



**NATIONAL LEAGUE OF FAMILIES  
OF AMERICAN PRISONERS AND MISSING IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**

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**Building a Bridge to the Fullest Possible Accounting:  
An Assessment of Vietnamese Archival Cooperation on the POW/MIA Issue  
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***Introduction***

The U.S. government has not produced an overall intelligence evaluation of Vietnamese cooperation on the POW/MIA accounting issue since 1998. The last published appraisal on one aspect of Vietnamese cooperation was a “Remains Study” released in June 1999 by the Defense Prisoner of War/Missing Personnel Office (DPMO), the predecessor organization of the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA).<sup>1</sup> The study evaluated the potential number of U.S. skeletal remains that Vietnam had recovered and stored, and the successes and failures of that effort. Although the study found a potential gap between the number believed recovered and repatriated, DPMO was uncertain if this disparity was attributable to poor data or Vietnamese intransigence. Yet despite repeated requests by the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia to update these studies, DPAA has declined.<sup>2</sup> DPAA responded that “an intelligence assessment may have been helpful in the past [but] it is anachronistic today given DoD’s increasingly solid relationship with the VNOSMP [Vietnam Office for Seeking Missing Persons], and as illustrated in assistance the government and people in Vietnam invariably provide to our accounting effort.”<sup>3</sup>

The League concurs that the Vietnamese have greatly assisted DPMO/DPAA in organizing field activities and seeking witnesses but believes that a new review is long overdue. A fresh estimate would map future U.S. policy discussions with Vietnamese counterparts and guide planning to establish clear goals and reasonable expectations.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, the League seeks an examination of all aspects of the accounting mission, including whether Vietnam still holds remains (updating the Remains Study), scrutinizing Vietnam-related operational costs (exorbitant), questioning Vietnam’s rigidity in field operations (increasingly inflexible), allowing new technologies (drone use was just permitted in 2023), and others.

In addition to mapping goals and examining Hanoi’s overall cooperation, another crucial reason for a formal assessment is to gain access to Vietnam’s archives. That is the major purpose of this study. Senior DPAA officials involved in the issue publicly stated a year ago that only three years are left before witnesses are unable to help recover missing U.S. personnel due to health or age-related issues. Since DPAA relies heavily on witnesses to pinpoint U.S. gravesites, as the witness pool dwindles, Vietnam’s POW/MIA archival cooperation will become increasingly vital.

The League believes that Vietnam possesses far more records on U.S. POW/MIAs than it has provided. Furthermore, the League assesses that DPAA has overemphasized VNOSMP cooperation by

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<sup>1</sup> In July 1993, the U.S. formed the Defense Prisoner of War/Missing Office (DPMO). DPMO and other agencies were subsumed by DPAA in January 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Hereafter League.

<sup>3</sup> Letter from Director Kelly McKeague, DPAA, to Ann Mills-Griffiths, April 12, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Although not addressed by this study, the Government Accounting Agency (GAO) has not examined the POW/MIA accounting mission since 2013. An analysis of DPAA is also long overdue. See GAO, *DOD’s POW/MIA Mission: Top-Level Leadership Attention Needed to Resolve Longstanding Challenges in Accounting for Missing Persons from Past Conflicts*, GAO-13-619 (Washington, D.C.: July 17, 2013); Brenda Farrell, “DoD’s POW/MIA Mission: Capability and Capacity to Account for Missing Persons Undermined by Leadership Weakness and Fragmented Organizational Structure,” August 1, 2013.

underestimating Vietnam's archival holdings and willingness to provide them. To support our hypothesis, this paper focuses on Vietnam's ability to provide archival material. It uses People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) publications, interviews with former and current DPMO/DPAA officials, and DPMO/DPAA internal memos and official publications. Although this assessment surveys the history of remains repatriation, it does not examine the potential number of remains Vietnam may still hold. Whether Vietnam still secretly possesses remains or has knowledge of where certain graves are located deserves a separate study. Nor does this paper revisit Last Known Alive (LKA) cases. Although a few LKA reports remain under investigation, DPMO/DPAA has received only one live-sighting account since 2005.<sup>5</sup>

This report covers six areas to showcase what Vietnam can reasonably provide. It reviews prior U.S. government studies on the issue, presents a brief evaluation of wartime Communist policy, examines the structure of Vietnam's civilian archives and the insights of researchers who have worked there, dives into Vietnamese document turnovers and its museum system, analyses Vietnamese military publications that speak directly to the depth of Vietnam's archival holdings, and offers a new insight into PAVN air defense histories.

To be precise, the League seeks documents that will lead to individual accounting and the turnover of personal artifacts from still missing U.S. personnel that would solve cases. The League recognizes that Vietnam has previously provided numerous documents, including material on specific cases and several significant compilations of information related to shootdowns. Nonetheless, we believe its cooperation with providing archival data that result in accounting has been selective—often to send signals—and must improve. It has refused U.S. researchers access to archives and has responded in piecemeal fashion to specific DPMO/DPAA for documentation rather than openly as should occur in a mature bilateral relationship.

Although current and former DPMO/DPAA analysts accept that PAVN wartime policies directed its units to carefully record and maintain U.S. POW/MIA information, some argue that these directives were not uniformly enforced. These analysts cite Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) contentions that no central repository exists and that any extant records remain scattered in the files of the various ministries. Thus, the League and DPAA differ about the extent to which these policies were carried out and whether a centralized database or some variation was created postwar. Hence, the need for an updated appraisal and frank discussions with the Vietnamese leadership.

Ultimately, the League believes that an official intelligence assessment by the American government will help develop a strategy to achieve our shared accounting goals, a policy that will require close coordination between DPAA, Stony Beach, the League, and U.S. government leaders. Since DPAA has declined to assess Vietnam's overall POW/MIA cooperation, the League has produced this paper for consideration by interested parties.<sup>6</sup> Given the restrictive nature of Vietnam's archives, the League asserts that discussions will be necessary at senior government levels on both sides to achieve greater cooperation. By convincing SRV officials to allow access to Vietnam's POW/MIA archival holdings, this process will build a bridge to the fullest possible accounting for American servicemen and civilians still missing from the Vietnam War.

### ***Prior Studies***

The first U.S. government postwar review was the House Select Committee on Americans Missing in Southeast Asia, which completed a fifteen-month assessment on December 18, 1976. Chaired by Rep. Sonny Montgomery (D-MS), the committee held hearings and visited Vietnam in December

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<sup>5</sup> Email from Colonel Matt Brannen, USMC, Acting DDO, DPAA, September 22, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> One potential reason for DPAA's reluctance is that many of the senior Vietnam War analysts have retired, taking their decades of experience with them. Worse, many of the Vietnam War analysts' slots have been transferred to WWII and Korea War studies. One DPAA official stated that they no longer have the resources to pursue Vietnamese documents, as only three Vietnam War analyst billets exist within DPAA. The DPAA researchers assigned to Vietnam War accounting have stated openly that they can only spend one hour per case per year, mainly to update the Case Summary.

1975, where it received three U.S. remains.<sup>7</sup> Although the committee determined that no live Americans were still in captivity in Southeast Asia, it concluded that Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia could rapidly solve the status of many missing Americans. To prove its point, the report noted that Vietnam had publicized the identification cards during the war from four crew members of two planes shot down on November 19, 1967. Two crewmembers returned during Operation Homecoming, while the other two remained (at that time) MIA.<sup>8</sup> “Clearly,” the report noted, “[this] establishes that [Vietnam] had custody of the officers or their remains and should be fully capable of repatriating them and describing the circumstances of their loss.” Further, “the return of identification cards or other items of personal property could be very significant, particularly where an individual simply disappeared ... Physical evidence of this nature would demonstrate the cooperation of Indochinese officials while at the same time contribute materially to resolution of the specific case.”<sup>9</sup> The League fully concurs with this first official assessment of Vietnam’s ability to solve cases.

When the issue remained stalled over Vietnam’s demands to lift the embargo and for the U.S. to pay war reparations, the administration of newly elected President Jimmy Carter attempted again to make progress. It sent a commission in March 1977 headed by AFL-CIO President Leonard Woodcock, but Vietnam continued to tie POW/MIA information to aid and normalization. To convince the U.S. to agree to Hanoi’s demands, Vietnam’s deputy foreign minister stated that “reciprocity ... cannot come from just one side ... Each side must take steps which address the concerns of the other ... In brief, we have obligations which are related to each other. So, we should start from this position.”<sup>10</sup>

After the Woodcock commission, the U.S. and Vietnam began a series of high-level meetings to discuss the process for normalization, but the talks produced little. Consequently, the advent of Vietnam’s friendship treaty with the Soviet Union in November 1978, Vietnam’s subsequent invasion of Cambodia in December 1978, and the Chinese attack on Vietnam in February 1979, halted virtually all movement on the issue.<sup>11</sup>

Such was the status of the POW/MIA issue facing President Ronald Reagan’s administration in January 1981. Reagan recognized that it had been sorely neglected, and he made it a personal priority. His administration developed a ten-point strategy to solve it, including raising intelligence priorities and opening policy-level negotiations at the ministerial level. The League arranged multiple meetings in Vietnam and New York between a representative from the National Security Council (NSC) and the SRV foreign minister. The meeting’s focus was the live prisoner issue and the turnover of recovered remains and relevant archival documents.

These high-level meetings were successful. After years of denial that it was holding remains, during an NSC trip with the League executive director in 1985, Vietnam’s foreign minister acknowledged that it was true, and it would begin unilateral turnovers of remains. Further, a visit was arranged to a B-52 crash site near Hanoi that led to the first joint excavation that provided resolution for a waiting family. On the live prisoner issue, the delegation pointed out cases that were unsolved. Although Vietnam asserted that it held no prisoners, due to the large number of live sighting reports

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<sup>7</sup> For the Vietnamese perspective during this period, see Tran Quang Co, *Hoi Ky: Tran Quang Co* [Tran Quang Co: A Memoir]. Co was deputy foreign minister, and his book was published unofficially but it circulated widely in Vietnam and overseas. According to Co, the Vietnamese parceled out remains in this period as “good faith cooperation.” Tran Quang Co, *Hoi Ky*, 14.

<sup>8</sup> Both remains were repatriated on September 30, 1977, along with eighteen others shortly after Vietnam was admitted to the United Nations.

<sup>9</sup> Select Committee of Missing Person in Southeast Asia, *Americans Missing in Southeast Asia* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976), 211. The report acknowledged the “great assistance” by the National League of POW/MIA Families.

<sup>10</sup> The Woodcock Commission report can be seen at *Foreign Relations of the U.S., 1977–1980, Volume XXII, Southeast Asia and the Pacific*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v22/d8>

<sup>11</sup> For an excellent historical overview of the POW/MIA negotiations, see the study prepared for Richard Childress entitled “A Report on US-Vietnamese Talks on POW/MIAs During the Nixon, Ford, and Carter Administrations,” September 23, 1985. The report can be accessed at <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/0005359871>.

being received from refugees and other sources, the administration acted. It dramatically increased Joint Casualty Resolution Center (JCRC) manpower and formed the Stony Beach team of investigation specialists from the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA). The increased personnel were needed to investigate current sightings, travel throughout Asian refugee locations to conduct source interviews, and send out mailings to U.S.-based refugees asking for information. Fifty-five postwar live sighting reports of Americans are unresolved and are the focus of ongoing analytical work.

After former DIA Director Lieutenant General Eugene Tighe, USAF, testified to Congress in October 1986 that he believed Hanoi still held U.S. prisoners, the Reagan administration commissioned the first in-depth intelligence study of the issue.<sup>12</sup> SNIE 14.3–87 was a classified intelligence review of Vietnamese knowledgeability.<sup>13</sup> It determined that there is a “considerable body of evidence that the Vietnamese have detailed information on the fates of several hundred personnel. North Vietnamese and Viet Cong had policies governing the handling of US remains that included removing identifying data, burying the remains, and sending the identification and location of the gravesite to Hanoi.”<sup>14</sup> All three programs—gathering data, burying the remains, and sending the information to Hanoi—are known wartime policies.

