

9. Why didn't the AFSOC learn about the aircraft's crash site discovery in 1992?

Understandably, the fact that the special operations community at Hurlburt Field had not learned about the discovery of the S-01 crash site was an embarrassment to many people in and out of the chain of command. The news of the discovery had not filtered through that chain and none of the families related the news to their friends who were still connected with the special operations community. That was because they were satisfied with the communications they were getting from the Air Force Personnel Center at Randolph Air Force Base and they logically assumed that the Special Operations Command was within the same information loop. Not so! Special Operations Command was not receiving any input from the Military Personnel Center because their mission was focused on assisting the families of MIA and KIA airmen.

Transcribed Teletype message from CJTFFA Det. 1. Bangkok, Thailand.

ROUTINE

R 230220Z NOV 92 PSN 893971P33

FM CJTFFA DET ONE BANGKOK TH

TO CDR JTF-FA HONOLULU HI

INFO SECDEF WASHDC//OCJCS-PW-MIA/J5//

SECDEF WASHDC//OASD-ISA/PW-MIA

USCINCPAC IO WASHDC//

CORUSACILHI HICKAM AFB HI//

SECSTATE WASHDC//CA/OCS/CCS/EAP//

CIA WASHDC//OEA/SEA/IB/DDO/EA/ICOG//

USCINCPAC HONOLULU HI//J3//

DIA WASHDC//POW-MIA//

NSC WASHDC

SECTION 01 OF 08 BANGKOK TH 52313

3371 NOV 92

DIA PASS TO DOD POW-MIA CENTRAL DOCUMENTATION OFFICE

SUBJ: DETAILED REPORT OF SURVEY OF CASE 0954

The first news about the crash site discovery was reported in a teletype message from the Commander of Detachment 1 of the Joint Task Force-Full Accounting (JTF-FA) in Bangkok, Thailand on November 23, 1992. It was addressed to the JTF-FA Commander in Hawaii with info to multiple recipients in the following offices: Secretary of Defense, Secretary of State, Central Intelligence Agency, Defense Intelligence Agency, National Security Agency, US Commander in Chief Pacific offices in Washington and Hawaii, and the Commander of the USA Central

Identification Laboratory in Hawaii (CILHI). The message instructed the Defense Intelligence Agency to pass this information to the Department of Defense POW-MIA Central Documentation Office.

Please note the addressees of the initial teletype message. It was addressed to the Commander of the Joint Task Force – Full Accounting for action. The teletype transmission was only for “information” (INFO) to all others.

There was a follow up letter from the JTF-FA in Hawaii to the Headquarters, Air Force Military Personnel Center (AFMPC), Attn: DPMCB, Randolph AFB, TX dated December 3 1992 with Subject: Detailed Report of Survey Associated with REFNO 0954. It listed the names of S-01 crewmembers and provided information contained in the original teletype message from JTF-FA in Bangkok. The letter stated that the sanitized information, which deleted only the names of the recovery team members, was available for dissemination to the next of kin.

The AFMPC made the required notifications to the S-01 families and obtained DNA samples from the family members for the Identification Laboratory at Hickam AFB in Hawaii to assist in the identification of the remains. Because no one in the Combat Talon loop maintained contact with the families, the word of the aircraft recovery did not spread. Crash site recoveries in Vietnam became frequent occurrences that no longer attracted attention of the media.

Note again the two highlighted addressees: USCINCPAC (Commander in Chief of Pacific Forces) and IO, his Liaison Office in the Pentagon. Those were the offices that should have flagged the information and notified the operational commands involved.

My own quest for information revealed that the Air Force was proper and timely in dealing with the families. However, I couldn't find anything about any agency notifying the Special Operations Command at Hurlburt Field or the successor to the Nha Trang's Stray Goose unit that eventually ended up as the 1st Special Operations Squadron in the 353rd Special Operations Group at Kadena AB, Okinawa.

My telephone inquiries about who on the operational level should have been notified about the crash site discovery were fruitless. I spoke to many sympathetic people who understood what I was looking for, but no one could go to a file or a computer to come up with the answer. Everyone I talked to ended up assuring me that their office must have done everything in accordance with their responsibilities. Several contacts suggested that I should use the Freedom of Information (FOIA) route to obtain my answers.

When I tried that route, I received what might have been correct but evasively bureaucratic response from the Air Force Personnel Center DPDXI office that contained the following: “In accordance with the DOD FOIA guidelines this request does not specifically request any type of record, but rather deals with asking questions about casualty notification process after the recovery of REFNO 0954. FOIA is not a forum for answering questions but a means to provide the public with government records; unless records exist which may answer your questions.” Very plainly, they pointed out that I was fishing for information and that their obligation was only to provide me with documents that I could positively identify by addressees and dates.

I did not like that answer because I already knew that there was no message traffic going to the interested special operations offices. I couldn't find anything about any agency notifying the AFSOC at Hurlburt Field. Mr. Herb Mason, AFSOC's historian, could not locate any evidence that his command was notified by any agency that had received the 1992 crash site discovery message from the JTF-FA. The successor organization to the aircraft's losing unit that eventually relocated to Kadena AB, Okinawa was also kept in the dark. This omission could be explained by the fact that the original Nha Trang unit, Detachment 1 of the 315 TAW changed its name to the 15th Air Commando Squadron in March 1968, then to 15th Special Operations Squadron in August 1968, and to the 90th Special Operations Squadron in October 1970, and then finally to the 1st Special Operations Squadron in March 1972. Not only that, after the Vietnam War the unit moved to the Clark AFB in the Philippines and later to Kadena AB in Okinawa where it became a part of the 353rd Special Operations Group. Mr. Fred Schramm's, Group historian's, search of the documents from the crash discovery period did not turn up any evidence that the JTF-FA message on REFNO 0954 trickled down to that command.

My obvious conclusion is that no agency was specifically tasked to locate the home unit or its major air command to let them know about the crash site discovery. It is unfortunate that after 25 years, which is the length of a full career in the Air Force, no one in the agencies that handled the information was close enough to this aircraft loss to address the information forward. Certainly, there was no one of our special operations family at the AFMPC and at the USCINCPAC who noted the significance of this long delayed crash site discovery.

Command headquarters had continuous stream of teletype messages coming in every day. Someone had to be in charge to sort them out and dispatch them to the proper sub offices for action. Information only messages did not receive equal attention. They were for information only and ended up in a stack of messages for daily reading. 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. Since there was no news coverage of the loss when it occurred, 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 even though every new thing the JTF-FA office at Camp Smith in Hawaii generated went out by teletype to the same addressees as above, they ended up in the same information file stack at USCINCPAC in Hawaii and in its liaison office in the Pentagon. There is a very strange twist to this mystery. The office of the Commander of the Special Operations in the Pacific (SOCPAC) is also located at Camp Smith. Their buildings are on the same street across from each

other. Their assigned personnel, officers and enlisted alike, probably used the same dining facilities and perhaps even sat at same tables.

It is unfortunate that we lost contact with the families of the crew. That is explainable. Members of the unit who were at Nha Trang were not at liberty to give the families the information they were seeking. Commanders and the summary court officers could say only that the aircraft failed to return from a nighttime mission and that the search for it would continue. None of the families liked the secrecy surrounding this mission and stopped their contacts with old friends of their loved ones.