

# MIA Body Hunt an Agonizing Science

By William Claiborne  
Washington Post Staff Writer

Tears were streaking the haggard faces of a small group of South Vietnamese soldiers when they stumbled into an American Army camp one January night in 1968 and poured out their hellish story of being ambushed and overrun.

Viet Cong guerrillas had taken the allied search-and-destroy mission by surprise and had decimated its ranks with furious machine gun and mortar fire. Hundreds of the enemy had rained a continuous stream of fire at the outnumbered patrol, killing both South Vietnamese and U.S. soldiers.

One South Vietnamese who was blown into a canal by the force of a

rocket explosion escaped by playing dead while the enemy searched the bodies of his comrades. He told a gruesome story—which later proved to be entirely false—of Viet Cong decapitating the bodies of U.S. soldiers and parading their heads on bamboo stakes.

More than 150 military personnel—including doctors, dentists, anthropologists, pathologists, fingerprint experts and other technicians from all service branches—are assigned to the Joint Casualty Resolution Center and its identification laboratory.

The center also employs local guides to accompany Army graves registration personnel to suspected grave sites for disinterment. Each mission re-

quires extensive red tape and formal approval from local authorities, according to a Pentagon spokesman.

The next day, a recovery force went to the site of the battle and recovered the bodies of 43 South Vietnamese soldiers and two Americans, including the force's commanding officer.

However, the recovery team failed to find the remains of 11 South Vietnamese soldiers and a young career Army sergeant named Collins. (The name is a fictional one, used in response to a request by the Army to spare the survivors of the real victim the knowledge of details of his death.)

Sgt. Collins was routinely listed by

See MIA, A19, Col. 1

## MIA, From A1

the Army as missing in action (MIA) and his family was notified. He became a statistic, one of 1,363 human beings assigned a number and made the object of a torso public announcement emanating from the Pentagon.

To his family, however, Sgt. Collins became the object of a constantly nagging mystery that placed him in the netherworld that includes neither the netherworld that includes neither the alive.

Collins' comrades on the patrol were of little help; in the heat of the battle, no one clearly remembered seeing the sergeant fall, although one South Vietnamese said he thought he might have seen a "short" American soldier hit by AK-47 automatic fire.

For more than four years, Collins remained in this netherworld—until a South Vietnamese villager named Bon remarked to U.S. military authorities he remembered seeing an old man bury an American soldier near a small stream.

The Army sent a helicopter to the site and recovery team found a 4½-foot deep grave exactly where the villager said it would be. In the grave, they found the skeleton of a man, some G.I.-type socks, two U.S. Army buttons, a ballpoint pen and a pair of tweezers.

There were no Army "dog tags" and the skull was badly shattered. Even though authorities knew that Collins had been lost in the immediate vicinity, there was scant evidence to give the Army's Memorial Affairs Agency the conclusive identification it demanded before it would declare Collins dead.

What followed was a months-long, intricate process of detective work that took the remains of the unidentified soldier to Japan, the University of Maryland, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington and, finally, to a marked grave in his hometown.

It is a process that will be repeated hundreds of times in Southeast Asia as the military attempts to locate and identify the 1,261 Americans still listed as missing.

Although the Vietnam war was the longest in U.S. history, it produced the smallest numbers of MIAs, mostly because of rapid helicopter evacuation from the battlefield. By comparison, 6,144 G.I.s are still missing in Korea.

In Sgt. Collins' case—which officials conceded was an unusually difficult one—the most sophisticated scientific techniques were used before positive identification was made.

The race, blood type, height and hair color of the remains matched the missing soldier, but the authorities were still not satisfied, principally because physical anthropologists who examined the skeleton estimated it to be that of a man 10 years younger than Collins.

As a result, the remains were flown to Japan, where a leading anthropologist also estimated the skeleton to be 10 years younger than the supposed victim. From there, the remains went to the University of Maryland for a complicated procedure called microscopic osteon count, and to the Smithsonian, for still more tests.

Still, the scientists disagreed over the age of the skeleton, with the highest estimate falling six years short of Collins' age.



Again, the remains were flown to Japan, where a physical anthropologist began a series of tests the Army hoped would positively identify the victim.

Seven photographs of Collins were sent to Japan, where scientists then took X-ray films of remaining skull sections and superimposed them on the precisely-enlarged photographs. It is a tedious process, involving precise calculations of angle, depth-of-field and other characteristics; but the overlays fit exactly to the photographed skull and the facial features of Collins.