The conclusion was drawn from a sizable number of captured wartime policy documents and interrogations of Communist cadre. Additionally, the SNIE stated that Vietnam had probably collected and could unilaterally return between four hundred and six hundred remains. These numbers were based primarily on testimony from a Vietnamese citizen of Chinese heritage who had fled Vietnam. Known as the Mortician, he had worked on preparing several hundred U.S. remains for storage and claimed to have seen boxes he believed were holding others.

In January 1989, the Reagan administration released an interagency report on the POW/MIA issue. The narrative noted how it had created a “conceptual approach [to] energize the government to pursue” answers while concurrently signaling to the “Indochinese governments American determination to resolve the issue [and] ensure that our approach would complement, not conflict with United States foreign policy and national security goals.”<sup>15</sup> Equally notable, the Reagan administration strove to separate the “POW/MIA and other humanitarian issues from political issues such as aid, trade, or the normalization of diplomatic relations.” This process was designed to convince Vietnam that “it is in our mutual interest to resolve the POW/MIA issue in a timely and comprehensive manner.” Although the report acknowledged that this diplomatic process had been marred by “periodic disappointments” due to unkept Vietnamese promises to provide detailed archival information, plus attempts to “link the issue to political differences,” overall, this effort had achieved substantial results.<sup>16</sup> Though US-SRV relations have evolved and are significantly different now than in the 1980’s, the League believes that this humanitarian approach to solving the U.S. POW/MIA issue has been discarded in favor of increasing unilateral U.S. governmental actions to gain even limited Vietnamese cooperation rather than seeking increased SRV reciprocity for U.S. acts.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> “The Tighe report on American POW’s and MIA’s,” Hearing and Markup before the Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, Ninety-ninth Congress, second session on H. Con. Res. 179, October 15, 1986. Tighe had left DIA in 1981, and his report was criticized as “fundamentally flawed.” [https://www.loc.gov/item/powmia/pwmaster\\_98850/](https://www.loc.gov/item/powmia/pwmaster_98850/)

<sup>13</sup> The CIA produced an earlier assessment on June 26, 1984. Entitled “Vietnam: Using the MIA Issue as a Bargaining Chip,” the report detailed Hanoi’s “one overriding goal:” to use the POW/MIA issue “to gain concessions from the United States.”

<sup>14</sup> SNIE, “Hanoi and the POW/MIA Issue,” September 3, 1987, 7.

<sup>15</sup> “Final Interagency Report of the Reagan Administration on the POW/MIA Issue in Southeast Asia,” January 19, 1989, 1.

<sup>16</sup> “Interagency Report,” 5.

<sup>17</sup> Historian Alex Vuving has mapped the four shifts in Vietnam’s worldview since 1975. See Alex Vuving, “The Evolution of Vietnamese Foreign Policy in the Doi Moi Era,” in Borje Ljunggren and Dwight H. Perkins, eds., *Vietnam: Navigating a Rapidly Changing Economy, Society, and Political Order* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2023), 347–369; Alex Vuving, “Vietnam’s Search for Its Place in the World,” forthcoming in Lien-Hang T. Nguyen and Pierre Asselin, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Vietnam War, Vol. III: Endings and Legacies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024); Alex Vuving, “Vietnam in 2022: Confronting the Post-Post-Cold War Era with Outdated Mental Maps,” in Thi Ha Hoang and Daljit

In June 1990, DIA published a report that again outlined that the PAVN had “a well-developed organization and cadre that had nearly 20 years of continuous experience in exploiting foreign prisoners of war ... Hanoi considered this information an important instrument for achieving diplomatic goals and had a well-defined and efficient system for acquiring this information. Although conditions of war prevented the system from functioning perfectly ... the system did provide Hanoi information about many Americans who are still unaccounted for.”<sup>18</sup>

DIA’s efforts, however, remained controversial, particularly over whether the U.S. government was actively seeking to determine if any Americans continued in postwar confinement. In May 1991, the Republican staff of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee accused DIA of deliberately rejecting any evidence that Americans remained in captivity.<sup>19</sup> The basis for this charge was wartime photos showing living U.S. servicemen who had never returned, alongside numerous refugee reports of Americans in postwar captivity. Over three hundred servicemen were categorized as Last Known Alive, men whose fates remained unknown. Thus, when a photo surfaced two months later showing three alleged American MIAs still alive in Southeast Asia, it became frontpage news. Although the photo was quickly determined to be a fake, a Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs was formed to investigate whether Americans were still being held in Southeast Asia.

Shortly thereafter, a CIA report concluded that Vietnam had ramped up cooperation significantly from the almost petrified diplomatic conditions of the early 1980s. They noted, however, that although Vietnam had turned over several hundred remains it had unilaterally recovered, its essential policy of “limited accommodation” to “gain economic benefits,” chiefly the lifting of the economic embargo then in place, remained intact. The CIA noted that Vietnam had publicly accepted the U.S. proposal to treat the POW/MIA issue as a humanitarian matter separate from political considerations between the two governments.<sup>20</sup> This indicated that Vietnam was at least openly continuing the Reagan-era policy of siloing the issue away from other policy concerns despite its ongoing attempt to use POW/MIA information to gain economic benefits. Consequently, when the Senate Select Committee issued its final report in January 1993 and agreed with the previous CIA analysis that Vietnam had cooperated by increasing field activities and had provided some relevant documents, the Clinton administration began the process of establishing diplomatic and economic relations.

Despite the Select Committee’s report, new archival discoveries kept the dispute over Vietnamese knowledgeability versus cooperation on U.S. POW/MIAs center stage. Soon after the Select Committee disbanded, a document was discovered in the archives of the Soviet Central Committee that claimed to be the transcript of a report by a Vietnamese general in September 1972 to the Politburo in Hanoi. The general claimed that North Vietnam was holding far more U.S. POWs than it later released. Several months later, another Soviet document of a speech by a Vietnamese official also claimed that Hanoi held more Americans than it returned.<sup>21</sup> After DoD dismissed as inaccurate the numbers of POWs in both Soviet reports, the Clinton administration ended the economic embargo and began openly considering establishing formal diplomatic relations between the U.S. and the SRV.

Subsequently, an American researcher in Hanoi named Ted Schweitzer purchased a trove of People’s Army records and photographs on numerous American MIAs from the Central Army Museum in Hanoi. Despite ongoing Vietnamese denials that they possessed additional data, let alone had a central archive of documents on missing Americans, the material that Schweitzer acquired told a different tale.

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Singh, eds., *Southeast Asian Affairs 2023* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing 2023), 359–380. For further reading, see Congressional Research Service, “U.S.-Vietnam Relations,” January 17, 2024.

<sup>18</sup> DIA Special Office for Prisoner of War and Missing in Action, “Americans Missing in Indochina: An Assessment of Vietnamese Accountability,” June 25, 1990, 46.

<sup>19</sup> Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Republican staff, “An Examination of U.S. Policy Towards POW/MIA,” May 23, 1991.

<sup>20</sup> CIA, “Vietnam: Adjusting Its Strategy on the POW/MIA Issue: An Intelligence Assessment,” February 1992.

<sup>21</sup> The two files were called the 1205 and the 735 Documents respectively. The names were based upon the number of American POWs each speaker claimed Hanoi was holding.

The files included index cards that listed identification cards, photos, and other media that Vietnamese units had collected on hundreds of POW/MIAs.<sup>22</sup> According to a memo written in 1992 by a senior JTF-FA analyst based in Hanoi, this information “re-affirmed the DIA’s long-standing assessment that Hanoi has well organized, comprehensive records concerning U.S. POWs and MIAs. The information also reaffirmed this analyst’s long-standing assessment that certain elements of Hanoi’s bureaucracy are not only withholding information about U.S. POWs and MIAs but are seeking ultimately to use the information as a sustained source of revenue.”<sup>23</sup>

The Soviet documents, the ominous internal warning that the Vietnamese intended to monetize U.S. POW/MIA information, alongside Schweitzer’s revelation of a portion of Vietnam’s hidden archival holdings, forced American policymakers to address two key factors before diplomatic relations could be recognized: Vietnam’s true cooperation on the POW/MIA issue and the potential number of remains that Hanoi could return unilaterally. To address these points, DoD issued a zero-based report in 1995 analyzing the number of cases with investigative leads to pursue and, equally important, a plan to resolve those cases.<sup>24</sup>

This report had two major consequences. First, it established a policy of focusing on the time-consuming process of individual remains recovery rather than seeking to resolve the issue by gaining access to Vietnam’s purported central POW/MIA holdings. Although DPMO continued to press the Vietnamese to provide archival documentation, given the slow and often haphazard Vietnamese response to its requests, DPMO switched to recovering remains by seeking witnesses to the loss location and then excavating. DPAA has maintained this process. Although the League agrees that most cases since the publication of the zero-based report in 1995 have been solved by locating eyewitnesses to the burial location, this method, while moderately successful, has proven laborious, expensive, and often futile due to excavations at incorrect sites or repeat visits to the wrong loss location.

Second, DPMO began dampening expectations regarding total Vietnamese knowledgeability that previous U.S. analysis had concluded it should possess. Despite having received several significant Vietnamese summary documents, including the MR-4 and Group 559 shutdown lists and other documents, the report states, “we have found it exceedingly difficult to predict the extent to which evidence of accountability by Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia about some aspect of a U.S. loss could lead to an accounting of the individual.”<sup>25</sup>

Since a sizeable discrepancy persisted between the number of remains the Vietnamese had returned and the number the U.S. believed they had recovered, a new intelligence study by the National Intelligence Council addressed Vietnamese remains collection. This new analysis “developed reservations about some of the judgments in the 1987 Estimate,” directly attacked the SNIE’s conclusions that a “considerable body of evidence” existed on Vietnamese knowledgeability, and disputed that the number of potential collected remains was between four hundred and six hundred.<sup>26</sup> The report, based upon additional evidence besides the Mortician, lowered the estimated number by claiming that Vietnam was “far more successful in northern Vietnam” in collecting remains, but was

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<sup>22</sup> Malcolm McConnell, with research by Theodore Schweitzer III, *Inside Hanoi’s Secret Archives: Solving the MIA Mystery* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995).

<sup>23</sup> Memo for Chief, DIA/POW-MIA, “Proposal to Employ Swamp Ranger as Research Specialist in Hanoi,” October 20, 1992.

<sup>24</sup> DoD, “A Zero-based Comprehensive Review of Cases Involving Unaccounted for Americans in Southeast Asia,” November 13, 1995. Zero-based reviews are generally used in budgeting and reorganizations, but another definition states that they emphasized “the future over the past,” operate from a “clean sheet,” and “abandon ‘always done’ mindsets and think and work in new ways.” <https://www.accenture.com/us-en/insights/strategy/zero-based-organization>. This was clearly DPMO’s approach.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>26</sup> National Intelligence Council, “Vietnamese Storage of Remains of Unaccounted US Personnel,” ICA 96-05, October 1996, 2. The SNIE’s original number included remains that Vietnam had already recovered and stored, plus remains that they had not recovered but knew the grave location. This is known as “above ground remains,” and “below ground remains.” Subsequent studies apparently did not take this key differentiation into account.

“less successful in the south and even less so on the Ho Chi Minh Trail.”<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, the report did little to address whether Vietnam held an unknown number of badly fragmented bones it had not repatriated, or graves that it had not disinterred.

Given these repeated proclamations by DoD and other U.S. government officials that Vietnam was fully cooperating, the Clinton administration established diplomatic relations on July 11, 1995.<sup>28</sup> Regardless, vocal disagreements remained over both the extent of Vietnamese cooperation and knowledgeability. Consequently, in April 1997, National Security Advisor Sandy Berger requested a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) to examine Vietnamese cooperation on the POW/MIA issue since the SNIE in 1987. He specifically tasked the intelligence community to evaluate Vietnamese cooperation to achieve the fullest possible accounting and the validity of the number of alleged U.S. prisoners mentioned in the two Russian documents.

