

Cohen Reaffirms Full Accounting Promise at Hanoi Dig

By Linda D. Kozaryn
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HANOI, Vietnam, March 13, 2000 -- Even though 33 years have passed, America has not forgotten U.S. Navy Cmdr. Richard Rich, an F-4B Phantom pilot.

Rich, of Stamford, Conn., is one of the more than 2,000 U.S. service members unaccounted for from the Vietnam War. For more than two decades families of the missing have wondered if their loved ones died in combat or possibly alive somehow, somewhere, still prisoners of the war that claimed nearly 60,000 American lives.

Defense Secretary William S. Cohen traveled March 13 to Don Phu, a village about 30 kilometers southwest of Hanoi. About 20 members of Joint Task Force Full Accounting, assisted by about 260 Vietnamese workers, are searching there for the remains of what may be Rich's plane.

"We have an absolute, sacred obligation to do whatever we can to look for our missing in action," Cohen told reporters at the site. "We will do that and not fail in that effort. We place the return of our missing in action as the very highest of our priorities. That is reflected in the effort being made out here today at this particular site."

Cohen said the purpose of his Don Phu visit was to show the incredible and complex effort being made so that the families of the missing will have some measure of comfort that their government is doing everything possible to bring their loved ones home.

Eyewitness accounts indicate an F-4B Phantom II aircraft was shot down in May 1967 at the site here, known as Ha Tay. Villagers say one man ejected, was captured and transported to Hanoi. That man was radar intercept officer Lt. Cmdr. William Stark, who was released during Operation Homecoming in March 1973.

Stark said he lost contact with Rich after two surface-to-air missiles racked their aircraft, but he thought Rich was still alive because his head remained upright. Stark ejected -- he's not sure how -- and the next thing he knew he woke up on the ground surrounded by North Vietnamese forces. Stark never saw or heard from Rich again.

A 10-kilometer drive over a rough, crowded, single-lane dirt road was the final leg of Cohen's journey to the excavation site. Accompanied by U.S. Ambassador Douglas "Pete" Peterson; U.S. Army Brig. Gen. Harry B. Axson Jr., joint task force commander; and other U.S. officials, Cohen then walked about 300 meters from the road along a muddy dike among the rice paddies.

Recovery experts have dug a crater where an eyewitness said the crash occurred. Overseen by an anthropologist and other task force members, Vietnamese workers in a bucket brigade steadily passed buckets of mud to be carefully screened. After touring the site and seeing the bits and pieces of wreckage unearthed to date, Cohen expressed his gratitude to the local workers, the joint task force and to the Vietnamese government for their cooperation.

The United States is also helping the Vietnamese locate their missing in action, Cohen said. "We will work cooperatively in the future to resolve the remaining questions about those who are missing in action. We will do whatever we can to bring some peace of mind to the families who have lost their loved ones. We are making every conceivable effort to find their remains and bring them home."

When U.S. combat forces pulled out of Vietnam in 1973, 2,583 Americans were unaccounted for --

1,500 in Vietnam, more than 500 in Laos, nearly 80 in Cambodia. Another 425 were lost off the coast of Vietnam. America is still trying to determine their fate and, whenever possible, bring them home.

The U.S. government made a commitment to fully account for service members lost during the Vietnam War. Cohen has reaffirmed that promise.

"We're committed to all of our warriors, past and present. We're committed to their families, whose pain has endured for decades," he said. "America's fallen heroes did not face the horror of battle for us to turn away from their sacrifice. They didn't fight for us to forget."





Many of the Americans unaccounted for were pilots or other air crew who were lost when their aircraft crashed or were shot down. Site excavations are much like archeological digs. The goal is to recover remains and other evidence to confirm the fate of the crew. If remains are located, they are transported to the Army's Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii.

As of September 1999, U.S. and host-nation recovery teams have repatriated the remains of 529 service members. U.S. officials first launched formal search and recovery operations in Vietnam and Laos in 1988 and in Cambodia in 1991. By the end of fiscal 1999, U.S. officials had conducted 57 joint field activities in Vietnam, 59 in Laos and 18 in Cambodia.

Joint Task Force Full Accounting, set up in 1992, continues searching for the remaining 2,054 unaccounted for Americans. In 1999, task force officials investigated 351 cases, excavated 61 sites and repatriated 40 sets of remains believed to be American GIs. The remains of 25 Americans have been positively identified and returned to their families.

The task force, made up of about 160 investigators, analysts, linguists and other specialists, plans to conduct 11 more field activities in 2000, five each in Vietnam and Laos and one in Cambodia. Task force headquarters at Camp H.M. Smith, Hawaii, has detachments located in Bangkok, Thailand; Hanoi, Vietnam; and Vientiane, Laos. The detachment in Thailand also supports operations in Cambodia.

No U.S. service members have returned alive since the release of 591 American prisoners of war in 1973. Despite reports of live sightings over the years, the government has been unable to obtain definitive evidence that Americans are being detained against their will in Southeast Asia. But they have not ruled out that possibility. Live-sighting reports continue to receive the highest priorities, according to military officials.

	Defense Secretary William S. Cohen leads visitors on a tour of an excavation site near Hanoi, Vietnam, where a Navy fighter reportedly crashed in May 1967. Following Cohen on the walkway on the March 13 site visit are Army Brig. Gen. Harry B. Axson Jr., Joint Task Force Full Accounting commander, and U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam Douglas "Pete" Peterson. <i>Photo by Linda D. Kozaryn.</i>
	About 260 Vietnamese workers, mainly women, pass mud and debris in a bucket brigade at a search and recovery excavation site near Hanoi, Vietnam. A Navy P-4B Phantom crashed at the site in May 1967, according to an eyewitness account. Defense Secretary William S. Cohen toured the site March 13. <i>Photo by Linda D. Kozaryn.</i>
	A Vietnamese worker shovels mud at a search and recovery site outside Hanoi, Vietnam. According to an eyewitness account, a Navy P-4B Phantom crashed at the site in May 1967. Defense Secretary William S. Cohen toured the site March 13. <i>Photo by Linda D. Kozaryn.</i>
	Defense Secretary William S. Cohen (center) talks with anthropologist Denny Danielson (left) at an excavation site outside Hanoi, Vietnam, where a Navy P-4B Phantom reportedly crashed in May 1967. Danielson is assigned to the Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii. Cohen toured the site March 13. <i>Photo by Linda D. Kozaryn.</i>



Air Force Master Sgt. Mark Mitchell (right), a life support specialist with Joint Task Force Full Accounting, explains what a search team has found in a rice paddy outside Hanoi, Vietnam, while Defense Secretary William S. Cohen (left) inspects pieces of metal, cable and other items believed to be from a Navy jet that was shot down in May 1967. Cohen toured the site March 13. *Photo by Linda D. Kozaryn.*