The Army then compared the skeleton's physical characteristics to all Americans killed in the area of the battlefield, and eliminated all but Collins because of age, height, estimated weight, hair color and blood type.

Finally, the Army took Collins' name out of limbo, officially declaring him killed in action. His family was notified, the remains were sent home and the Army began paying death benefits.

With the war's end, helicopters operating out of the Joint Casualty Resolution Center at Nakhon Phanom, on the Laotian border in Thailand, are flying grid patterns over areas thought to contain downed aircraft and graves of missing soldiers.

On the ground, advance teams go through villages advertising the search and seeking help from local officials. Villagers are being asked to report grave sites and, in some cases, are being paid for their information.

The ultimate goal of this grisly exercise is to file "reports of death" for those missing and to avoid, whenever possible, the classification termed "presumptive finding of death."

Only a handful of presumptive death findings have been issued by the Pentagon since the Vietnam cease-fire took effect, and this policy is being closely watched by the several organizations of wives and families of MIAs.

"Why not presume them alive before American inspection teams complete their work, and the North Vietnamese give a full accounting," asked Gloria Coppin, chairman of the national advisory board of VIVA (Voices in Vital America), a California-based non-profit organization that sold thousands of bracelets bearing the names of POWs and MIAs.

VIVA and the National League of Families of POWs and MIAs are actively lobbying the government to bring intense pressure on Hanoi for a full accounting of all missing G.I.s before presumptive findings of death are issued.

One Pentagon official said the presumptive death findings issued so far have been based on overwhelming circumstantial evidence.

For instance, he said, when an aircraft at sea dropped from radar tracking and there was no evidence on any seagoing vessels nearby, the pilot may have been declared killed because of the unlikelihood of survival. These findings would have been re-enforced, he said, when returned POWs showed that the missing man never turned up in a prison camp.

"Such a finding is based on the totality of evidence. We don't like making such findings, but there are some cases in which it is necessary," the Pentagon official said.

William Annetti, director of the Disposition Program of the Army's Memorial Affairs Agency, works in a cluttered office in a government "tempo" building in the Southeast, alongside Fort McNair.

Rows and rows of file cabinets surround Annetti's desk, each containing the impersonalness that accompanies pathological studies of shattered bodies. Remains are identified with an X-prefix and six or eight numbers; the files contain sickening photographs of freshly re-opened graves, or bones laid out on a measuring table.

He said that for the disposition program, this has created problems with mothers of victims, who recall that in World War II dog tags were more often relied upon for positive identification.

Annetti has been on the job since World War II, and he is still identifying bodies left over from the battlefields of Europe and the South Pacific.

"What happens is that a man goes out in his back yard and starts digging a foundation for a shed and comes across a skeleton . . . Then, we start trying to identify and we keep working until we do it," said Annetti.

In 1971, Annetti's staff identified 24 World War II GIs who were dug up a quarter century after their deaths. The office is now trying to identify a U.S. aircraft crew recently discovered in New Guinea by a Gulf Oil Co. exploratory team, and some skeletons found in India by natives.

Also, Annetti said, hardly a year goes by that an American grave is not discovered on some barren hill in Korea. The same lingering, macabre exercise will probably occur in Southeast Asia, Annetti predicted.

However, one complicating factor, he said, was the reluctance of many Vietnam war GIs to wear their identification dog tags, often as a gesture of rejection of military authority.

"Dog tags are really a fallacy. We would never identify anyone on the basis of a dog tag alone," said Annetti, adding that many Vietnam GIs traded identification necklaces.

"They place a lot of weight on the tags. If we can't produce the tags, many of them won't accept our findings," Annetti said.

Military officials have estimated that the search for MIAs in Southeast Asia may take as long as five years, although privately they hint that the job may be finished in two years when they begin running out of leads.

Annetti said he had no way of estimating when his job would be completed, although he said it depends on how much cooperation the Joint Casualty Resolution Center gets from Hanoi.

"It's true, some MIAs will be found by accident. You can be investigating a case, and some native will say, 'Well, I buried an American back in '67,' and you will find him. But, mostly, what we get will come by designed searches, and that depends on the cooperation we get over there," said Annetti.

He said that dossiers are being compiled on each of the 1,280 MIAs to facilitate the recovery operation. The dossiers will already contain debriefing statements by POWs and other U.S. combatants before the physical evidence reaches a central identification laboratory in Thailand, Annetti said.





Associated Press

A member of a U.S. graves registration team probes the reported site of a 1969 helicopter crash deep in the

Mekong delta, South Vietnam. Metal detectors are used in exploring parts of the water-soaked Camau peninsula.