

Analysis of 15 DoD Lao Discrepancy Cases

The 15 Lao cases consist of 3 civilians and 12 military. None of these cases were on either the Vessey II or Last Known Alive lists. 4 of the 15 were in the Senate Select Committee's list and all 4 were listed POW at Operation Homecoming. Only 1, Peter D. Hesford, is deemed a possible POW candidate and he was not listed as a POW at Homecoming.

Of the civilians, one is not a U.S. citizen and should not be on DoD's list for U.S. priority investigation. Of the remaining 2 civilians, only one, Eugene Debruin, was a POW at Homecoming and he is on the Committee's list. He was acknowledged in captivity by the LPF during the war although there was no hard reporting about his being alive after 1966. He was not accounted for at or after Operation Homecoming. A Lao official advised the National League of Families in 1982 that he was dead. Information obtained from U.S. teams in Laos to date includes witness statements he died before 1973.

The third civilian is a private citizen captured in Laos in 1974. Based on all available evidence in early 1975 he and his Australian companion were killed in late 1974. Information obtained by U.S. investigators in Laos is consistent with that information. The Committee staff did not consider him as a live POW candidate for inclusion on its list because he was not listed as a POW at Operation Homecoming.

Of the 12 U.S. military, 3 were listed as a POW at Operation Homecoming. During Operation Homecoming it was determined that one of the three (Clarke, Case 0862) had been classified a POW during the war through misidentification and there was no evidence he was captured.

One individual, Peter D. Hesford (Case 1100) was identified by name during the war by LPF Vientiane based representative as having been captured; however, his status was never changed from MIA to POW based on that information. He was not listed as a possible POW candidate on the Vessey II, Last Known Alive or Committee lists.

Of the remaining 8 cases, there was credible wartime evidence that one individual probably died (Carlock, Case 0606). Of the remaining 7, there is no evidence they were captured but it is possible that either the Lao or Vietnam governments should have information concerning their fate.

Laos

Eugene H. Debruin
(0018)

On September 5, 1973, an Air America C-47 transport on which Mr. Debruin was a "kicker" was shot down by hostile ground fire over Savannakhet Province. It crashed approximately twenty two kilometers northeast of Muang Phine. Eugene Debruin and four non-U.S. crewmen parachuted out and were captured. According to the Pathet Lao, the remaining two American civilian crewmen who were not reported to have bailed out died in the crash. On May 31, 1966, the Pathet Lao spokesman in Vientiane, Soth Phetrasy, confirmed that Mr. Debruin was alive and in captivity. Information from an American escapee and a Thai captured with Mr. Debruin recounted Mr. Debruin's capture and prison chronology through July 3, 1966, the last time they knew Mr. Debruin to be alive and with them in Khammouane Province. Accounts of the prison escape include information that four of the seven prison guards were killed during the escape attempt. One Thai who escaped and was recaptured was not killed after recapture.

A photograph of Mr. Debruin was later obtained by Air America in May 1969 and showed Mr. Debruin in captivity circa 1965. A credit card and other information concerning the dead pilot was later obtained through provide sources.

On September 25, 1982, Pathet Lao Colonel Khla Keuphithoune told a visiting National League of Families delegation that Eugene Debruin was killed attempting to escape captivity.

Information has surfaced from American POW hunters throughout the last half of the 1980s and into 1991, as well as Lao and Thai residents of Thailand, which assert that Mr. Debruin is still alive in Laos and living freely with a Lao wife and children in Khammouane Province. The Debruin case is well known in the private POW/MIA community due to extensive efforts and informational leaflets distributed by Mr. Debruin's brother for many years in an attempt to recover his brother. The Joint Task Force Full Accounting has received information regarding Mr. Debruin's grave site and is currently planning to excavate it.

Laos

Charles E. Shelton

(0079)

On April 29, 1965, Captain Shelton was the leader in a flight of two reconnaissance aircraft over Laos. Due to bad weather in their primary target area, Captain Shelton turned to the next target near Sam Neua City, Sam Neua Province. His aircraft was hit by hostile fire while at 3000 feet and lining up on his target. He ejected with a good chute and the other aircraft overhead was in contact with him by radio. Inclement weather delayed any possible recovery attempt until May 1. Search and rescue efforts on 2-3 May were negative. A U.S. controlled team was inserted into the area on May 3 and learned from local villagers that Captain Shelton was last seen hanging in a tree. Similar teams continued to search for him through February 1966 but with negative results.

After his shutdown, Pathet Lao ralliers reported hearing about the capture of an American correlating to the capture of Captain Shelton. He reportedly died in a cave in Vieng Xay, east of Sam Neua town, and near another POW, Captain Hrdlicka.

In September 1982 a Pathet Lao security official, Colonel Khamla, stated that Captain Shelton died in captivity in 1968 and was buried near his place of imprisonment. His grave was described as obliterated by a U.S. air strike.

