

**VIET NAM VETERANS OF AMERICA  
POW/MIA COMMITTEE  
VETERANS INITIATIVE PROGRAM  
TEAM MISSION MARCH 2010**

**REPORT**

Gary Jones, chairman, team leader

I must express the appreciation of the VIP “Team Tiger” and the POW/MIA Committee to the VVA National Board of Directors for the support and encouragement to make this trip possible. In my opinion as one who has made numerous trips, this one shall be marked as one of the most successful. This trip was memorable in many ways. The time was right and more importantly the reputation, conduct and support offered by the Viet Nam Veterans of America since 1994 on many missions has earned a place of great respect for us and what we stand for from the Vietnamese government, the people and mostly the veterans of the American-Vietnamese War. It is this respect for the warrior mentality that is and has led us to an environment of cooperation which has brought home thousands of soldiers who were not accounted for at the wars end. This accounting means the whole world for many American and Vietnamese mothers, fathers, siblings and friends.

The delegation, better known as “Team Tiger” for the year of the Tiger, consisted of Vice President Jack Devine, Chairman and team leader Gary Jones, Vice Chairman Grant Coates, Director of the Veterans Initiative Program Bill Duker and Dan Tucker. Dan is a VVA member and was the 1<sup>st</sup> Sgt at FB Tomahawk when over run in 1969. He accompanied us as a witness to the burial of 27 PAVN KIA from that battle.

The journey began for us on March 10. It was a challenge from the beginning as airlines connections throughout the US were in a shambles and some arrived at the LAX departure within bare minutes of departure for Taipei while one was delayed a full 24 hours after an attack by a unit of birds in Lawton Oklahoma. Being a “Top” however requires coolness in the most devilish of situations and Dan handled it as he did in Phu Loc 41 years ago. The rest of us arrived in Hanoi about mid morning on the 12<sup>th</sup> of March with just enough time to register at the hotel, clean up and rest for a couple of minutes before our first formal meeting with the Vietnam Union of Friendship Organizations. We had the great honor of being greeted by Mr. Vu Xuan Hong, President of VUFO and former ambassador to the United States. Also present and ready to take us under wing was former Ambassador Nguyen Tam Chien, Executive Vice President of the Viet Nam-USA Society who are our sponsors for the trips. It is very important to note that the Vietnam - USA Society was formed in October 1945 as the first bilateral friendship Organization of the Vietnamese people with people from other countries. Since that beginning, as far back as World War 2, the mission of the society has remained the same: the promotion of mutual understanding, friendly relations and mutually beneficial cooperation between the people of Vietnam and the people of the United States of America. I believe that you will find upon questioning that every member of a team to Vietnam...at least the ones I have had the honor to attend, will attest to the sincerity of

that goal on their part. After a press conference and a dinner with Ambassador Chien, our weary, weary bodies fell into bed and thus endeth day one...plus.

Our next meeting day started with JPAC. The CO, LCOL Emoto and Ron Ward, our long time friend and casualty resolution specialist for detachment 2, brought us up on events and specific case progress. Major progress has been had on the off shore effort. The Navy research vessel USNS Heezen has spent one tour along the coast. Public relations with the Vietnamese government were very positive and we don't expect serious problems with future assignments. Some possible sites were identified and the Heezen will return after its current overhaul.

Unilateral support from the Vietnamese continues to improve. The communications and approval of information from the civilians to the Vietnam Office for Seeking Missing Persons (VNOSMP) to JPAC, particularly regarding permission to excavate, has been excellent. In particular some of the older Vietnamese veterans have visited our sites to provide information.

On specific cases the information from the Ukraine has opened possible new sites. One last known alive case that had been stalled has now resulted in a confirmation of KIA and another site that had reached a dead end now has new information which will actively reopen it.

On the problem side we were advised that there has been a decision by USG's office of air travel certification that has greatly impacted the efforts of JPAC. The Vietnamese MI 17 helicopters which we have used to transport personnel into the sites have not been recertified by this US office for use and the teams have to walk into the sites. One current site requires a two day hike each way through the jungle on treacherous mountain terrain. This has also meant that older witnesses are now unable to go to the sites with the investigation teams. Avenues open to JPAC to correct this have been exhausted with no approval. It is Team Tiger's opinion that this is a huge loss in time and effort and first hand witnesses. A typical site has only 60 days to complete and now a substantial portion of that time is wasted on a hike. We recommend that VVA urge their congressional contacts to remedy this problem by recertifying the flights.

