Iraq War to liberate Kuwait, and the historic three way presidential elections at home.

Why didn't someone from all the agencies that received the JTF-FA teletype messages focus on the importance of this crash site and notified someone within the special operations community? Again, let's put ourselves into the proper time. The recovery and identification were happening in the 1990s. Junior staffers at these agencies who are normally tasked to sort incoming mail and messages were probably in elementary schools or high schools during the Vietnam War. Because of the secrecy surrounding our clandestine operations, there was no news coverage of the loss when it occurred. So how would these relatively young soldiers connect to the loss of this one aircraft? Only someone who had served in Vietnam at that time would have been able to highlight such teletype item and perhaps inform someone within the special operations community. Obviously, none of the mail sorters were of this type. Messages that were for information only ended up on the bottom of the stack in the reading priority of every office. Those in higher echelons who received them pre-sorted in their daily reading files had to go through them perhaps with a

lot of scanning. I believe that a message from a small Army Detachment in Bangkok did not end up very high in the reading files of the State Department, CIA, DIA, and NSA, as well as at CINCPAC. It was the type of message a reader would get to on the third cup of coffee of any one day, if even then.

So it took someone like Gene Kremin, radio operator friend of Gean Clapper who, after a long search, found reference to the crash site in 1997. He located the original 1992 teletype message from the JTF-FA printed in the Congressional Record. He contacted me and then I notified the Combat Talon community at Hurlburt Field that was constructing a memorial for the missing S-01 crew.



Retired Colonel Lee Hess, former commander of the Combat Spear unit in the Pacific and founding father of the Stray Goose International with retired Colonel John Gargus, former navigator with service in all Combat Talon Spear, Knife and Arrow units.