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Hunt for Missing Will Take Years

Land for Grabs 1,300 GIs Sought

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It will take many years, if ever, to find out what has happened to more than 1,300 American fighting men missing in Southeast Asia, Pentagon officials say.

American representatives will go over the list of unaccounted-for U.S. servicemen with North Vietnamese and Vietcong authorities, name by name, seeking information on their whereabouts.

The Vietnam peace agreement, signed in Paris last Saturday, commits all parties to cooperate in locating missing men and graves.

But the language in the various documents is general and the provisions for carrying out such responsibilities are sketchy.

It is clear that much will depend on the willingness of the North Vietnamese to permit search teams on their soil. Pentagon officials say they cannot tell how far Hanoi's cooperation will extend, if at all.

High hopes that many of the 1,300-plus missing men would turn out to be enemy prisoners were shattered over the weekend when the North Vietnamese reported

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Problem of 1,300 MIAs May Take Years to Solve

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they and their Vietcong allies held 555 American captive. Under the cease-fire agreement, prisoners are to be returned within 60 days.

U.S. military men and civilian officials long have acknowledged privately that perhaps most of the missing were dead because American airplanes and their crews were seen going down in deep jungle, often far removed from roads and villages.

Apparently some of the missing ended up in North Vietnamese, Pathet Lao or Vietcong camps, but the number probably is small.

The Vietnam peace agreement stipulates that all the parties—U.S., North Vietnamese, Vietcong and South Vietnamese—shall exchange complete lists of captured military and civilian personnel on the day of the signing.

But Pentagon spokesman Jerry W. Friedheim confirmed that the Communists provided no list covering Americans captured in Laos. Only six Americans have been listed by the Pentagon as captured in Laos, but another 311 were carried as missing, and Friedheim said, "We have reason to believe there are more U.S. POWs in Laos."

He avoided numbers, but military sources said they feel that as many as 70 American airmen may be held captive in Laos.

Friedheim told reporters "we do expect to receive a list" of American POWs in Laos from the North Vietnamese, but he did not say on what he based his belief.

The Pentagon's top

spokesman said that, in hunting for evidence of the location of additional Americans in Indochina, the United States will work through the temporary joint military commission of the warring parties being set up in Saigon, and through diplomatic channels.

Friedheim said late last week that during the 60-day period for prisoner exchange some U.S. military men will be shifted from Vietnam to Nakhon Phnom, a base in Thailand close to the border of Laos. There, Americans will organize a casualty-recovery center to search for men missing in Indochina.

"We have an obligation to the families of the men missing in action to do our best. We intend to fulfill that even if it takes us years to do so," Friedheim said.

The key paragraph in the agreement that obligates the North Vietnamese and other signing parties says this.

"The parties shall help each other to get information about those military personnel and foreign civilians of the parties missing in action, to determine the location and take care of the graves of the dead so as to facilitate the exhumation and repatriation of the remains, and to take any such other measures as may be required to get information about those still considered missing in action."

But the agreement does not spell out the measures, apparently leaving it to the good will of the countries involved to carry out the responsibilities.

Eventually, after all possi-

ble avenues and means are exhausted, the services may act to register "findings of presumptive death" for men who remain unaccounted for. Pentagon officials said there is no specific number of years required before such a step is taken.

There still are 389 American servicemen who have not been accounted for since the Korean war ended almost 20 years ago.

A Defense Department statement from the post-Korean period recalls that:

"After completion of the prisoner exchange in the fall of 1953, there was handed to the Communists a list of 944 members of the armed forces of the United States and 2,460 other United Nations command personnel who there were reasons to believe had been in Communist hands at one time or another between June 1950 and September 1953..."

"The Communist response to demands for an accounting was inadequate. Nevertheless, after months of intensive effort by U.S. Army graves-registration units plus the sifting of thousands of reports from prisoners who were repatriated, it was possible over a period of years to reduce the number of unaccounted-for Americans... to the present 389.

"In every instance of deletion of a name from the list, it had been determined beyond reasonable doubt that the individual died during the conflict. This was ascertained through recovery, examination, and identification of remains, or through eyewitness reports of death."