



Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office

Live Sighting Investigations

Repatriation of American POWs and resolution of live sighting reports has always been one of this nation's highest priorities. Since the collapse of the South Vietnamese government in 1975, the U.S. Government has received 7,576 live sighting reports of possible American POWs. Of these reports, 1,997 are purportedly firsthand.

Upon receipt, incoming reports are immediately analyzed. Reports are compared to literally thousands of documents and records developed over the years. In most cases, the reports can be correlated to documented POWs, Westerners known to be living, working, or imprisoned for various offenses at established locations in Indochina, or Asians with slightly Western physical characteristics. There were, however, additional reports of sightings for which corroborative or clarifying data was lacking, and these remained unresolved. Prior to the 1990s, options for investigating these reports were limited by lack of access to most of the locations in Southeast Asia where sightings were alleged to have taken place.

One tool available since 1991 is the Live Sighting Investigation (LSI). This investigative mechanism provides for short-notice inspections, by U.S. officials, of specified sites, including prisons, in Southeast Asia. Stony Beach investigators from the Defense Intelligence Agency, accompanied by host-government representatives, are permitted to tour select areas, review documents and interview the local populous in an attempt to determine the authenticity of alleged, first-hand live sighting reports. Over the years, live sighting investigations have been used to look into a wide range of reports, from live sightings to alleged evasion symbols. To date, none of the 119 LSIs (97 in Vietnam, 12 in Laos, and 10 in Cambodia) conducted have generated any credible evidence of American POWs being held in Southeast Asia after 1975. On the contrary, LSIs have aided in the resolution of a number of POW-related scams and/or located individuals in Vietnam who had been incorrectly identified as POWs. The last LSI was closed in June 2000 after investigators located the Hungarian ethnologist that was the basis for a large body of live sighting reports.

The LSI mechanism was never envisioned to be a replacement for previously employed methodologies, and is not employed automatically with every reported sighting. Rather, LSIs are used, only if necessary, to supplement traditional methods of case resolution. The Vietnamese and Lao have expressed they will not support what they deem as frivolous investigations, and DPMO has been very careful to exploit all other available means before requesting an LSI from either country.