The Joint Task Force investigated the purported grave site in April 1992 and was unable to locate any remains.

Colonel Shelton is still carried in a POW status.

Laos

David L. Hrdlicka
(0084)

On May 18, 1965, Captain Hrdlicka was piloting the lead aircraft in a flight of four F-105D on an interdiction/bombing mission in Houa Phan Province, Laos, previously known as Sam Neua Province. His aircraft was hit by hostile fire and he was seen to bail out, land safely and was later reported by villagers living near his landing point to be in the custody of Pathet Lao communist forces. A May 24 Pathet Lao radio broadcast announced his capture. A July 26 broadcast by Pathet Lao radio broadcast a post-capture tape recording made by Captain Hrdlicka. Captain Hrdlicka was listed by the Department of Defense as a POW at the time of the Paris Peace Accords but was later declared to have died in captivity, body not recovered. Wartime reports from Pathet Lao defectors placed Captain Hrdlicka in a cave in the Vieng Xai area of Sam Neua Province through at least 1966.

On September 25, 1982, National League of POW/MIA Families visitors were told by a Lao security official, Colonel Khamla, that Captain Hrdlicka had died in 1968 of natural causes exacerbated by malnutrition and while imprisoned in a cave in Sam Neua. Colonel Khamla stated he was buried nearby but his grave was destroyed by U.S. bombing. A photocopy of personal documents belonging to Captain Hrdlicka were passed to the U.S. by the Lao in February 1988. A private citizen visiting Laos in September 1989 was provided the photocopy of a document which apparently also belonged to Captain Hrdlicka. A photograph of Captain Hrdlicka after capture is in the Lao museum.

Captain Hrdlicka's purported gravesite was investigated by the Joint Task Force Full Accounting in April 1992. Witnesses were interviewed who described Captain Hrdlicka's burial there in 1968. No remains were located. Efforts continue to locate Captain Hrdlicka's remains.

Laos

Richard D. Applehans
George W. Clarke, Jr.
(0862)

Clarke and Applehans were reported lost in an RF4C while on a reconnaissance mission which was planned for the area of the Demilitarized Zone separating Vinh Linh Special Zone, North Vietnam and Quang Tri Province, South Vietnam. They checked in prior to receiving clearance to attack their assigned target. This was the last contact with the crew which never returned from its mission and was reported lost over Quang Binh Province, North Vietnam. The aircraft's wreckage was not located and there was no beeper. In May 1975 it was determined that the aircraft had crashed in Laos.

In 1968 Clarke's status was changed to POW based on information from a U.S. POW repatriated on February 16, 1968 which indicated Clarke was alive and in captivity. During Operation Homecoming it was determined that this report was erroneous and hearsay information which was a misidentification. Clarke was declared killed in action, body not recovered, in November 1973. Applehans was declared killed in action, body not recovered, in April 1978.

Other than the one misidentification, there is no evidence that either individual was seen alive in the northern Vietnamese prison system and their remains have not yet been repatriated.

Laos

Arthur D. Baker
James W. Lewis
(0070)

On April 7, 1965, Baker and ^{Lewis} James were crewmen on a B-57B, one in a flight of four aircraft on an interdiction mission launched from Bien Hoa Air Base, South Vietnam and with its target in Xieng Khouang Province, Laos. The crew was last seen descending through thin overcast toward the target area and it never reappeared. Extensive search and rescue efforts through April 12th failed to locate either the aircraft or its crew.

On April 14, 1965, the New China News Agency reported the shootdown of a B-47 approximately three miles north-northeast of the town of Khang Khay. This was described as the first B-57 shootdown of an aircraft launched from South Vietnam.

Both crewmen were initially reported missing in action in South Vietnam while on a classified mission. Their loss location was later changed to Laos. There was limited wartime reporting about U.S. aircraft losses in the general area the crewmen were last reported but they could not be correlated to this specific incident. U.S. intelligence debriefers continue to receive information which may correlate to this shootdown but provide no positive information on the fate of the crewmen.

In January 1974 Major Baker's next-of-kin requested his case review go forward and he was declared killed in action, body not recovered, in January 1974. Lewis was declared dead, body not recovered, in April 1982. Returning POWs were unable to provide any information on the fate of these two servicemen.

Laos

Don C. Wood
(0233)

On January 16, 1966, Captain Wood was one of a flight of five F-105 aircraft on a mission over Xieng Khouang Province, Laos. Captain Wood was the pilot of an F-105D on a photo reconnaissance mission. While over the target and with flight members receiving 37mm antiaircraft fire on their passes over the target, Captain Wood's flight leader determined Captain Wood was not present with the remainder of the flight. The flight members searched a thirty mile radius from their target and were unable to either locate him or his crash site. Searches for him continued for the next three months and were unsuccessful. He was initially declared missing in action.