The NIE was published in April 1998. It also judged that “Vietnam had become more helpful in assisting US efforts to achieve the fullest possible accounting of American personnel ... On the issue of recovering remains we rate Vietnamese cooperation as excellent. Cooperation has also been good on assisting with trilateral investigations and providing documents.”<sup>29</sup> Moreover, it reaffirmed that no live POWs remained in captivity, rejected the stated numbers in the two Russian documents, and concluded that the number of remains that Vietnam had recovered was far less than the 1987 SNIE had determined.

Senator Bob Smith (R-N.H.), denounced the NIE as biased to allow the Clinton administration to increase the pace and scope of normalization with Vietnam. Smith requested that the inspector generals of DoD and CIA examine the NIE to determine if its conclusions had been influenced by Clinton officials. He also published a highly critical evaluation of the NIE.<sup>30</sup> Despite Smith’s claims, a joint DOD-CIA analysis denied that the NIE’s conclusions were politically motivated and agreed with the NIE’s findings.<sup>31</sup>

Since these studies had still not directly addressed how many remains Vietnam had collected, stored, and could still return, DPMO began a three-year study to tackle this vital question. In 1997, only about 270–280 remains had been unilaterally returned, including Americans who had died in captivity or whose remains had been returned for other reasons, and none since September 1990.<sup>32</sup>

This study interviewed both wartime and postwar Vietnamese officials involved in the POW/MIA issue, included information from recently provided Vietnamese documents on the internal successes and failures of its remains recovery effort, and again reviewed the Mortician’s testimony. The report further lowered the number of remains that DPMO believed Vietnam had recovered. The new estimate determined that Vietnam had collected around three hundred remains, leaving a much smaller gap of around twenty to thirty remains, a disparity that DPMO was unable to determine was “real or attributable to incomplete data, but Vietnam probably has records that would answer some of our questions.”<sup>33</sup> Notably, DPMO justified its current process of seeking out eyewitnesses by noting that the “ability of the Vietnamese to recover a given set of remains was almost always contingent on finding Vietnamese citizens who could point out grave sites several years after burial.”<sup>34</sup>

Yet an analysis of a SRV registration list created in 1978 listing the remains or graves that Vietnam had been unable to recover or lost showed that “six of the individuals whose remains are listed

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>28</sup> The economic embargo was lifted in early 1994. After establishing diplomatic relations, in May 1996, President Clinton designated Pete Peterson, a returned Vietnam War prisoner, as the first U.S. ambassador to the SRV. He presented his credentials to Vietnam in May 1997.

<sup>29</sup> NIE, “Vietnamese Intentions, Capabilities, and Performance Concerning the POW/MIA Issue,” April 1998, 5.

<sup>30</sup> Senator Bob Smith, “A Critical Assessment of the Estimate,” November 1998.

<sup>31</sup> Joint DOD and CIA Report, “A Review of the 1998 National Intelligence Estimate on POW/MIA Issues and the Charges Levied by *A Critical Assessment* of the Estimate,” February 29, 2000.

<sup>32</sup> DPMO, “Vietnam’s Collection and Reparation of American Remains,” June 1999. Hereafter “Remains Study.”

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., “Key Judgments,” 4.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 4–5.

as ‘buried, grave lost,’ have already had their remains repatriated in the 1985–90 time period.” Additionally, although some remains were listed as disintegrated, “it is known with certainty that the individual was able to exit the aircraft” and land safely. Lastly, “U.S. personnel have been told by witnesses that SRV officials have previously exhumed other listed remains.” Essentially, the Vietnamese list of remains that cannot be recovered is:

another example of a document long held by the SRV but not revealed to the U.S. ... The entire tenor of the Vietnamese response to U.S. requests for answers, particularly on remains and documents, continues to be ‘that’s all we have’ and to be ‘procedural’ in nature, when in fact there is strong evidence that other documents exist and that there are at least some remains under the control of the SRV government that they have not yet returned. The turnover of documents (which they clearly had for years) ... illustrates that the Vietnamese continue their long-standing practice of providing documents only to high level emissaries. This measured response, if sustained, does not auger well for the early resolution of the POW/MIA issue.<sup>35</sup>

Although citing analysis from thirty years ago to describe current Vietnamese behavior is debatable, the League believes this conduct continues. For example, the Vietnamese have refused, despite repeated requests, to provide the U.S. with the list of remains they did recover. The VNOSMP rebuffed the U.S. request by stating that they had “already provided all the documents they possess.”<sup>36</sup> This prevented DPMO from comparing who had been returned with those the Vietnamese had recovered. DPAA sources indicate that Vietnam still has not provided this list.

Given that the DPMO Remains Study provided no citations for its conclusions, it was censured by the League as prejudiced to broaden the bilateral relationship. Since that study in 1999, the U.S. government has not published an assessment of Vietnamese cooperation on remains or archival holdings.<sup>37</sup> DPAA’s consistently positive characterization of Vietnam’s cooperation continues despite information such as the Schweitzer archival records that dispute that judgment. What then can we expect, and why did early U.S. government assessments conclude that Vietnam could provide more?

### ***Vietnamese Policy on American POW/MIAs***

Dozens of captured documents and interrogation reports regarding Vietnamese Communist wartime POW/MIA policy show a consistent theme of careful handling of not only American prisoners or their remains, but also any documents or material possessions recovered with them.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, specific staff sections known as the Enemy Proselytizing Offices were created within PAVN units and regional headquarters. These staff sections were primarily responsible for handling American prisoners and their identification media.<sup>39</sup> As a part of their training, PAVN forces were given instructions to create “a detailed file ... on each POW as soon as he was brought to a detention camp. With regard to the

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<sup>35</sup> DPMO, “Vietnamese POW/MIA Related Documents Provided to Ambassador Lord in Hanoi, SRV, December 14, 1993,” December 15, 1993. The Vietnamese compendia is “List of American Personnel Killed During the War in the SRV (Remains not Recovered),” November 2, 1978.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 38. Although DPMO admitted that the Vietnamese explanation for refusing to turn over the list of recovered remains “lacked credibility,” it explained that its “experience in dealing with Vietnamese bureaucracy, its penchant for controlling information, and its reflex toward secrecy, however, make it difficult to draw conclusions from the failure to provide these records.”

<sup>37</sup> For further reading on the history of the Vietnam-era POW/MIA issue, see Paul Mather, *M.I.A.: Accounting for the Missing in Southeast Asia* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, 1994); Lewis Stern, *Imprisoned or Missing in Vietnam: Policies of the Vietnamese Government Concerning Captured and Unaccounted for United States Soldiers, 1969-1994* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publishing, 1995).

<sup>38</sup> “Viet Cong Policy Toward and Exploitation of U.S. Prisoners of War,” CIA Intelligence Information Report (IIR), March 14, 1967, NSF Country File, Vietnam, Folder 81, Document 70, LBJ Library, Austin, TX.

<sup>39</sup> For a detailed overview of the various proselytizing offices and their functions, see Bill Bell and Jay Veith, “POWs and Politics: How Much does Hanoi Really Know,” a paper presented at Texas Tech University on April 19, 1996. [Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive \(ttu.edu\)](http://www.vietnamcenter.org)



deceased ones, records should be maintained, listing such information as deceased date and burial location. Personal belongings of the deceased should be carefully kept. Similar records were to be prepared for the U.S. POWs who escaped, were missing, became lost, or were killed by enemy bombing.”<sup>40</sup> When these items are “captured, they should be transferred to higher headquarters.”<sup>41</sup> Other documents state that “In the event corpses of US KIA are recovered from a battleground, they should be secretly buried after removing all personnel effects. Their graves should be marked for future recognition.”<sup>42</sup>

This program of exploiting POWs or their remains was created during the First Indochina War against the French. When queried by the U.S. government in 1976 on French-Vietnam postwar POW negotiations, the French government provided sobering answers. The “French believe that the U.S. may encounter some of the same basic problems from the Vietnamese: broad political ‘payment’ to establish a program and then steep financial concessions for each body at each step of the way.” Further, “Quai officials commented that the operation appeared to be run to provide revenue for the DRV. The French found they had to pay fairly stiff commercial prices for each body. They thought the U.S. would have to do the same.”<sup>43</sup> Based upon these numerous wartime reports of a Vietnamese policy to carefully secure and exploit American POWs, their remains, or their possessions, U.S. government agencies concluded that the Vietnamese could rapidly account for many U.S. losses.

PAVN wartime and postwar efforts to catalogue its records are well-established. Details were provided in a background paper written for General John Vessey in January 1992. It noted:

PAVN elements at all levels have a long and consistent history of compiling and preserving war time records ... the available evidence indicates that ... PAVN made an effort to create and preserve records of its activities at all levels. Immediately after the war ended in 1975, PAVN began to systematically assemble and organize its records and to reconstruct missing records where possible. Both the Party’s national leadership and the PAVN High Command took a direct and continuous interest in the preservation and research of wartime records ... Numerous sources have given convincing evidence that Vietnam still has easily accessible and well-organized records about U.S. POWs and MIAs.”<sup>44</sup>

Although the U.S. government did not expect them to have information on every loss, since the vast bulk of American MIAs were in areas controlled by PAVN forces, the expectation for accounting was high. However, DPMO’s Remains Study concluded that while these directives existed for PAVN units on the southern battlefields, they were often unfulfilled since “reporting on foreign casualties did not contribute directly to war fighting, it was a low priority.”<sup>45</sup> Oddly, seven years later, when DPMO asked the Vietnamese for records from the south, it wrote, “Though record-keeping in the south was likely not up to the standards adhered to in the north, US analysts believe that a multi-layered organization such as the COSVN, particularly its security office, maintained records on prisons they controlled ... They also likely maintained records on individual imprisoned Americans ... Those records are likely to now be in Hanoi and would be of great assistance in accounting for missing Americans.”<sup>46</sup> Whether DPMO was prodding the Vietnamese is unknown, but the divergence in language is striking.

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<sup>40</sup> “Guide for Interrogation of US Prisoners of War, Military Proselytizing Section, VC MR-5,” CDEC Bulletin #48,829, Log #4-1654-72, RG 472, NARA II, College Park, MD. The Vietnamese initially provided JTF-FA the “Blue Book” files on individual POWs held in the northern camps. Discovering that the files contained sensitive personal information, the JTF-FA commander, Brigadier General Thomas Needham, decided against keeping them. When DPMO later asked for them again, the VNOSMP declined. Eventually, DPMO concluded that the files only pertained to returned POWs and could not solve MIA cases.

<sup>41</sup> “Collection of Personal Belongings of US Servicemen,” CDEC Bulletin #5783, Log #06-4188-67.

<sup>42</sup> “Handling of US KIA, MR V,” CDEC Bulletin #6450, Log #07-3510-67. The Vietnamese did provide several grave registry lists compiled by provinces in North Vietnam, proving that this directive was, to some extent, obeyed.

<sup>43</sup> Embassy Paris #3032 to SecState, “Repatriation of French Remains from North Vietnam,” March 4, 1976.

<sup>44</sup> “Background Paper for General Vessey,” January 26, 1992.

<sup>45</sup> “Remains Study,” 9. Since DPMO did not number the pages, the cited page number refers to the page number on the PDF.

<sup>46</sup> DPMO, “Vietnam: Archival Documents for Unilateral SRV Provision,” October 31, 2007.

The diverse opinion on what Vietnam collected, stored, and can provide is where the issue has remained for over two decades. The League accepts that as new information has surfaced, the U.S. government's original assessments of Vietnam's knowledgeability and remains collection program and potential corpus of documents was modified. Hence, the argument boils down to those who accept the prior government analysis that Vietnam had a relatively comprehensive POW/MIA collection program that it used for diplomatic and financial gains, versus those who accept Vietnamese protestations that they do not have a central repository.

