

Generation X Honors Historic Battlefield Pledge

By Linda D. Kozaryn
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, April 4, 2000 -- Even though it was hot, damp and dirty in the village of Don Phu, Vietnam, the American military men and women who volunteered to go there said they loved it because they were doing something worthwhile.

About 20 young service members traveled to Southeast Asia to help honor America's pledge to bring home its fallen soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines and Coast Guardsmen. Every bucket of mud that passed hand to hand at the evacuation site, about 20 miles southwest of Hanoi, revealed a bit more about the fate of a missing U.S. pilot.

Senior Airman Christopher M. Rogers, 24, of the 324th Intelligence Squadron at Hickam Air Force Base, Hawaii, was one of five linguists who volunteered for the recovery mission. The St. Louis native said his father served two tours with the Army in Vietnam; it's not lost on him he would not have been born had his father not survived the war.

"I know if my dad had been killed over here, I'd want his remains to come home," the young airman said.

Senior Airman Brenda Smith, 21, of Houston, another 324th linguist, said her father served off the coast of Vietnam with the Navy during the war. "I never got to talk to him much about it though," said Smith, whose parents divorced when she was a toddler. "I just know that he was in it."

"I begged to do this," she said. "I wanted to come so badly because I speak Vietnamese and it's a way for me to improve my language skills and see the country I've been studying. The mission itself is very noble. I think coming out here to try to find the remains of any of our missing soldiers is awesome."

A self-proclaimed "basic city girl," Smith admitted she'd never dug or carried buckets before. Although this kind of physical labor is not her "bag," she said the work has been gratifying. "I already plan on volunteering again," she said. "I want to come out here as many times as I can."

Tech. Sgt. Brian R. Trout, 36, also a 324th linguist, said he volunteered to practice his language skills and for a chance to see Vietnam. "I've enjoyed every moment of this trip so far," said the Sandusky, Ohio, native. "It's the camaraderie. People come together with different backgrounds, histories, experiences in the military and we draw from that."

While the mission is "sad," Trout said, "I think that's what adds to it -- we know we're doing this for a good cause. We're trying to bring closure to this. We know that it's very important for the families back in the United States."

Many of those who volunteered were not yet born when U.S. combat troops pulled out of Vietnam in 1973. Some, like Rogers and Smith, have fathers who served there. Whether they have a personal connection to the war or not, though, military service is the tie that binds this generation to the one that served in the 1960s and 1970s.

"Part of the military psyche is that you never leave your comrades on the battlefield," said Bob Jones, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Prisoner of War/Missing in Action Personnel Affairs. "That's ingrained in the fiber of everyone in uniform."

Jones, a former enlisted soldier and Army officer who served two combat tours in Vietnam, heads the Pentagon's efforts to recover service members missing from World War II, Korea, Vietnam and the Cold War. Experts from the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory Hawaii and Joint Task Force Full

Accounting, also based in Hawaii, collect oral histories, do archival searches, conduct interviews and site excavations around the world.

Once a potential site is identified, recovery experts conduct joint field activities similar to that of an archeological dig. "Literally, no stone goes unturned in trying to find information concerning a missing American," Jones said.

Recruiting volunteers for these difficult, often dangerous, recovery missions is not a problem. Military and civilian personnel readily volunteer to perform arduous tasks all over the world at great risk to themselves, Jones said.

"It's amazing to see the willingness of folks to come out and try to assist in locating and identifying yesterday's heroes," he said.

Volunteers are exposed to unexploded ordnance, bamboo vipers, malaria, and a host of other environmental hazards. At one Southeast Asia site, Jones recalled, recovery team members traveled back and forth by helicopter. When the chopper touched down, one skid rested on the narrow edge of a jagged limestone cliff while the other still hovered in the air. The workers had to rappel to the recovery site, Jones said.

In mid-March, Jones accompanied Defense Secretary William S. Cohen during a visit to the relatively tame crash site here. According to an eyewitness, a Navy F-4 Phantom crashed and exploded in the rice paddies here in May 1967, killing both the pilot and a local resident. U.S. officials believe the pilot may have been Navy Cmdr. Richard Rich of Stamford, Conn.