On January 18, 1966, Radio Beijing announced that a U.S. aircraft was shot down over Laos on January 16, 1966. A Pathet Lao radio broadcast also mentioned the shutdown of an aircraft and reported an airman was seen parachuting down. A Pathet Lao source interrogation in Laos in 1974 described the recovery of a U.S. airman who fell from an aircraft hit by antiaircraft fire from the area from the area of the Pathet Lao Regional Headquarters at Phou Kout. The airman reportedly died shortly after capture. This incident was placed in Captain Wood's file as possibly correlating to him due to the loss location. A Lao propaganda film obtained in January 1977 showed the identity card of Captain Wood together with blood chits, revolvers, helmets and other items which appeared undamaged.

In March 1980, Captain Wood was declared dead, body not recovered. His remains have not been repatriated. He was never reported by returning U.S. POWs to be alive in the Lao or Vietnamese prison system.

Laos

Ralph L. Carlock

(0606)

Carlock departed Thailand on March 4, for an armed reconnaissance mission over Xieng Khouang Province, Laos, in the Rolling Thunder operational area. He was hit by hostile 37mm antiaircraft fire while preparing to attack a truck. Two other aircraft on the scene told him to bail out but he never acknowledged and no chute was seen. The followed him as his aircraft headed toward the ground, the canopy still in place and all bombs still on board. The aircraft was on fire all the way to the ground where it exploded. His aircraft crashed in the area of Nong Het, a border town on Route 7 close to the border with Nghe An Province, Vietnam. A week beeper was heard forty minutes later but was believed to have been activate by the fire at his aircraft crash site.

Wartime reports were received about an aircrash crash in the areas of Nong Het and the burial of one or two pilots.

North Vietnam

Gilbert S. Pulmer, Jr.
Thomas T. Wright
(1063)

On February 27, 1968, Palmer and his navigator, Thomas T. Wright, departed Thailand in an RF-4C for a solo photo-reconnaissance mission in an area stretching from North Vietnam southward into Quang Tri Province, South Vietnam. They were last reported over North Vietnam but never returned from their mission. A returning POW debriefed during Operation Homecoming reported seeing an individual in captivity in Nghe An Province who resembled Thomas Wright; however, neither individual was seen later in the northern Vietnamese system of permanent prisons.

Both airmen were initially declared missing in action. Both were declared dead, body not recovered, in April 1977.

In 1991 a U.S. investigating team in northern Vietnam reported interviewing witnesses to the 1968 shootdown of a U.S. jet aircraft over Le Thuy District, Quang Binh Province in which the remains of the crew were either disintegrated or later destroyed in U.S. bombing. A document provided by Vietnam gave the aircraft shootdown dates as March 6, 1968. The Joint Casualty Resolution Center's preliminary conclusion was that the information obtained during the field investigation might pertain to the loss incident of these two crewmen.

Laos

Peter D. Hesford
Aubrey E. Stowers, Jr.
(1100)

On March 21, 1968, First Lieutenant Hesford and First Lieutenant Stowers were the crewmen in an F-4D, one of a flight of two aircraft on a night strike mission over Laos. A forward air controller illuminated three trucks on a road and a second forward air controller made passes in the target area, drawing heavy automatic weapons fire.

The crew radioed they were "rolling in" and that was their last transmission. Other aircraft observed 37mm anti-aircraft fire and then a large explosion and fireball. A search of the area failed to locate any survivors. There were no chute and no beepers. Both airmen were initially declared missing.

On September 17, 1968, the Pathet Lao spokesman in Vientiane, Laos, Soth Phetrasy, stated that Lieutenant Hesford had been captured.

Lieutenant Hesford was declared dead, body not recovered, in June 1978. Lieutenant Stowers was declared dead, body not recovered, in October 1979. Neither individual was identified alive in the Lao or Vietnamese prison system.

In April 1989, U.S. intelligence received a report of the recovery of remains with dog tag information associated with Lieutenant Stowers. No remains were actually provided.

Laos

Charles Dean
Neil Sharman
(1994)

On September 5, 1974, Mr. Dean, an American and Mr. Sharman, an Australian, were detained at a Pathet Lao checkpoint on the Mekong River at the mouth of the Hin Boun, approximately 40 kilometers northwest of the town of Tha Khek, Khammouane Province. Reporting from sixteen sources over the next six months general affirmed the capture of the two civilian travelers who were reportedly detained by Pathet Lao authorities at Kham Keut from shortly after their detention until near the end of 1974. Conflicting accounts described either their being taken away by truck in mid-December 1974 or that they were killed during an abortive escape attempt early in 1975. On May 24, 1975, Mr. Dean's father held a memorial service for him and initiated legal action to have him presumed dead. The U.S. Embassy issued a notice of death for Mr. Dean on January 11, 1975.

In September 1990 the Lao government reported locating an individual who had guarded the two at Kham Keut. He stated both died on Route 8 near the border with North Vietnam.