After JPAC we met with the Ministry of Defense which is Vietnam's active duty command. The Deputy Director of MOD advised us that the MOD is now engaged in its eighth unilateral mission for US recovery and pledged that the cooperation would continue. We discussed the need to follow up on a case by case basis for the 291 cases we have provided so we can be in a position to provide possible additional help. Grant Coates introduced the case data base program and we agreed to improve and use this method.

Our next visit was with the Bombs and Landmine/UXO Clearing Technology Center (BOMICEN). Since the end of the war 100,000 persons have been killed by the UXO scattered throughout the country. Twenty percent of the country is contaminated with ordinance and only around ten percent of that has been cleared. NGO groups are very helpful, but funding is a problem for them.

Later in the afternoon we are off to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and VNOSMP where we are greeted by Deputy Minister Pham Binh Minh. He reiterated the problem of the MI 17 recertification as being a substantial problem not only for US, but Vietnamese as well. He hoped a solution for this could be found. We discussed the Agent Orange situation, which had been brought up at the VUFO meeting. As before, the team described the

policy of the VVA and explained to them that contrary to belief the US Veteran was not as cared for or compensated as they thought. Vice President Devine suggested we might be of some help to each other by mutual sharing of information and advocacy about the problem. We thought we might develop side by side stories of American and Vietnamese family hardships as a start. The team has taken this subject back to the April Board meeting, but any results are not yet available.

At the end of this, the second meeting day, we had a dinner meeting with LCOL Emoto and Ron Ward to discuss our findings this day and make plans to meet at the US JFA site north of Saigon in a few days. Thus endeth day 2.

The next day we meet with our counter parts and fellow players in the war and in the recovery, the Veterans Association of Vietnam (VAVN). We met here with Major General Mai the Vice president of the VAVN. We spoke of the cases we brought back for them on this trip. Case 289 was a helmet from the Hue Tet Offensive and an incense stand from a temple in the near area. Case 290 was a description of fourteen PAVN KIA during operation Lom Son 719 in Quang tri province along route 9 below Dong Ha Mountain. Case 291 was the burial site of 27 PAVN soldiers on Firebase Tomahawk, near Phu Loc and that we brought with us a first hand witness Mr. Dan Tucker. We talked informally of the legacies of Agent Orange and UXO problems as well as the MIA's from both sides. The General spoke of some projects that VAVN is now conducting. First was a series of Friendship villages throughout the country to provide care and education for not only victims but those interested in the history of the war and second was encouragement of veteran enterprises. He envisioned it as a joint enterprise situation with US Veterans.

The remainder of the morning the team met with the US military attaché' Col. Patrick Reardon at the US Embassy. Col. Reardon is a Vietnamese American who was born in Vietnam and has made a career in the US Army.

A very unique opportunity during the afternoon was a VUSA sponsored roundtable on People's Diplomacy and Vietnam-USA Relations. There are 350 non governmental agencies (NGO's) from America active in Vietnam. VVA is one of them. It was a high honor indeed that the roundtable was jointly chaired by Mr. Nguyen Tam Chien, former Ambassador to the United States and Vice president, Director of the VUS Center for International Research and our own Vice President Jack Devine. The discussion was divided into our past relationships to include our efforts and successes in overcoming war consequences, enhancing mutual understanding and promoting reconciliation; and then into the Future and promoting mutually beneficial cooperation. It was attended by an impressive array of governmental, educational, research, press, business veteran NGO's. The results should be covered by a separate report. It should be mentioned however that the historical implications of the impact of VVA on Vietnam US Relations is demonstrated by our being asked to co chair this momentous event.

Thus endeth day three of meetings and our time in Hanoi. We now depart for Hue- Phu Bai.

The meetings with groups through the remainder of the country were primarily a continuation of our message on not only current cases, but our effort to create a follow up process for the cases. Throughout the rest of this report I will mention those groups with whom we met and also highlight of our field activities.