Rich is but one of the more than 2,000 service members from the Vietnam War still unaccounted for. When U.S. combat forces withdrew, 2,583 Americans were unaccounted for -- 1,500 in Vietnam, more than 500 in Laos and nearly 80 in Cambodia. Another 425 were lost off the coast of Vietnam.

U.S. officials first launched formal search and recovery operations in Vietnam and Laos in 1988 and in Cambodia in 1991. As of April 1, the remains of 554 service members have been identified and repatriated as a result of joint U.S. and host-nation investigation and recovery efforts. Still, 2,029 remain lost -- but not forgotten.

For more than a month this spring, a team of U.S. service members and Vietnamese workers excavated the Don Phu site, known locally as Ha Tay. Dennis R. Danielson, an anthropologist from the Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii, slogged in the mud along with about 20 U.S. joint task force volunteers and about 260 Vietnamese workers.

Danielson served a tour as a Marine infantryman in Vietnam and that one combat tour was enough, he remarked. But, he added, he hasn't hesitated to return to Southeast Asia as an anthropologist. In fact, he has led excavations on more than 26 recovery missions to Vietnam and Laos.

"You couldn't ask for a better job than to recover the remains of Americans that served here," he said.

The war took its toll on both sides, Danielson noted. "The landowner's husband was with the North Vietnamese army," he said. "He's an MIA, too."

Army Staff Sgt. Sean A. Bendele, a veteran of 12 such joint field activities in Southeast Asia, also said he values the opportunity to honor the nation's pledge. The Victorville, Calif., native enlisted as a mortuary affairs specialist more than 15 years ago because he felt compelled to join the search for the nation's MIAs.

"It's just something I want to do," said Bendele, who's also assigned to Central Identification Laboratory. "I want to make sure these guys come home. They've been over here too long. It's time to bring them

home."

As the recovery team's assistant leader, Bendele led the Vietnamese workers as they hauled buckets of mud from the crater and poured it into quarter-inch mesh screens. The team then used water hoses to wash away the dirt and clay, leaving small pieces of aircraft wreckage on the screens. Anything larger would have been scavenged over the years, said Army Maj. Mike Higginbotham, recovery team leader.

Higginbotham, 45, of Huntington Beach, Calif., previously worked at three recovery sites in Laos. This was his first mission in Vietnam. He said earlier investigations at the Ha Tay site in 1995 and 1996 had uncovered no leads. "It was '97 before we got enough leads to know where to start to dig," he said.

Midway through the excavation, Higginbotham's team had recovered several sacks of metal pieces, cable and wire. He said team specialists seek anything that will identify the aircraft -- a data plate, uniform buttons, portions of a parachute. They also aim to determine whether anyone was in the aircraft at the time of the crash.

In this case, Higginbotham said, the team found some bones that could prove to be human remains. "We never know if what we've found is human remains until we get it back to the Central Identification Laboratory at Hickam Air Force Base, Hawaii, and our experts there make a determination."

Air Force Master Sgt. Mark Mitchell of Dangerfield, Texas, told site visitors he's taken part in 10 investigations and this was his 16th joint field activity. The Ha Tay site, he said, was one of the worst because of the weather and the size of the wreckage. "Most of the sites I've worked on have been dry sites where you didn't have to deal with the water or the cold," he said.

Mitchell said recovery missions have been his most rewarding jobs during his 20-year military career. "I feel like it's a joint task force, and we're just trying to bring one of our team members home," he said. "I'd want the same if I went down or years later my son had to go."

Air Force Master Sgt. Michael B. Reilly is an explosive ordnance disposal technician assigned to the 35th Civil Engineering Squadron, Misawa Air Base, Japan. He's at the Ha Tay site because he wanted to learn what's required of EOD experts on these types of missions.

"Our unit gets tasked to provide support, and they asked for volunteers," he said. "I wanted to see where I send my personnel. It's always nice for the bosses to know what they're getting their personnel into." Luckily, Reilly said, the excavation so far had not required his particular EOD expertise.

"There are other sites where they have found a lot of cluster munitions," he said. "That's when the sites really get dangerous."

