

5. S-01 Crash Site

The crash site is located in a rugged mountainous terrain of Lai Chau province some 32 miles northeast of Dien Bien Phu. The joint recovery team pinpointed it on the best available 1 to 50,000-scale chart at 21-39-80N 103-31-20E (Grid 48QUJ 4744596161). This chart shows it to be at 4780 ft. on a steep 60-degree slope of a north-northwest facing crescent shaped mountain. The crest of this mountain goes only up to 4870 ft. The main peak of this karst studded mountain known as Nam Bo rises to 5174 ft. and it is one mile due west of the crash site. The crash site is very small. Its measurements are given as 105 by 72 feet. It is a very small area for an aircraft as large as a C-130. Since all the crew remains were recovered from this small location, it can be safely concluded that the aircraft did not bounce and break up along its track before coming to a stop. Its heading must have been perpendicular to the face of the mountain. With that, the destruction of the aircraft must have been instantaneous.



Point of impact is somewhere in the center of the upper third of the rectangle.



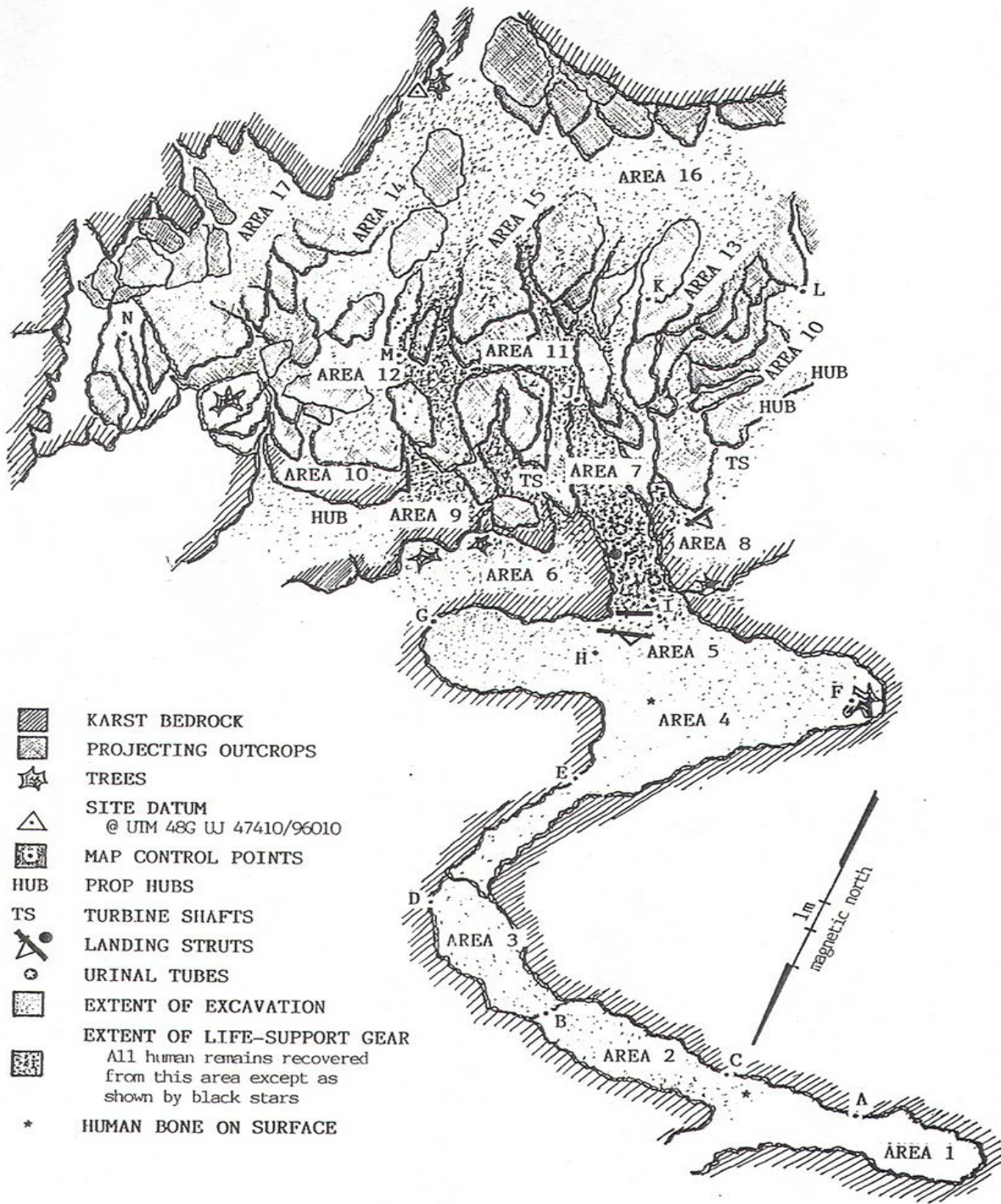
Front view of the point of impact.

Because the crash area was so remote and the surrounding terrain so treacherous, the survey team recommended that further recovery efforts should not be undertaken. Crash site contained very little top soil that was mixed with decaying foliage trapped in rocky crevasses and tree roots. It was subjected to continuous erosion from frequent rains and all light weight debris such as bones had already washed down the mountainside over the years. Stories of witnesses who reported burying bodies in graves were not credible because there was no available terrain in which one could excavate a grave. Bodies could not be buried in a conventional manner. They could only be wedged in cracks and crevasses and covered up by plentiful rocks. That is how the scavenging natives must have disposed of the burnt and decaying bodies while they were stripping everything usable from the aircraft's wreckage. No one had turned in a fire damaged 38 caliber pistol that each crewmember carried. Not a single weapon from the resupply bundle was turned in or found. Only four .38 Cal bullets and one 5.6 mm shell were found. There wasn't much more that our forensic people could hope to recover in their methodical search for more remains. Forensically, the scene was totally compromised by the natives who had already scraped the limited soil surfaces for remains. They turned over eight small bundles of what they believed to be human remains. These few bone fragments from eleven crewmembers was about all that the site would yield.



Side view of the point of impact.

The JTF-FA staff was not satisfied with the first team's recommendation about closing the crash site. The eleven American airmen who perished there warranted a more thorough excavation. Lt. Col. Jack Donovan, Detachment 2 Commander, surveyed the site again on March 29-30, 1993. He recommended a new, better planned recovery operation which he then commanded between October 24 and November 8, 1993.



Downhill view of the 17 excavation areas

The 1993 team came well prepared to conduct a full scale professional recovery. They divided the crash site into 17 distinct excavation areas and sifted through all debris through a 1/4in mesh, carefully screening for aircraft parts, personal effects and human remains. Sifting and screening recovered 187 pieces of human bone fragments, including 16 teeth, 6 of which had dental restorations. Small aircraft pieces consisted of all types of rings and buckles from the crew seats safety belts and aircraft bucket seats. These were items that for some reason did not interest the scavenging natives. The recovery team closed the crash site at 1100 hours on November 8, 1993.



Space was limited for sifting of debris.



PHOTOGRAPH 10

Steep mountain slope was full of loose boulders and rocks.



PHOTOGRAPH 12

Crevasse like these were the only places to cover the bodies with soil vegetation and rocks.