The League believes they do have organized files, based upon not just Hanoi's wartime policies, but also its ability to provide new material at politically opportune moments. POW/MIA information is often used for specific political signals or goodwill gestures, such as the recent turnover of documents to President Joe Biden. The PAVN invested resources postwar to maintain its records, and this paper will show how its postwar publication of massive document collections clearly indicates that it possesses significant primary sources. This is one reason the League has sought a new assessment: to answer the question, based upon the latest research, of what archival material the Vietnamese can provide and how that might achieve the fullest possible accounting.

### *Vietnamese Civilian Archives*

Vietnam's governmental archives for civilian records are located at four centers named Archives 1 through 4.<sup>47</sup> Archives 3 (*Trung tam Luu Tru Quoc gia III*) in Hanoi houses the post-1945 government records from ministries such as the prime minister's office, Finance, Agricultural, and others. Vietnam permits foreign researchers to visit Archives 3 and make copies of official government documents. However, the files of the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Interior/Public Security, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs—with rare exceptions—are off-limits to foreigners. Foreigners are also prohibited from researching Communist Party records housed at the Central Committee archive at Number 9 Nguyen Canh Chan Street in Hanoi.

Access to documents at Vietnamese archives is restricted by a variety of factors. Researchers must describe their research topic and provide a letter of recommendation from an accredited institution in Vietnam. Once one's topic is approved, one is not permitted to view materials outside the scope of that topic. Every researcher is given a handler, who closely monitors the researcher's activities. A computerized finding aid allows researchers to search for and then request specific files. Upon receiving a request, archive managers then decide if foreign researchers can view and copy the material. Foreign researchers note that denials by the archive staff are often arbitrary, with little explanation other than that the topic remains "sensitive." Western archives, though, operate on an open versus classified basis. If the materials are declassified or open, they may be viewed by anyone without staff interference. Classified records can be opened via specific requests. Vietnam has recently begun to declassify some records, but the results are still limited.

Researchers from Det 2 in Hanoi attempted years ago to access Archives 3. They met the director of Archives 3 and the director of the entire Vietnamese archival system. Both claimed that Archives 3 held no war records, and the Det 2 researchers were given access to the computer database to conduct a search of Archives 3 records. They found no military records, but they discovered several interesting folders in the prime minister files. They were denied access to those documents. In contrast, DPMO sponsored Vietnamese researchers who visited the U.S. National Archives in 1999 to search American

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<sup>47</sup> Archive 1 in Hanoi houses colonial-era and historic Vietnamese materials. Archives 2 in Ho Chi Minh City contains the former Republic of Vietnam files plus some materials from the National Liberation Front/Provisional Revolutionary Government. Although Archives 2 has published two separate volumes on its holdings, the NLF/PRG files are generally hidden from foreign researchers. Archives 4 in Dalat holds materials from Central Vietnam. Most of the files are from the imperial court in Hue, French materials on the administrative activities of Central Vietnam, along with a handful of former RVN files.

military records, and it also sponsored Vietnamese archivist Truong Van Am to visit in 2004. These researchers were granted access to declassified files.<sup>48</sup>

The Vietnamese claim that Archives 3 does not possess wartime records is strange. According to the multilingual volume published in 2006 that describes the holdings of Archives 3, the dates listed for most record groups clearly extend well past the war. For example, the files of the Prime Minister's Secretariat's Office, which issues national directives, are "one of the most valuable sets of records created during the process of establishing and administering the DRV and SRV from the central to the local levels. The records provide a diverse perspective on the country's defense, construction, and development ... a large number of records document the Resistance War against the USA and the victory that led to the country's reunification."<sup>49</sup> One potential example of this type of material is Prime Minister Directive 286, dated October 21, 1972, which instructed the provinces in North Vietnam to record the location of American gravesites and prepare a register of remains in preparation for the Paris Peace Accords. This document was turned over to DPMO on May 4, 2012, but its archival sourcing remains unclear. The text says it originated from the Central Executive Committee, but the document's signature block indicates "on behalf of the Secretariat," meaning the prime minister's office.

Despite Vietnamese claims that Archives 3 does not possess military records, foreign researchers have discovered military and other reports interspersed among the various record groups. One noted Vietnam War scholar has spent considerable time at Archives 3. He advised that the "online computer system often provides little information because many files deemed sensitive have not been digitized and are deliberately not included in the computer finding aid. However, important documents can occasionally be found in the odd record group because the prime minister's office would send out reports to every agency. Some would preserve the paper because it pertained to their responsibilities, while others did not. For example, I found in the Post Office files a report on the effect of B-52 strikes on the road network."<sup>50</sup>

Another researcher who visited Archives 3 in 2020 reported similar results. "Using files from other ministries as well as the prime minister's office, I discovered important foreign policy documents by aligning dates, signatures, and other clues. The ministries' files possessed copies of diplomatic directives and correspondence with Ministry of Foreign Affairs."<sup>51</sup> Whether information on U.S. MIAs resides in Archives 3 is unknown, but a broader search to encompass all record groups is warranted. Since the results from using the archive's computer finding aid are limited, the League recommends the use of a virtually unknown Vietnamese archival website that provides significantly more information.<sup>52</sup>

Files on American, Communist, and GVN POWs exist among the holdings of the former Republic of Vietnam files at Archives 2. A search of these folders revealed that they do not contain information that would help recover U.S. MIAs. However, files belonging to the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) from 1969–1976 are also held at Archives 2.<sup>53</sup> The PRG files include military reports, foreign policy discussions, anti-pacification plans, and various speeches. According to informed sources, when Det 2 and Stony Beach personnel visited Archives 2 in March 2019, they did

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<sup>48</sup> "U.S. Government Support to Vietnam's Efforts to Account for Its Missing," n.d. The U.S. has also provided over 100 compact disks from the U.S. Marine Corps archives and has provided numerous materials on PAVN war dead.

<sup>49</sup> *Sach Chi Dan Cac Phong Luu Tru Bao Quan Tai Trung Tam Luu Tru Quoc Gia III* [Guide to the Collections of National Archives III] (Hanoi: Archives III, 2006), 519. This volume is produced in Vietnamese, French, and English.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Dr. X, July 7, 2023. Note: tone marks have been removed from cited Vietnamese publications to ease Western readers.

<sup>51</sup> Ginger Davis, "Secrets of the Vietnamese Archives," <https://blog.online.norwich.edu/norwichproresources/secrets-vietnamese-archives>. There are only two other published attempts to define the Vietnamese archival system. One is from 1993, the other from 2004.

<sup>52</sup> A quick search of the website using Google Translate found 340 hits on POWs. Many, however, dealt with Communist prisoners or RVN prisons. The web address can be provided upon request.

<sup>53</sup> The material is located at *Phong Chinh Phu cach mạng Lam thoi Cong hoa mien Nam Viet Nam* [Collection of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam]. A small finding aid booklet on PRG materials does exist. The League has a copy.

not examine these materials because either they were unaware of these files due to the poor finding aid, or the staff did not disclose their existence.

Knowledgeable DPAA officials indicate that both Det 2 and Stony Beach have also visited provincial archives, but DPAA has not catalogued the dates of its visits to these locations nor created a database of items and folders examined. This is regrettable and prevents researchers from focusing on new accessions. Moreover, according to one outside researcher, procedures at some provincial archives are less strict than at Archives 3. He copied—without restriction—hundreds of pages of documents on the land reform efforts in Nghe An Province, a sensitive historical topic given the killing of thousands of landowners during the 1950's.<sup>54</sup>

Clearly, given the rapidly closing window to find eyewitnesses to a particular case, not to mention accelerating urbanization of loss sites, access to Archives 3 and provincial archives might provide investigative leads for U.S. teams. Even with full or supervised access to these archives, however, they pale in comparison to the more critical Ministry of Defense (MoD), Ministry of Public Security (MPS), and Party archives. Yet until access to these files is granted, is there another research avenue that can be reexamined?

### ***Vietnamese Military Archives and the Museum System***

For years, the Vietnamese have rejected the contention that they had created a central repository of U.S. POW/MIA information. However, since it is established that the Vietnamese consolidated U.S. remains they recovered in North Vietnam and then generated written inventories of previously collected bodies or unrecoverable ones, why is it illogical to believe that they had also established a central repository or inventory of U.S. POW/MIA information? As a reminder, PAVN standard procedure dictated that units recover U.S. remains, identity cards, and other artifacts for later diplomatic, political, or economic use. Certainly, the index cards that Schweitzer purchased indicate a PAVN effort to catalog its U.S. POW/MIA holdings.

The Vietnamese rebuttal is that while this policy was carried out in the north, wartime pressures in the south and other battlefields precluded their forces from strictly following policy regarding adequately marking grave sites or collecting materials to ship to Hanoi. Although the DPMO Remains Study did not specifically research the question of whether Hanoi had created a central information repository, DPMO concluded it did not. The report states that while the DRV recovery effort in the north was mostly successful, because of a lack of information, U.S. remains that were retrieved in the south came primarily from those who died in prison camps. DPMO further asserted that when Hanoi tasked the provinces in North Vietnam in late 1972 to compile information on U.S. grave sites in preparation for the signing of the Paris Peace Accords, “it did not have a cache of centrally held documents to draw from. Instead, it tasked lower echelons to develop and forward information.” Additionally, “even as early as 1972, the ability to recover wartime remains depended on the memory of witnesses rather than on written data.”<sup>55</sup>

DIA's Stony Beach, however, published an illuminating report in 2005 that reviewed several PAVN regimental unit histories. The report itemized primary documents cited in the books that originated from PAVN archives. Although none of the endnotes referenced POW/MIA information, the Stony Beach report concluded that this material was “illustrative of the types of documents being held at various archives in Vietnam ... Witnesses interviewed by POW-MIA investigators ... have consistently denied the existence of archived documents related to POW-MIA. The reported information clearly proves the existence of wartime documents currently being held at archives in Vietnam. This information also proves the existence of archives at a far greater scale than previously known.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Alex Thai Vo, “Nguyen Thi Lam and the Land Reform in North Vietnam, 1953,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, Vol. 10, Issue 1, 1–62, 2015.

<sup>55</sup> “Remains Study,” 12.

<sup>56</sup> Stony Beach to DIA, “Vietnamese Archives Containing Wartime Documents,” August 26, 2005, IIR 6 024 0178 05.

Given some divergence in opinion about a centralized document repository, perhaps it is time to reframe the definition. The term central remains warehouse indicates a single location where Vietnam secretly hid information for later political or monetary gain. Did Vietnam house U.S. remains in the same location? Source reporting, particularly the Mortician, indicated that remains were held in different locations or were moved to other sites. Moving the remains probably reflected the need for greater storage space, security after the Mortician's defection, or consolidation in preparation for turnover. Yet when DPMO pressed the Vietnamese on where they "stored remains [it] did not receive a persuasive answer. The question appears to be sensitive."<sup>57</sup> It is unknown if DPMO/DPAA ever reached a definitive conclusion.

On the other hand, source reporting on a central information repository is extremely thin. While not precluding its existence, it lowers the odds of one existing. What we do have, however, are plentiful reports from both Vietnamese sources and American investigators that conclusively indicate a tremendous amount of U.S. POW/MIA information—documentation gathered per PAVN policy—resides in Vietnamese military archives and museum system.

Although JTF-FA spent considerable time in the army museum system in the early 1990s, it eventually turned to other efforts. Stony Beach, though, continued to explore the Vietnamese military museum system. A Stony Beach report from 2003 using two Vietnamese publications provides a succinct outline of the museum system. The army (the air force and navy are part of the People's Army) museum system consists of twenty-five museums, plus unit tradition houses (small exhibitions used to showcase a unit's history). One of the books described how the museums prioritized collecting U.S. materials. "Whenever an American aircraft was attacked and shot down by northern localities, collectors of army museums were present in time at the site and collected objects such as labels, aircraft pieces, various articles, and ID cards of the pilots. Although it is incomplete, ten thousands (*sic*) of objects of various kinds of American aircrafts shot down in the nine years (1964–1973) as evidences (*sic*) of the U.S. defeat ... have been stored in army museums."<sup>58</sup> Given this effort, where did this material go?