Army Spc. Robert L. Gordon, 24, of Houston is a personnel administration clerk assigned to the 706th EOD Detachment at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii. The mission offered a chance to get out of the office, see Vietnam, "plus get to do something honorable for our country," he said.

"When I found out what the mission was and what it was about, it became kind of personal because if I had someone who was missing in action like that, I would like to have closure for my family," Gordon said.

Word of mouth led Chief Petty Officer James M. Vukovich, 36, to the site. The Navy corpsman from Waukesha, Wis., is assigned to the 1st Marine Division at Camp Pendleton, Calif. He said his unit wasn't tasked to provide anyone, but other corpsmen had volunteered and he decided to follow suit.

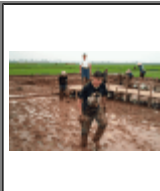




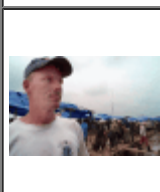


"It's a once-in-a-lifetime experience," Vukovich said. "After being out here in these conditions for almost a month, we've potentially found some things and that kind of makes it worthwhile. Do it again? Oh yeah, definitely."

Air Force Tech. Sgt. Luis E. Valladares, 40, from the 18th Medical Group at Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, Japan, was one of two medics on the recovery team. The San Antonio native was a teen-ager during the Vietnam War.

"I can relate to what we're doing here," Valladares said. "I remember some things from TV. During my first years in service, I also met several people who served in Vietnam. I probably am the link between that generation and the new generation of military members."

The 14-year Air Force veteran said this was his second recovery mission in Vietnam, and he plans to volunteer for more.

"I've enjoyed it tremendously, coming here and doing this kind of job," he said. "It is an opportunity to practice what I was trained for. Back on base is a good thing too, but this has a special meaning. These people gave their lives for our country. The least we can do is to bring them back home."

	<p>Army Spc. Robert L. Gordon, 24, from Houston, Texas, trudges through ankle-deep mud at the site of recovery operations outside Hanoi, Vietnam. Gordon, a personnel administration clerk assigned to the 706th EOD Detachment at Scofield Barracks, Hawaii, volunteered to join Joint Task Force Full Accounting to help in determining the fate of an American pilot missing from the Vietnam War. <i>Photo by Linda D. Kozaryn.</i></p>
	<p>Vietnamese children wave to U.S. officials en route to recovery operations at the 1967 crash site of a Navy F-4B Phantom outside Hanoi, Vietnam. <i>Photo by Lt. David Gai, USN.</i></p>
	<p>A Vietnamese farmer hauls a loaded trailer along the dirt road linking Hanoi, Vietnam, and Don Phu village, about 20 miles to the southwest. The scene was typical for about 20 members of a U.S. recovery team who traveled this route every day for about a month during recovery operations at the 1967 crash site of a Navy F-4B Phantom. <i>Photo by Lt. David Gai, USN.</i></p>
	<p>U.S. and Vietnamese workers excavate the crash site of a U.S. F-4B Phantom jet in rice paddies about 20 miles southwest of Hanoi, Vietnam. <i>Photo by Lt. David Gai, USN.</i></p>
	<p>Anthropologist Dennis R. Danielson (center) of the Army Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii supervises Vietnamese workers excavating the crash site of a U.S. F-4B Phantom jet in rice paddies about 20 miles outside of Hanoi. <i>Photo by Lt. David Gai, USN.</i></p>
	<p>Army Staff Sgt. Sean A. Bendele of the Army Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii, looks over the site where about 260 Vietnamese workers and 20 members of a U.S. recovery team are excavating the crash site of a U.S. F-4B Phantom jet. As assistant recovery team leader, Bendele led the workers' efforts during the recovery effort in March. <i>Photo by Linda D. Kozaryn.</i></p>
	<p>Vietnamese workers pass buckets of mud from an excavated crater during a recovery mission outside Hanoi, Vietnam. Workers then washed away the dirt and clay to reveal bits of airplane wreckage. <i>Photo by Linda D. Kozaryn.</i></p>
	<p>Vietnamese women work in a bucket brigade to excavate mud from the suspected crash site of a U.S. F-4B Phantom jet 20 miles outside Hanoi, Vietnam. <i>Photo by Linda D. Kozaryn.</i></p>