

The Search for MIAs

It has been nearly eight years since Maj. Arthur S. Mearns, a 37-year-old career Air Force officer from Great Neck, N.Y., bailed out of his burning F-105 jet after leading a strike against a railroad depot 50 miles north of Hanoi. The men flying in behind him got a good look at him as they streaked past his billowing parachute: his head was up, he was alive and conscious and hanging on.

He has not been heard from since.

As time continues to pass since the U.S. troop withdrawal and the return of U.S. prisoners of war, Maj. Mearns' wife and the families of other servicemen listed as missing in action are growing increasingly apprehensive that their men are being lost in the shuffle.

"It might upset the appellation of aid to North Vietnam and the political settlement in South Vietnam" if the U.S. government presses too vigorously to learn the fates of these men, says Mrs. Mearns. "As Americans, we cannot let this thing happen. It is important to find out what happened to them, for the sake of human dignity."

Though the war in Southeast Asia was the longest in American history, it produced the smallest number of MIAs, a result of rapid helicopter evacuation from the battlefield and downed planes. The remains of 1,325 Americans are thought to be scattered through North and South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, compared with 8,144 still missing in Korea.

The Pentagon is tight-lipped on the subject of negotiations for the start of recovery operations in Southeast Asia, except to say the negotiations have bogged down with the continued shooting in South Vietnam and the U.S. bombing of Cambodia and Laos. The basic agreements were spelled out in the Paris truce papers in January: 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 considered missing in action."

Officials have estimated that the search for MIAs may take as long as five years; but privately they are saying the bulk of the work will probably be closed down in two years or less as the search for bodies and downed aircraft reaches a point of diminishing returns.

Much depends on the cooperation the search teams are able to get from former enemies and on how vigorously the U.S. is willing to insist on the implementation of the Paris agreements at the highest level. Old hands at the Pentagon vividly remember the Korea experience, when the U.S. was not allowed to send search teams into North Korea. Instead, an exchange agreement was worked out whereby each side had to rely on the word of the other that a diligent search had been made.

"They did cooperate, and they did return some remains," says William Annetti, director of the Disposition Program of the Army's Memorial Affairs Agency, which will administer the search once it gets underway. "I can't answer how well they cooperated. We have no real way of knowing." He estimates that about 60 per cent of those servicemen still missing in Korea are in the North.

The search of Southeast Asia will be infinitely more difficult than Korea because of the terrain and climate.

Once recovery operations start they will follow the basic patterns developed during World War II, with a few technological improvements. The Joint Casualty Resolution Center, staffed by members of all the services and civilian technicians, will act as a clearing house at Nakhon Phanom, a U.S. air base on the Laotian border in

Thailand. Helicopters flying grid patterns will sweep areas thought to contain downed planes and graves. Small advance teams will go through villages advertising the search and enlisting support of local officials. A second wave of teams will investigate specific reports of crashes and grave sites.

The fate of the men whose remains they find will be pieced together from a variety of sources: military records, interviews with local populace, physical evidence found at the crash or grave site and information from returned POWs who knew of men who died in prison camps. Information about each MIA is being stored in computers for quick access. Remains will be examined by doctors and den-

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tists and matched against medical and dental records, and in particularly tough cases, anthropologists will be called in to determine such things as age, weight and height.

Actually, the files of America's lost soldiers are never closed. Hardly a year goes by that an American grave is not discovered on some barren hill in Korea, and even more remains are continually recovered in various parts of the world from World War II. Memorial Affairs Agency official Annetti says the count could vary from five to 40 in one year.

"We're now looking into the case of an individual found in Europe," he said. "What happens is, a man goes into his back yard, in Holland in this case, and decides he's going to put up a shed, and he starts digging for a foundation and comes across a partial remains, and most of the time there is some identification to give us a good lead. Other times there is very little except perhaps part of a uniform to indicate he is an American. The same thing happens in metropolitan areas where they excavate for buildings and come up with remains. In the South Pacific area some people may be trudging across a mountainous land and come across a plane. Not long ago in New Guinea one of the tribes reported they found a plane, and it was reported through channels and we sent in a team to investigate."

The lengths to which the Army goes to identify recovered bodies can reach the heroic. In one World War II case the Army, after a tedious search, located a ring thought to have been worn by a soldier who died in the Normandy invasion. It bore the markings, "SVHS, Spring Valley, 1944, D.T." That was the only clue they had. The Army turned the ring over to the FBI, which traced it through the manufacturer to its owner, a high school girl in Wisconsin. It turned out that she had given the ring as a good luck token to her high school sweetheart—Don Peters—as he left for Europe. Until then, Peters' mother knew nothing of the circumstances of her son's death or where he was buried: only that he had gone to fight and had not returned.

Mary-Ann Mearns believes the North Vietnamese know what happened to her husband nearly eight years ago. "They might have taken shots at him as he was coming down, and he might have died that way," she says. "Or he might have hit something. Or he might have been captured by the local populace and handled whatever way they . . . wanted to, or he might have been turned over to the authorities and just not made it through the prison camp."

"Those are the things that go through my mind. I don't hold out much hope anymore that he's alive, and I don't want to be selfish, but I must know what happened to him. He didn't just disappear. He was a man, he had a family." (Mearns' two daughters were 6 and 9 years old when he was shot down.) "He couldn't just be wiped off the face of the earth without somebody knowing something."