One early report that the Vietnamese were collecting U.S. artifacts came in March 1980 from a former PAVN Major. An ethnic Chinese northerner who had served the revolution since 1949, by 1966 he was the commander of Warehouse 205, a significant logistics hub for the PAVN Rear Services Department in Hanoi.<sup>59</sup> Dismissed in the wave of anti-Chinese discrimination raging in Vietnam in 1979, he escaped to Hong Kong. There he was interviewed for information on American POW/MIAs.<sup>60</sup> The U.S. official who translated the interview recalls that the source claimed Warehouse 205 had been:

sent a large amount of flight helmets, flight suits, boots, weapons, and personal effects collected from downed American airmen and saying that he did not know why his warehouse had been sent all this stuff, since this was a warehouse for quartermaster gear. He asked his superiors what he was supposed to do with the stuff (he clearly had not wanted to be responsible for it) but was told to continue to store it in one place, without any further explanation. As I recall, he said that at the time he was relieved of command of the warehouse this collection of items was still being held by the warehouse.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 24. The remains storage location was probably sensitive due to prior Vietnamese denials that they had created one, which does not auger well for low-level negotiations between DPAA and the VNOSMP to open Vietnamese archives.

<sup>58</sup> Stony Beach to DIA, "The Army Museum System in Vietnam," March 5, 2003, IIR 6 024 0084 03. The army museum also published a four-volume series of books entitled *Relics of the Resistance* that details the displays shown in various museums.

<sup>59</sup> Formed on May 20, 1952, Warehouse 205 is subordinate to the General Department of Rear Services Quartermaster Department. The League examined a history of Warehouse 205, but this publication contained no information on storing U.S. artifacts.

<sup>60</sup> CIA to DIA, "DLO Hong Kong Reporting on POW/MIA Matters," March 25, 1980, [https://www.loc.gov/item/powmia/pwmaster\\_109714/](https://www.loc.gov/item/powmia/pwmaster_109714/) This report contains biographic information on the PAVN major. Unfortunately, the interview report cannot be found on the Library of Congress website.

<sup>61</sup> Email from the U.S. official, who wishes to remain anonymous, January 10, 2024.

Warehouse 205 probably held the collected artifacts of shot down U.S. pilots in the Hanoi area. To gain credit for shooting down an American plane, the air defense unit needed to produce evidence of the crashed plane. Moreover, the Vietnamese gathered plane wreckage to scavenge for reuse, to give specific technology to the Soviets, and to collect materials to use in potential war crimes trials or for future negotiations. But what happened to the artifacts held at Warehouse 205?

The supposition is that much of it was transferred to PAVN museums. Beginning in the late 1980s and into 1990, Vietnam turned over some documents and agreed to conduct limited research, but it heavily controlled the process.<sup>62</sup> In 1991, U.S. Special Envoy General John Vessey formally requested that Vietnam provide documents. After his demand—an appeal reinforced by the League, the Senate Select Committee, and other delegations—the JTF-FA signed an MOU in October 1992 to permit U.S. researchers to access the Central Army Museum in Hanoi and other museums in Vietnam, including some unit tradition houses in exchange for payment for museum staff to assist them.

The first Det 2 team began research at the Central Army Museum, now called Vietnam Military History Museum, on November 2, 1992. The museum director informed the team that “since the beginning of 1992, the museum has received 400 artifacts and photos not previously shared with U.S. researchers,” but he did not state the provenance of these records.<sup>63</sup> The U.S. team was shown photos of wreckage, identification media, and museum accession records, and it made sixty-one possible correlations to U.S. losses.

Det 2 researchers then attempted to visit the MR-7 museum in Ho Chi Minh City, but they were initially prohibited.<sup>64</sup> To gain access, the Det 2 researcher spoke directly with the Central Army Museum chief administrator. The director claimed that material on U.S. POW/MIAs existed in the MR-7 museum but that it was “scattered in the files of individual units and province commands, and it would take a good deal of time and effort to find this information and make it available for joint research ... MR-7 cannot begin to draft plans to search for information in the provinces until it has assurances that the U.S. will furnish means of transportation or reimburse MR-7 for expenses.” According to the Det 2 researcher, “if the views ... expressed during the meeting reflect the policy of the Vietnamese government or military leadership, they could signal we are in for a short-term public relations blitz concerning archival research followed by a trend of expensive, unproductive unilateral Vietnamese research activities that could be drawn out over many years.”<sup>65</sup> Although his words proved prophetic, the museum director’s disclosure that U.S. POW/MIA materials were unconsolidated became the standard Vietnamese line.

JTF-FA spent considerable effort from late 1992 to 1994 visiting museums. DPMO claimed that “we deployed teams specifically to investigate archives and have reviewed holdings in every known museum/tradition house. Information obtained from archival research has been of great value, providing new investigative leads, helping to clarify/verify existing information, and evaluate witness statements.”<sup>66</sup> A search of the Library of Congress database, however, reveals a sharp drop off in messages after 1994 regarding archival research at the museums.

The reason was that from 1992 to January 1999, prodded by the U.S. government, the Vietnamese produced hundreds of documents. Some were grave sketches, but most documents were summaries of the war or statistical records of U.S. air losses. For example, the Group 559 list of shootdowns—turned over on September 1, 1993—outlined aircraft losses from 1965–1975 on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Others include “Report on the Number of American Pilots captured in Vinh Phu from 1964 to October 1972,”

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<sup>62</sup> USDAO Bangkok to DIA, “Current Status of POW-MIA Research, Tour Report,” December 17, 1991. Authored by Bill Bell, it is a withering review of the results of POW/MIA research to date. [https://www.loc.gov/item/powmia/pwmaster\\_86206/](https://www.loc.gov/item/powmia/pwmaster_86206/)

<sup>63</sup> USCINCPAC to AIG 90, “Sitrep/JTF-FA/92-041, 29 Oct 92 to 5 Nov 92,” November 7, 1992. [https://www.loc.gov/item/powmia/pwmaster\\_65855/](https://www.loc.gov/item/powmia/pwmaster_65855/)

<sup>64</sup> Both Stony Beach and Det 2 have since been allowed into the facility.

<sup>65</sup> Det 2 to JTF-FA, “(ART 013-92) – Archival Research Update – 13 Nov 92,” November 13, 1992.

<sup>66</sup> DPMO, “SEA Archival Research,” n.d., but a handwritten notation says, “DPMO Update, 2011.” The report further states, “Have they given us everything? No, but we continue to request documents.”

provided by the Ministry of the Interior (Public Security) on May 30, 1995. On August 4, 1995, Vietnam turned over “List of American Bandit Pilots Killed in Quang Binh Province,” a report that had been created on February 7, 1973. From the southern battlefields, it turned over a register dated September 8, 1979, entitled Military Region 5, “List of Remains of Military and Civilian Americans and other Foreigners Who Died in the War in Vietnam.”

Clearly, the Vietnamese had reviewed their files to prepare statistics on American losses. Although these documents provided important information, they rarely led directly to a recovery. Hence, DPMO’s stated policy that witnesses were more important than archival records. Yet a DPMO paper continued to proclaim that “many of the documents provided information that helped solve cases [and] were indispensable analytical tools in accessing sites, witnesses and processes in broad areas of Vietnam.”<sup>67</sup> Given the discrepancy in the two statements, what DPMO meant by that declaration is debatable.

In January 1999, however, the Vietnamese informed DPMO that they had turned over all pertinent materials. In response to Vietnamese stonewalling, DPMO created another archival initiative from 2002–2007 that used contracted Vietnamese researchers to re-review their classified holdings for POW/MIA documents.<sup>68</sup> Although the Vietnamese unilaterally provided documents via this process, as predicted in 1992, hiring the Vietnamese to conduct research proved expensive and relatively unproductive. Under this program, the U.S. government reportedly paid the Vietnamese \$1,500 for each research request.<sup>69</sup>

This program gave way to specific case-related requests, often based upon published PAVN histories. According to one former DPAA official, after completion of the 2007 effort, “the U.S. proposed a new archival research program to be carried out under the auspices of the RIT [Research Investigative Team], with the VNOSMP arranging to search for documents related to specific cases. We got a lot of original documents and information extracted from other documents. The Vietnamese explained this was a way for them to provide case-related information on U.S POW/MIA cases while still complying with their national classification regulations and those of each associated ministry (Defense, State, Security).”<sup>70</sup>

To buttress their denial of possessing additional material, in later years, the Vietnamese searched their own published military histories and provided extracts about battles.<sup>71</sup> The predominant theme in Vietnamese document turnovers became specific responses to DPAA requests. Although DPAA analysts pored over thousands of pages of PAVN military histories to create requests, and some new documents were discovered in the Ministry of Defense files on individual losses, the Vietnamese pattern remained: repeated denials followed by the discovery of new documents combined with a refusal to allow DPAA researchers access to MoD or other archives.

What documents can Vietnam be expected to have? Vietnamese publications provide a window into what they could potentially provide.

### ***Vietnamese Publications***

To gain a greater sense of the scope and breath of Vietnamese military archival holdings, let us examine two areas: the types of records captured in the south during the war and postwar primary source

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<sup>67</sup> DPMO document summarizing Vietnamese archival efforts, no date or title, but probably written in 2010.

<sup>68</sup> A formal MOA was signed in June 2004 to conduct research by PAVN officers in PAVN archives. Research was conducted from May 2006–Feb 2007. The MOA expired in May 2007.

<sup>69</sup> Embassy Hanoi to SecState #8979, “League of Families Visit to Vietnam,” February 24, 2003. When queried, a former DPMO/DPAA official denied that there was a blanket \$1,500 rate but rather that the VNOSMP charged them varying rates for conducting research, witness interviews, and other efforts. Regardless, the official confirmed that they had paid a significant amount of money for Vietnamese research efforts.

<sup>70</sup> Email from a former DPMO/DPAA official who wishes to remain anonymous, September 1, 2023.

<sup>71</sup> Comparisons by a respected Vietnamese translator between the VNOSMP reports and the books that were readily available for purchase on the open market revealed that the VNOSMP often left out important details from the books in its reports.

collections. Western scholars are often astonished at the breadth and amount of Vietnamese military publications. These include unit histories, memoirs, battle studies, province histories, campaign studies, and general histories of the war. These publications, while interspersed with the usual proclamations of great victories, are highly detailed and often include battlefield statistics clearly drawn from wartime reports.

The key consideration is not that the Vietnamese have failed to turn over documents. They have, but based upon their own publications, they can provide substantially more. First, one should remember that the People's Army was a well-organized military with a typical need for reporting from the lowest to the highest levels. The U.S. military captured and translated thousands of enemy documents during the war. Many of these were routine PAVN reports that included monthly and quarterly reports on unit rosters, number of proselytizing activities, etc. Numerous documents were also captured regarding Communist policies on treatment of American POWs.

Although fewer in number, allied forces also captured reports from Communist POW camps in South Vietnam. One such example was a simple supply request from the commander of the B-2 Front POW camp to his headquarters.<sup>72</sup> If a simple supply request was generated, what other reports were created? PAVN Senior Colonel Bui Tin wrote that in 1972, prior to the signing of the Paris Peace Accords, he interviewed numerous American POWs for a book. After the accords were signed, he "suggested that we should request the Vietnamese side to provide the U.S. with the prisoner registration lists, the documents on issuing supplies, the monthly reports submitted by each of the camps, the documents held by the province and Party historical review committees, and the province and district museum records, because shooting down U.S. aircraft and capturing U.S. prisoners were considered outstanding combat achievements for provinces and districts. These documents could provide additional information on a number of cases."<sup>73</sup> The types of reports in Bui Tin's commentary are telling.

