

8. Why it take so long to discover the aircraft crash site?

Local district chief provided the team with a good explanation why it took so long for the government officials to learn about the aircraft crash site. The site was in a sparsely populated remote area with ethnic minorities who did not stay in touch with local and district authorities. When their local leaders heard about the crash from witnesses, they did not know what to do. Then, when the US and Vietnamese governments began to account for the missing airmen, the information trickled down to the local levels, they realized that the crash site they had been aware of for so long should be reported to higher authorities.

Interview of witnesses is a significant part of JTF-FA's effort to recover human remains and articles from crash sites. Unfortunately, witnesses connected with this crash site proved to be of minimal value. Those who provided references about other potential witnesses caused only delays in bringing the recovery effort to a much earlier conclusion.

The first witness was only eleven years old at the time of the crash. He believed to be the first person to reach the wreckage of the plane that he thought crashed late in 1967 or early in 1968. He claimed that he saw the aircraft crash but he did not remember the time of the day. When questioned on the direction of the flight before the crash, he could not recall it. He saw no parachutes and did not hear any explosions. Later, he heard many aircraft flying around and could not identify what type they were. He claimed that he arrived at the crash site late in the afternoon. He could not get too close to the wreckage because the area around it was still burning. When he was able to get closer, he saw bodies that were badly burned. He could not tell how many bodies there were but he was sure that they were all dead because of the condition of the wreckage and the fire at the site. He claimed that he returned home without taking anything from the site. He said that he went to the crash site only two times and that he knew that the local villagers began going there to take away pieces of wreckage for use in their homes. He said that when he learned in 1991 that government was trying to locate missing Americans, he reported what he had seen many years ago to the local authorities.

Interviews of witnesses who admitted that they had visited the crash site revealed that there was a financial incentive to report locations of American human remains. All were disappointed when Lieutenant Colonel Khoi, joint investigating team member from the Ministry of Defense, explained to them that if the remains prove to be those of U.S. servicemen, their government could reimburse Vietnamese citizens reasonable sums of money for such things as labor, transportation and storage costs. He emphasized that the mission of the investigating team was a humanitarian one. There were no hidden or unofficial programs for rewards. The Vietnamese members of the joint teams operated under strict directives of the government of Vietnam.

Over the following five years, the JTF-FA personnel responded to many reports from individuals that hinted of possible connections to the S-01 crew crash site. Most had the same common denominator. People who had remains or knew of aircraft crashes were looking for compensation and relied on questionable intermediaries to deal with authorities. Stories of intermediaries changed between what they reported to the U.S. authorities and what they said when questioned by joint investigating teams. This may be due to a cultural trait or intimidating fear of the Vietnamese interviewers. It is also probable that the informants backed off from their claims once they learned that the hear-say stories about payments for reports leading to a recovery of

American servicemen were not true.

Interviews of witnesses were conducted in a very professional manner. No one was ever accused of pilfering the crash site even though it was found completely stripped of any usable parts and equipment that could be carried away to the small villages within reach through the rugged jungle terrain. Likewise, none of the witnesses confessed to taking anything away from the site, even though some went back several times. They all heard of someone else taking things away from the crash scene. Only few admitted to return to the site to dig for human remains and that is all. People who turned in eight sets of remains did not come forward to be interviewed. Yet all claimed that the bodies were properly buried after the crash even though there was no piece of terrain on the site with enough soil where a whole body could be completely covered. It is doubtful that anyone brought digging equipment to the site to inter the bodies. Everyone who came there from the here villages within reach of the place came there to get usable stuff. There was plenty of it left even though the aircraft was completely demolished and also burned. All chains, cables and sheet metal parts did not just melt away. They were items the villagers could use. There were eleven 38 cal. revolvers on the bodies. None of them, including other weapons and tools that were normally in each resupply bundle parachuted to the teams on the ground. The crash site became a gold mine for the primitive natives of the area and they kept it a secret not only from the authorities but most likely from other likewise remote villagers. The investigating team did not report the number of people living there, but the photographs and maps that show the area hint at not much more than 200 people in the 3 villages.

