

# U.S. Chances Dim For Finding 578 Lost in Laos War

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VIENTIANE — As the U.S. role in Laos shrivels daily, with it shrinks the chances of ever recovering some 578 American soldiers and airmen killed or missing in action in the jungled and mountainous country.

Laos is the last of the three former Indochinese countries where the United States still has a diplomatic mission. But as the Communist Pathet Lao take further control of the government and relations with the United States sour, the continuation of that U.S. presence grows more doubtful.

At the moment, a U.S. Army colonel here has the fulltime responsibility of trying to convince the Pathet Lao that they should provide all the information they have on the whereabouts of the 303 Americans known to have been killed in Laos and another 275 listed as missing in action.

Meanwhile, the Defense Department must soon come to a decision on whether or not to continue operating the Joint Casualty Resolution Center at Samaesan, in neighboring Thailand. The center, which employs 100 experts in reconstructing and identifying human remains, has been virtually idle for months.

"Time's running out," said Col. Luther Vaughn. "If we don't get some cooperation from the Pathet Lao or any of the others very soon, there's no point in keeping the center operating. In another year or so the jungle will have grown back so completely that it will be impossible to even locate graves or crash sites."

Throughout Indochina, a total of 2,300 American military men are still unaccounted for.

"I know they have a lot of

information," said Col. Luther Vaughn. "I'm sure they could help resolve at least 100 cases."

Vaughn, who has been in Vientiane just over two months, formerly worked on the project at U.S. Pacific Command headquarters in Honolulu.

Altogether, according to Vaughn's figures, 900 Americans are missing in action (MIA) in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, while another 1,400 are listed as killed in action—bodies not recovered.

Most of these men were pilots whose planes were shot down on bombing runs. Some, Vaughn said, have been missing since 1967 when their planes disappeared over the South China Sea.

The Defense Department is interested in clearing up

the cases for humanitarian and economic reasons. "Until we know for certain that these men have been killed, there is always the nagging hope that they may be alive and held prisoner," said Vaughn. "It's hell for the next of kin."

Economically, he explained, as long as a man is listed MIA, he continues to receive promotions and his family continues to receive his salary and other allowances.

Vaughn, a Special Forces officer with a soft southern accent, said he did not have much evidence that any of the MIAs were still alive, but he felt some were. "But," he conceded, "God only knows how they'd continue to be held."

In his efforts to find out why, and if, any Americans are being held prisoner, Vaughn met recently with Col. Phao Bounnaphol, the Pathet Lao delegate to the joint commission in charge of implementing Laos 1973 peace accord.

Vaughn said Phao was courteous and seemingly sincere, "but when I asked him why the Pathet Lao had withheld information so far and whether we could expect some cooperation now, he just laughed and shrugged his shoulders."

The exchange indicated that Phao himself had nothing to do with the matter and that decisions would have to be made by the Communist high command.

Some U.S. officials here believe the Pathet Lao intend to withhold information on the dead and missing Americans until they need to use it as a final political lever. These officials noted that recently North Vietnam reportedly told the United States that there could be no search for any Americans missing in Indochina until the United States contributes "to healing the wounds of war and to post-war reconstruction in both parts of Vietnam."

The official U.S. position so far has been that North Vietnam is not entitled to post-war economic assistance because it blatantly and frequently violated the 1973 peace agreement.

The reported linking of aid with the search for missing Americans is likely to run into opposition from U.S. interest groups seeking information on those reported killed or missing. These groups, which include veterans organizations, are likely to see the North Vietnamese demand as "ransom," sources here said.