Prisoner camps in South Vietnam did submit monthly reports to higher headquarters. One captured document dated August 4, 1970, provides a summary from the Political Staff for Military Region 9 (the lower Delta) to the Political Staff Department at COSVN on the situation for the first half of 1970 for the prisoner camps subordinate to MR-9. They had a regional camp at its headquarters plus six camps within the provinces. The regional "camp was composed of two sections, the first in charge of captured US servicemen, the second in charge of captured RVNAF officers. The camp was headed by a five-member management committee." Although the regional camp provided timely statistics on the number of prisoners, the provincial camps had failed during this period to "provide accurate reports as to how many prisoners of war were under their control." One of the provincial camps was currently holding an American first lieutenant but it had been unable to evacuate him to the regional camp.<sup>74</sup>

This same monthly reporting requirement also existed in other Communist military regions. One captured U.S. prisoner in I Corps, PFC Louis Ortiz-Rivera, who was released in January 1968, "reported that he believes the VC maintain records on the PWs and send monthly reports to the NLF HQs."<sup>75</sup> Yet despite allied forces capturing dozens of PAVN POW/MIA related documents in South Vietnam, Vietnamese authorities have provided only a handful of documents from its southern commands, mainly the Died-In-Captivity (DIC) list.<sup>76</sup>

However, one former DPMO official, who was present for many interviews with Vietnamese cadre who served in the south, stated that he had:

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<sup>72</sup> "Request for Supplies," CDEC Log #05-3301-70.

<sup>73</sup> Bui Tin, *May Mu The Ky: Doi Thoai [The Clouds of the Century: A Dialogue]* (Westminster: Da Nguyen Publishing, 1998), 127. One such document was turned over, a list of all American POWs held in northern prisons. Known as the Hotel Registry, only POWs that have been accounted for were listed.

<sup>74</sup> "US Prisoners of War Detained in VC Military Region 3," CDEC Bulletin #42,122, Log #02-1060-71. The NLF created different military regions to disguise the correct PAVN military region numbering.

<sup>75</sup> Interagency Prisoner of War Intelligence Ad Hoc Committee (IPWIC) - Minutes of Meeting, 23 February 1968. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=3671207008>

<sup>76</sup> The DIC is a compilation of U.S. POWs who died in the south and was provided to U.S. authorities on January 27, 1973.



interviewed the deputy of the office in the South that collected what remains they could find, some 9–11 sets, and is the office undoubtedly the source of the info for the DIC list, even though the list appears to have been typed in the North. He was still angry about it, and chastised his northern colleague sitting beside him, that they Southerners were fighting a war in the South, were being bombed by Americans, and had too many things on their hands and of their own dead to be worrying about some 1972 Northern edict to collect such things.<sup>77</sup>

Unilateral Vietnamese interviews with wartime cadre repeated this refrain. In one example, the VNOSMP spoke to senior officers of the B-3 Front (Central Highlands), who insisted that they do not “have any wartime records on file because in principle, every ten years they must turn over records to the Ministry of Defense, Archives Directorate. In reality, however, almost no wartime records exist because at that time they only concentrated on fighting. In addition, to ensure secrecy, documents such as battle sketches had to be destroyed immediately (after the battle.)”<sup>78</sup> Given these declarations, the DPMO Remains Study stated that it was unable to ascertain how much U.S. POW/MIA information had reached Hanoi from the southern battlefields or from Laos.

Despite Bui Tin’s commentary and captured documents, if wartime demands prevented PAVN units from maintaining POW-related material, that would not preclude information having been sent to the Ministry of Defense or regional commands and still residing there. Communication between the PAVN general staff in Hanoi and its southern commands was far more comprehensive than has previously been known. In 1969, the general staff’s Combat Training Department published a volume that contained detailed battle reports of engagements in South Vietnam. This book contains reports on six different battles that were comprehensive, reported in nearly real-time, and included battlefield sketches in color that were supposedly destroyed at the local level.<sup>79</sup> Numerous postwar volumes also published these after-action reports, including one air defense battle study that detailed a shootdown over Haiphong in November 1966 that incorporated a footnote to the returned POW’s interrogation report.<sup>80</sup>

Some U.S. POW/MIA information from northern South Vietnam did reach Hanoi during the war. A heavily redacted CIA report from February 1970 noted that the identity cards of two American servicemen—Francis Quinn and George Groom, who were captured in April 1962 and released a month later—were on display at the Revolutionary Museum in Hanoi.<sup>81</sup> Another DIA report noted that the ID card of John Duffy, an Air Force pilot shot down in Quang Ngai in April 1970, was forwarded by local political cadre on November 10, 1973, to a Hanoi museum. Information was included that the plane was “shot down on the spot” and the pilot killed. The DIA report noted that this “provides strong evidence that someone within the Vietnamese hierarchy should have knowledge of 1LT Duffy’s fate.”<sup>82</sup> His remains were recovered in June 1993 and identified in 1996.

Despite the failure to provide documents from the south, the Vietnamese have published two separate collections of primary source material from COSVN, its political headquarters for the southern half of South Vietnam. These publications provide a clear window to the size and scope of Vietnamese

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<sup>77</sup> Email from former DPMO official, no date but probably in June 2012.

<sup>78</sup> JTF-FA#3460 to SecDef, “Translation and Evaluation of Vietnamese Document: Unilateral Investigation of Case 0997,” April 9, 1998.

<sup>79</sup> *Mot So Tran Danh Co Hieu Suat Chien Dau Cao, Tap II [A Number of Battles That Achieved a High Level of Combat Effectiveness, Volume II]* (Hanoi: General Staff’s Combat Training Department, 1969.)

<sup>80</sup> “Battle Fought by 172nd Anti-Aircraft Battery to Defend Haiphong, 01 November 1966,” in *Mot So Tran Danh Phong Khong Trong Khang Chien Chong My Cuu Nuoc, Tap I [A Number of Air Defense Battles During the Resistance War Against the Americans to Save the Nation, Volume I]* (Hanoi: People’s Army Publishing House, 1992), 77.

<sup>81</sup> The CIA IIR is so heavily redacted that it has no cable number or title, only the date of release: February 18, 1970. The Revolutionary War Museum is in Hanoi. There are no reports in the LOC database of any U.S. investigator searching the museum. For information on the museum, see <https://vinpearl.com/en/vietnam-museum-of-revolution>.

<sup>82</sup> DIA, “Transmittal of Vietnamese Archival Document Pertaining to First Lieutenant John E. Duffy, U.S. Air Force,” October 17, 1991.

archival holdings for the battlefields in South Vietnam. A one-volume book of almost 1500 pages of cables, memoranda, directives, and activity reports sent between Hanoi and COSVN was published in 2002. A second edition was released in 2008. This updated volume included three hundred new entries that were found in the archives of the Party Central Committee, the Ministry of Defense's Central Archives, the archives of the Party History Institute, and the archives of the Military History Institute of Vietnam.<sup>83</sup> Unfortunately, the editors are circumspect about the sourcing of these documents. They do not provide specific citations to archives, record groups, or folders. Instead, they simply state "Document held in the archives of the Party Central Committee." This again indicates that material from the southern commands does exist, but in other archives.

More astounding, in 2020, a massive eighteen-volume set of primary source material was published about the activities of COSVN from 1946–1975. Comprising over twenty-thousand pages, the introduction indicates that these are original documents found in the party archives, COSVN files, plus documents from the different military regions like Region 5, Region 7, and Region 9.<sup>84</sup> This highlights the previous conclusion that while the units on the battlefield may not have kept materials, reports sent to higher headquarters are still maintained in military regional archives.

These primary source sets are not unique. In fact, they are common. The first published group of primary source documents was the *Collected Party Documents* series. Launched over twenty years ago, this collection is well-known and heavily used by Western academics. The material stretches from the inception of the Communist Party to well past the war. It provides previously secret Communist Party documents, with each volume representing a single year. DPMO analysts were surprised to discover in the volume for 1969, which was published in 2004, a Politburo directive on its policy regarding American POWs.<sup>85</sup> Although the document only dealt with improving the treatment of American POWs, it had not been provided to U.S. government researchers. The sourcing also remained nebulous. It is listed as "Document held in the Archives of the Party Central Committee," making it difficult for a foreign researcher—assuming they had access—to search for similar material in the same box or folder.<sup>86</sup>

There are numerous other large, multi-volume primary source collections focused on the war. They provide rich details about how Hanoi managed the conflict. These volumes showcase the deep archival materials the Vietnamese possess. For example, the People's Army published an eleven-volume set of primary sources from the general staff outlining its activities from 1954–1975. The 1966–1967 volume included a message on June 1, 1966, from the general staff ordering PAVN units to gather materials from American aircraft.

As a follow-up to Directive No. 813/CT-TM, dated 28 October 1965 on recovering American aircraft that we had shot down, on 1 June 1966 the General Staff issued supplementary instructions (No. 149/TM-CT) directing the military regions to order their province and city military units to actively collect all equipment from American aircraft that had been shot down by our forces over Vietnam, including radio transmitters, signal flashlights and signaling mirrors, flare guns, tank repellent, pistols, phosphorescent medicine [*sic* liquid], and other types of personal equipment. After collecting these materials, the materials were to be sent to the local

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<sup>83</sup> *Lich Su Bien Nien Xu Uy Nam Bo va Trung Uong Cuc Mien Nam (1954–1975)* [*Historical Chronicle of the Cochinchina Party Committee and the Central Office for South Vietnam (1954–1975)*] (Second printing, with corrections and additions) (Hanoi: National Political Publishing House, 2008). The materials range from 1954–1975.

<sup>84</sup> *Van Kien Trung Uong Cuc Mien Nam Giai Doan 1946–1975, Tap 1* [*Central Office for South Vietnam Documents 1946–1975, Volume 1*] (Hanoi: National Political - Truth Publishing House, 2020).

<sup>85</sup> "On Policy Toward Captured American Pilots in North Vietnam," in *Van Kien Dang, Toan Tap, 30, 1969* [*Collected Party Documents, Volume 30, 1969*] (Hanoi: National Political Publishing House, 2004), 303.

<sup>86</sup> Another People's Army publication states that this Politburo directive is also held in the files of the Civilian Proselyting and Special Propaganda Department. See *Tong Ket Cong Tac Binh-Dich Van Trong Khang Chien Chong My, Cuu Nuoc (1954–1975)* [*Summary of Military-Enemy Proselyting Operations During the Resistance War Against the Americans to Save the Nation (1954–1975)*] (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 2002), 113. This book was published two years before DPMO researchers discovered the directive in the *Collected Party* volume.

province military unit or city military unit and then turned over to the Air Defense-Air Force Headquarters.<sup>87</sup>

Interestingly, PAVN Colonel General Tran Sam, deputy chief of the general staff, claims that this directive was issued because the commander-in-chief of the Soviet Air Defense Forces, Marshal Pavel Batitski, who was then visiting North Vietnam, requested American material. “The Soviet Union,” Batitski said, “desperately needs to acquire the wreckage and spare parts of U.S. aircraft to conduct our research projects. I suggest that if you have three examples of one type of aircraft or aircraft parts Vietnam should retain one of them, you should give one to us, and give one to China. If you only have a single example, then you should let the Soviet Union examine it and then we will return it to Vietnam.” Tran Sam “agreed to his request.”<sup>88</sup> According to Tran Sam, these supplementary instructions were issued “shortly thereafter.”

Besides primary document collections, various unit and branch histories contain interesting information, particularly on Hanoi’s policy on American POW/MIAs. One example is a history of the Civilian Proselytizing Department. Civilian proselytizing was directed at South Vietnamese civilians to convince them to join the Communist cause, while the Enemy Proselytizing Department of the PAVN General Political Department held sway over American POW/MIAs.<sup>89</sup> This volume discusses the effort to ideologically convince captured Americans to engage in propaganda activities but also provides the titles for various directives on U.S. POWs.