In Thua Thien-Hue Province we met with the Union of Friendship Organization, the VAVN and the Peoples Committee. On the second day we traveled to Quang Tri province where we met with the Quang Tri Peoples Committee, the VAVN and the Department of Foreign Affairs. On a personal note I also met up with my personal long time friend and one time adversary Mr. Tan. Agent Orange is also now presenting a challenge to him and I wish him the very best of good fortunes in his challenge for that. We journeyed out Route 9 to locate the area of case number 290. Unfortunately the young officer who was on hand to guide us needed a little more map practice and after much milling around in the agricultural area near the Rock Pile we could only direct them back down the road to the proper location. Our journey continued to Khe Sanh where the Vietnamese had excavated a site we previously provided to them. This demonstrated a very unfortunate break in communications between the veterans we took to the site a year earlier and the ACDU forces which did the actual excavation. The site was incorrectly interpreted and as expected there were no positive results. We are considering how to correct this, but it will be difficult now.

Now we are underway for Firebase Tomahawk, case number 291 and the realm of 1st Sgt Dan Tucker. In Phu Loc at the base of the pass we had the good fortune of meeting with the wife of the XO of the NVA RGT that overran the "Boys from Bardstown" in 1969. He has since passed away, but the visit to her home, accompanied by scads of press was very meaningful to us all. This time instead of an AK 47 on her hip she held a new grandchild. The world moves on. We spent over four hours pounding up the firebase with the press from multiple sources being educated by Dan. He was amazed and grateful to be in the company of former PAVN soldiers who were involved with the attack and they shared information and experiences and came away with a new found respect for each other. We did indeed locate the burial area of 27 KIA and I think it will be a priority dig for the MOD. It will be very interesting to see the result. This effort was reported and broadcast throughout Vietnam and the VVA is the reason it took place. We continued on to Hoi Anh that afternoon and spent a couple of days resting...hot, tired, dehydrated, drained and sick...satisfied.

While in Quang Nam Province we met with the Danang Union of Friendship Organizations, the VAVN and the Peoples Committee.

On March 24 we depart on the last major leg of the mission to HCMC (Saigon). The first assignment is a visit to a US JFA site in Phu Giao District, Bien Duong Province, and north of Saigon about three hours travel. This was an easy access site in a rubber plantation area with good access. We were accompanied by LCOL Emoto, Ron Ward, and had joined forces with delegates from the VFW who were in the area. Most impressive of all for us was the JFA team who did the excavation. The Team leader was Captain Mike, USMC, fresh from Afghanistan and totally committed to the mission at hand. He was a delight to know and very informative about the dig. The Archeologist, Kristin, I apologize for losing her last name, was a young lady from La. State University who was absolutely competent to do the job, and in talking with her I found she had passed up the opportunity to go immediately back to school for her PhD to continue this work. This work is not easy even at the best of locations. Realizing we were not well acclimated, having come from a snow covered ground in some cases, the 90 plus degree, humid weather was a real killer to hike up and down the slopes. But the operation was intriguing. The encampment was in a shady rubber plantation which made things much

improved over many JFA's. The work is accomplished with our active duty team and many Vietnamese who are hired on to help. It is a painstakingly diligent work in hot and often dangerous environment. The EOD specialist is on hand at all times. The corpsman is on hand at all times. All members of that team showed us how much they appreciated our interest and help. I can tell you that I was immensely proud of these people and this effort in one of the great humanitarian efforts to come from any war.

In HCMC we met VAVN and the Peoples Committee. One of our last stops was the US Consulate. There we were met by the Consul General Ken Fairfax who had just arrived back from in country to meet with us. This was an extra effort on his part and we were very appreciative of this as we have enjoyed a very enjoyable and informative relationship with him. Consul General Fairfax demonstrates the very best of the American people to his job and we are proud to have worked with him.

In Conclusion I offer some observations. The relationship of VVA's VI program is such that at meetings at all levels from the highest offices of Government to the highly respected veterans to the people on the street the association is one of old and familiar friends. All are very comfortable to visit on an informal and familiar level on any subject, with great respect for each other.

Clearly Agent Orange remains in the picture, as does the UXO problem. But to us as fellow vets and humanitarians of long time support, the outreach is for mutual support rather than demand for compensation. There is clearly a significant progress in the cooperation to resolve the MIA issue for both sides. Most of the resistance now seems to come from a few governmental and lobbying efforts. Funding and emotional extremism creates some tensions, but not to the degree it has at times in the past. The VVA documentary "Once Enemies" was a very positive thing there and perhaps here in the states. We hope it will result in more information that we can take to families in SEA and in return to bring home to families here.