To carry out the General Political Department’s instructions on monitoring and administering the grave sites of American airmen who had died, in early 1966 the Department disseminated policy and implementation guidance to the headquarters staff and enemy proselytizing cadres of the different military regions, provinces, and cities. It sent cadres to Thanh Hoa and Nghe An provinces to personally instruct the localities in order to learn lessons from experience. On 23 November 1967 the Department submitted Report No. 159/NC on “The Status of the Administration of the Graves of American Airmen Who Have Been Buried in Local Areas” [*Tình Hình Quan Ly Mộ Ma Nhung Ten Giac My Lai May Bay Da Chon O Cac Dia Phuong*]. The report provided the overall number of American graves and the concrete totals in 16 provinces, cities, and the Northwest Military Region; the rank, condition, and reason of death; and the method of burial. It also provided an assessment of the implementation of the General Political Department’s directive by the local authorities.<sup>90</sup>

It is unknown whether the Vietnamese have provided this report to DPMO/DPAA, although the book was published in 2008.

Lastly, higher level histories of the war often contain fascinating details on Hanoi’s focus on gathering information on American POW/MIAs. Below is a list from a command history discussing various directives the general staff regarding maintaining files on U.S. POW/MIAs. Although these directives do not solve a case, they speak to the importance the general staff placed on capturing U.S. aircrews and their identification media.

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<sup>87</sup> “General Staff Issues Supplementary Instructions on Collecting Equipment from U.S. Airmen and Aircraft Shot Down Over North Vietnam,” June 1, 1966, in *Bien nien su kien: Bo tong tham muu trong khang chien chong My, cuu nuoc 1954–1975, Tap IV (1966–1967)* [*Chronology of Events: The General Staff During the Resistance War Against the Americans to Save the Nation 1954–1975, Volume IV (1966–67)*] (Hanoi: People’s Army Publishing House, 2005), 106. The citation is Ministry of Defense Archives Center, General Staff Collection, File 988.

<sup>88</sup> Tran Sam, with Le Hai Trieu, *Thang Cuoc Doi: Hoi Uc [The Years of My Life: A Memoir]* (Hanoi: People’s Army Publishing House, 2007), 254.

<sup>89</sup> For an interesting article on northern POW cadre, see “Reunion of Those Who Carried Out a Special Mission,” *Ho Lo Prison* website, 5 August 2018, accessed 4 April 2021 at <http://hoalo.vn/Articles/12/23667/Cuoc-hop-mat-cua-nhung-nguoi-lam-nhiem-vu-dac-biet.html>

<sup>90</sup> *Lich Su Cuc Dan Van va Tuyen Truyen Dac Biet (1947–2007)* [*History of the Civilian Proselytizing and Special Propaganda Department (1947–2007)*] (Hanoi: People’s Army Publishing House, 2008), 393.

P. 496 – on 31 May 1972, the Militia Department [Cuc Dan Van] completed a draft order (No. 83G7A) covering a number of issues ... The draft order said that the utmost attention must be paid to organizing and commanding the capture of downed American airmen to ensure that they were captured ... and that all downed airmen were captured, both day and night.

P. 498 – on 1 June 1972, the Combat Operations Department completed a draft order on battle plans for the defense of North Vietnam (No. 193/Tg1) ... (to) capture large numbers of enemy airmen in order to directly contribute to the protection of our logistical supplies.

P. 506 – On 13 July 1972, the General Staff issued a directive (No. 52/CT-TM) to headquarters agencies and units, to interrogate captured airmen on B-52 tactics.

P. 509 – on 25 July 1972, the General Staff issued a directive (No. 57/CT-TM) providing supplementary guidance on organizing self-defense militia forces to fire at low-flying enemy aircraft [and] to identify where downed enemy airmen landed by parachute in order to inform militia self-defense forces sent to hunt down and capture the enemy airmen.

P. 522 – on 7 October 1972, the General Staff issued a directive (No. 77/CT-TM) to the military regions ... The regions were instructed to treat the mission of capturing enemy airmen as a combat mission and instruct all local military agencies and units that they must have pre-prepared plans for surrounding and capturing downed enemy airmen in each individual area, and at the same time to issue appropriate awards, commendations, or punishment based on the degree of success achieved when carrying out this mission.<sup>91</sup>

This section provides instances where Vietnamese publications display both a deep reservoir of archival material and additional information on U.S. personnel that has never been provided. Yet there is another area that, based upon new information from a knowledgeable Vietnamese source, could reopen investigations.

### *Vietnamese Air Defense Histories*

Although DPAA has thoroughly reviewed PAVN air defense histories for pertinent information regarding American losses, Vietnamese publications use a variety of terms to define aircraft shootdowns:

*bắn rơi* - shot down.

*bắn hạ* - shot down.

*bắn rơi tại chỗ* - shot down and crashed on the spot.

*bắn cháy* - hit and caught fire (can mean shot down or hit and damaged).

*bắn bị thương* - hit and damaged.

The PAVN have only published one definition of a shootdown. The *Air Defense Dictionary* provided the term *Bắn rơi ngay loạt đạn đầu/bắn rơi tại chỗ*, which translates as “shootdown with the very first volley/ shootdown on the spot.” Essentially, this was “An action slogan aimed at building the combat resolve of Vietnam’s air defense troops during the resistance war against the Americans in order to implement Chairman Ho Chi Minh’s words of instruction ... Chairman Ho said, ‘Only if you fire accurately to shootdown the enemy aircraft with your first volley will you be able to shoot enemy aircraft down and have them crash on the spot.’”<sup>92</sup>

Qualified DPMO/DPAA Vietnamese linguists have been aware of these terms since the 1990s. They understood that the most important description is “crashed on the spot,” meaning that a plane had fallen within a short radius of the shootdown unit, and that the Vietnamese potentially had knowledge of its location or whether the crew survived.

However, a recent interview with Senior Colonel Le Co, a wartime Air Defense officer, has provided the first known definition of the term “crashed on the spot,” one that potentially showcases

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<sup>91</sup> *Lịch sử Bộ Tổng tham mưu trong kháng chiến chống Mỹ, cứu nước (1954-1975), Tập 4 (1969-1972)* [History of the General Staff During the Resistance War Against the Americans to Save the Nation (1954-1975), Volume 4 (1969-1972)] (Hanoi: People’s Army Publishing House, 2010.)

<sup>92</sup> *Từ Điển Phòng Không* [Air Defense Dictionary], (Hanoi: People’s Army Publishing House, 1997), 28.

deeper Vietnamese knowledgeability on wartime air losses. Senior Colonel Co claimed that “crashed on the spot [meant] that the aircraft crashed on Vietnamese soil, we were able to pick up pieces of the aircraft’s wreckage, and we either killed or captured the enemy aircrew alive.”<sup>93</sup> This newly published meaning has crucial implications for both Vietnamese knowledgeability and recovery efforts.

One Vietnamese air defense history confirms that air defense units needed to provide physical proof of the crashed aircraft. In March 1972, a AAA battery guarding an airfield shot down an American unmanned reconnaissance aircraft. To receive credit,

The regiment sent its report up the chain of command just as the Air Defense–Air Force Service Commander arrived for a visit to inspect the unit. The Commander announced, ‘You must turn in the tail of the aircraft’ for the regiment to be credited with this victory. Regimental Chief of Reconnaissance Nguyen Van Nhan and a team immediately set off to conduct a search through the jungle, following the smoke trail that the aircraft had left. With the assistance of the Ba Thuoc Militia, after several days of searching, the reconnaissance cell was able to recover the wreckage of the enemy aircraft and return it to the unit. When Deputy Regimental Political Commissar Tran Van Bat brought in the aircraft’s tail to submit it as ‘evidence,’ the Service finally officially gave the regiment credit for this victory.<sup>94</sup>

To show the differences in Vietnamese terminology, here are two translated examples of Vietnamese descriptions of B-52 engagements during the December 1972 “Christmas bombing” of Hanoi. The first discusses a plane shot down on the spot: “*Kết quả: ngay trong đêm tập kích đầu tiên 18 tháng 12 năm 1972 vào Hà Nội, lực lượng tên lửa bảo vệ Hà Nội đã **bắn hạ** 3 B-52 trong đó 2 chiếc **rơi tại chỗ*** [Results: During the first night of the attacks on Hanoi, 18 December 1972, Hanoi’s missile defense forces **shot down** 3 B-52s, 2 of which **crashed on the spot.**]<sup>95</sup> A second example acknowledges that another B-52 was hit but not shot down: “*Anh hùng Hoàng Văn Nam là người cùng kịp chiến đấu **bắn bị thương**, loại khỏi vòng chiến đấu một chiếc máy bay B52 thứ 2 trong Chiến dịch Điện Biên Phủ trên không.* [Hero Hoang Van Nam is a man who along with the rest of his combat crew **hit and damaged** and knocked out of the battle a second B-52 during the Dien Bien Phu in the Air Campaign.]”<sup>96</sup>

Based upon the revelation by Senior Colonel Co and the differences in language used to describe air defense engagements, a reexamination of PAVN air defense histories to search for the phrase “crashed on the spot” is needed. These search results should then be matched against the current list of missing aircrews. If the search reveals air defense accounts using the phrase “crashed on the spot” regarding still missing aircrew losses, DPAA could easily use these PAVN published histories to press the Vietnamese to provide information, with the caveat that PAVN records, like all military records, have gaps.<sup>97</sup> Although PAVN air defense histories are generally accurate, the pressures of wartime reporting often led to “heat of battle” errors. shootdown claims from other information sources such as memoirs or journal articles sometimes cannot be correlated with a U.S. loss, or the plane was hit and crashed elsewhere. For example, on November 22, 1972, a B-52 was hit by a SAM-2 but made it back to Thailand and crashed near its base at Nakhon Phanom. Although the Vietnamese acknowledge it

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<sup>93</sup> “The Legendary Saga of the SAM-2,” *Quan Dan Nhan Dan* weekend edition, December 23, 2022.

<sup>94</sup> *Lịch Su Lu Doan Phong Khong 234; Doan Tam Dao (1963–1998)* [History of the 234th Air Defense Brigade; The Tam Dao Group (1963–1998)] (Hanoi: People’s Army Publishing House, 2000), 141.

<sup>95</sup> “B-52 trong Chiến tranh Việt Nam [B-52s in the Vietnam War],” [https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/B-52\\_trong\\_Chiến\\_tranh\\_Việt\\_Nam](https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/B-52_trong_Chiến_tranh_Việt_Nam). A public plaque in Hanoi commemorates the shootdown of another B-52 on December 27, 1972. Note the underlined term *bắn rơi tại chỗ* indicating that the Vietnamese confirmed this plane’s loss. The League has three pictures of these plaques.

<sup>96</sup> “Meet The Hero Who Hit and Damaged a B-52, Forcing it to Make an Emergency Landing,” December 20, 2022. <https://www.nguoiduatin.vn/gap-anh-hung-ban-bi-thuong-buoc-may-bay-b52-phai-ha-canh-khan-cap-a586252.html>

<sup>97</sup> Both DPAA and the League have virtually every published PAVN air defense history, which now number over twenty. The League is prepared to assist DPAA with its collection of translated histories. Stony Beach also has these histories and has also translated the pertinent sections regarding MIA losses.

crashed in Thailand, they still use the phrase “crashed on the spot” to describe the incident.<sup>98</sup> Regardless, based upon this information, the League recommends a thorough review of Vietnamese air defense histories.

### **Conclusion**

The League proposes that the U.S. government conduct a thorough intelligence assessment of the Vietnam War accounting mission with a goal to develop a policy to engage the SRV at a high level and in a sensitive and straight-forward manner to solve the U.S. accounting issue. The report should examine all aspects, especially on Vietnam’s ability to provide additional archival records to increase results. Concurrently, DPAA should press Vietnam to unilaterally boost the provision of relevant materials. Unfortunately, it is unknown what types of archival documents Vietnam may or may not currently be providing since DPAA has not published this information or provided it to the League.

The purpose of this paper was to review and draw attention to a subsection of sources to substantiate the League’s analysis that Vietnam can provide significantly more archival material to solve cases. Moreover, the original U.S. government analysis that Vietnam possesses relevant POW/MIA materials that it has not yet provided is strongly supported by Hanoi’s wartime policies and its numerous publications of primary sources. Accordingly, it is critical that DPAA and Stony Beach are given access to Vietnam’s civilian and military archives to supplement aging eyewitness accounts, with the full understanding that, per SRV law, these holdings are classified.

However, given Vietnam’s current archival roadblocks, one avenue to convince the Vietnamese to be more forthcoming on its archives would be use its own directives. During various document turnovers, the Vietnamese have provided several Ministry of Defense directives that ordered its units to search for and provide any material on U.S. POW/MIAs. One document provided is MoD Directive 138/QD-QP, dated July 21, 1977. Referencing the Party Secretariat decree from October 1972, it ordered the military regions to discover, search for and exhume graves, and register and maintain “remains and personal effects of American military personnel and foreigners who died in the war in Vietnam. Especially military regions 4, 5, 7, 9.”<sup>99</sup> In the same turnover was MoD Directive 15 from January 1991, which undoubtedly was created in anticipation of increasing in-country U.S. and Vietnamese cooperation. It ordered its units:

to fulfill in a timely manner requirements for political and diplomatic struggle ... all units with files and documents on POW/MIA have responsibility to furnish these materials to the Vietnam Search Agency ... Information concerning POW/MIA (including information on remains), when discovered in files, must be extracted, compiled, and reported to Vietnamese research specialists and unit commanders before passing to the Americans ... Upon receiving this directive, all units will inform subordinate levels of the ministry’s policy ...<sup>100</sup>

Another turnover in June 1997 included an additional directive by the Ministry of Defense that reordered its subordinate commands to review its holdings, “gather and check all documents, grave records and material evidence associated with missing Americans” because some of the remains it had turned over could not be identified.<sup>101</sup>

Since relations between Vietnam and America are strong and time is running short, now is the perfect opportunity for direct engagement with Hanoi. During the signing of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in September 2023 between the two countries, each acknowledged the significant

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<sup>98</sup> *Lich Su Quan Chung Phong Khong, Tap III [History of the Air Defense Service, Volume III]* (Hanoi: People’s Army Publishing House, 1994), 165.

<sup>99</sup> JTFFA to SECDEF, “Translation and Evaluation of Vietnamese Document: MND Document 138,” February 10, 1999. This directive probably set in motion PAVN collection efforts in Vietnam.

<sup>100</sup> JTFFA to SECDEF, “Translation of Vietnamese Document: MND Document 15,” June 22, 1998.

<sup>101</sup> JTFFA to SECDEF, “MND Document 826: (16 June 1997),” February 10, 1999.

role that solving war-related issues had played in turning former enemies into partners. Although it is well-recognized that the U.S. accounting issue (among other contentions such as the war in Cambodia, boat people, etc.) was both a stumbling block and fundamental to creating U.S.-SRV relations, only the Vietnamese government publicly acknowledged U.S. POW/MIA concerns.<sup>102</sup> The SRV acknowledged in the Joint Statement that “Vietnam affirmed that it will continue to provide full cooperation with the U.S. in searching for the remains of U.S. military personnel who went missing during the war.”<sup>103</sup>

However, the fact sheet released by the White House during the trip only addressed what the Vietnamese call “war legacy” issues.<sup>104</sup> The phrase “war legacy” is a successful effort by Hanoi to pressure and convince the U.S. government to pay for war-related damages in Vietnam.<sup>105</sup> These problems include unexploded ordinance, dioxin clean-up, helping disabled persons, and finding Vietnamese war dead. Unfortunately, a White House official in a subsequent public forum did not mention U.S. POW/MIA concerns, only Vietnamese war issues. Surprisingly, it was the Vietnamese deputy ambassador who noted the U.S. POW/MIA issue had been “a key pillar in building trust.”<sup>106</sup> This failure by the Biden administration to emphasize U.S. POW/MIA accounting as equal to Vietnamese war issues is deceptive and disheartening.

Regardless of its opinion of the war, the Biden administration should emphasize to Vietnam that solving the American POW/MIA issue is a humanitarian effort that serves both countries. The Biden administration should also recognize that in the mid-1980s, both governments developed a policy of reciprocal steps that addressed U.S. POW/MIA accounting requirements as a humanitarian matter separate from political considerations. Although the U.S. currently addresses SRV concerns, it now appears that the U.S. POW/MIA issue has been subsumed into a more general “war legacy” basket that prioritizes solving Vietnamese interests rather than a balanced approach that equally addresses U.S. POW/MIA accounting.

The League strongly disagrees that the U.S. POW/MIA accounting issue should be lumped together with Vietnamese issues or considered last among war-related concerns. Instead, the League recommends that the U.S. require advanced steps and reciprocity from Vietnam regarding accounting

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<sup>102</sup> Several books of varying quality provide an overview of the development of postwar relations between Vietnam and the U.S. For the orthodox liberal assessment, see Edwin Martini, *Invisible Enemies: The American War on Vietnam, 1975–2000* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007). For a less polemic approach, see Cecile Menetrey-Monchau, *American-Vietnamese Relations in the Wake of War: Diplomacy After the Capture of Ho Chi Minh City, 1975–1979* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2006). For an in-depth examination of postwar Vietnam-U.S. relations, see Richard T. Childress and Stephen J. Solarz, “Vietnam: Detours on the Road to Normalization,” in C. Richard Nelson and Kenneth Weisbrode, eds, *Reversing Relations with Former Adversaries: U.S. Foreign Policy After the Cold War* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1998). For more recent scholarship, see Amanda Demmer, *After Ho Chi Minh City’s Fall: Refugees and US-Vietnamese Relations, 1975–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

<sup>103</sup> “Full Text of the Joint Statement Issued by Vietnam and the U.S. on Raising Relations to the Level of Full Strategic Partnership,” Vietnamese Government Official Website, 11 September 2023, accessed 09 November 2023 at <https://xaydungchinhsach.chinhphu.vn/toan-van-tuyen-bo-chung-ve-nang-cap-quan-he-viet-nam-hoa-ky-len-doi-tac-chien-luoc-toan-dien-119230911120518326.htm>.

<sup>104</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/10/fact-sheet-president-joseph-r-biden-and-general-secretary-nguyen-phu-trong-announce-the-u-s-vietnam-comprehensive-strategic-partnership/>. These include U.S. assistance to search for Vietnamese fallen, helping the disabled, and solving the unexploded ordinance and dioxin remediation issues.

<sup>105</sup> Another current effort by Hanoi is the ongoing verbiage about Ho Chi Minh writing to both President Woodrow Wilson and President Harry Truman seeking help to prevent France from reclaiming its colony. Known as the “Lost Opportunity” theory, its proponents claim that the U.S. missed a chance to work closely with Ho and hence prevent the Vietnam War. In fact, Ho was writing to numerous heads of state seeking assistance against the French. The theory that America missed a chance to work with Ho Chi Minh, while fashionable, is unsustainable. Yet it is accepted without question by current U.S. government officials. See Brett Reilly, “The Myth of the Wilsonian Moment: Ho Chi Minh’s Embrace of the Communist International in 1919–1920,” June 17, 2019, at <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/the-myth-the-wilsonian-moment>

<sup>106</sup> Remarks by Dr. Mira Rapp-Hopper, National Security Council, and by Ms. Hoang Thi Thanh Nga, DCM of the SRV Embassy, at the USIP Conference, “2nd Annual Dialogue on War Legacies and Peace in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia,” September 13, 2023.

related issues.<sup>107</sup> Just as the Vietnamese noted in 1977, and in the spirit of the new Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, solving war-related issues should work in concert, especially since the U.S. government currently has multiple initiatives underway to assist Vietnam in these areas. These programs include a million-dollar DoD program with Harvard's Ash Center to search the wartime CDEC collection for information on Vietnamese war dead, a similar but unsponsored program at Texas Tech, and USAID and United States Institute for Peace plans to assist with dioxin removal and others.

Harvard has prepared over fifty reports on PAVN war dead that have been provided to the SRV Ministry of Defense. Although commendable, the Vietnamese were provided a copy of the CDEC collection in 1990 by General Vessey, and a second copy in 1993, along with a fiche reader by JTF-FA.<sup>108</sup> Given that Vietnam has several copies of CDEC, it seems unnecessary for the U.S. government to provide Harvard a million-dollar contract to conduct research the Vietnamese can do themselves. Additionally, since 2020, Congress "has appropriated \$7 million for the Defense Department to help Vietnam's Defense Ministry account for some of the approximately 300,000 Vietnam War-era Vietnamese [fallen] personnel."<sup>109</sup> In view of these efforts, the League believes that the U.S. has satisfactorily addressed Vietnamese casualties and other legacies from the war, and Vietnam should reciprocate.

Reciprocity involves forthrightly discussing with the Vietnamese the need to rapidly solve the U.S. POW/MIA issue, especially since the Vietnamese have stated that many challenges remain to achieve the fullest possible accounting. These challenges include the "danger that sites may be lost because of natural or social changes in the environment. Most of the sites are located in rugged, difficult, dangerous areas. There is also the threat of the continuing loss of witnesses to the ravages of old age, to poor health, the loss of files, papers, and personal items. Despite these problems, the Vietnamese Government and the Vietnamese people will continue to work closely with the U.S. on the MIA issue and in other areas involving healing the wounds of war."<sup>110</sup> Given the paucity of recoveries and identifications of missing Americans from the Vietnam War, the U.S. government should utilize this latest Vietnamese declaration of cooperation to increase the pace of serious accounting efforts. Although these pledges of POW/MIA support are not new, they provide a foundation for the U.S. government to press for greater assistance.

Clearly, Hanoi planned to exploit the POW/MIA issue not just for political but for financial gain, a plan that continues to this day. Therefore, we should also seek a reduction in costs associated with excavations and other items. Although DPMO/DPAA has never published its outlays associated with research or the money paid to Vietnamese officials for field activities, it notes that Vietnam War accounting efforts comprise a far larger share of its operational budget than other conflicts. Otherwise, we will remain locked into the current high-cost process that is achieving limited results at an incredibly slow pace.

The League believes that given Hanoi's desire for economic, educational, and strategic benefits from the U.S., the Politburo should respond positively to a combined U.S. government diplomatic and League-supported approach to gain access to Vietnamese archival materials. Concurrently, the League firmly supports U.S. efforts to develop a deeper relationship with the SRV and views the accounting mission as a proven asset to achieve broader objectives but one still pursued on a humanitarian basis and separate from political considerations. Humanitarian aid to Vietnam is laudable and began in the 1980s with the League's advocacy and full support. Regrettably, the line has been blurred by both the U.S. government and NGOs as mandating an obligation by America in return for Vietnam's POW/MIA cooperation, a position diametrically opposite from the successful Reagan policy of humanitarian reciprocity separate from political differences.

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<sup>107</sup> Interview with Dr. Alex Vuving, Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, September 28, 2023.

<sup>108</sup> "DPMO, "U.S. Government Support to Vietnam's Efforts to Account for Its Missing," n.d.

<sup>109</sup> CRS, "U.S.-Vietnam Relations," January 17, 2024, 2.

<sup>110</sup> "U.S.-Vietnamese Cooperation in Searching for Missing Military Personnel: Slowly Reducing the Pain," *Vietnam Net*, 10 September 2023, accessed 09 November 2023 at <https://vietnamnet.vn/viet-my-hop-tac-tim-kiem-quan-nhan-mat-tich-khep-lai-dan-nhung-noi-dau-2187655.html#>



Hopefully, readers will study this report carefully and provide feedback or useful information to further the goal of achieving the fullest possible accounting. The League wishes to avoid what the eminent writer Christopher Hitchens once proclaimed, “What can be asserted without evidence can be dismissed without evidence.” Or, as the historian John Lewis Gaddis so eloquently stated, for all historians, their product “must go before an audience, at which point one of several things may happen.” The reader may approve or disapprove, but hopefully, “the product may move those who encounter it to revise their own views so that a new basis for critical judgment emerges, perhaps even a new view of reality itself.”<sup>111</sup> Such is the League’s hope and its desire to build a bridge to the fullest possible accounting.

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<sup>111</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 48.