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Families of MIAs have new questions

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By Nicole Weisensee
States News Service

Washington, Sept. 30, 1990 — They are the forgotten ones.

For years, these people have fought teams of bureaucratic red tape to find out what fate befell loved ones who fought in the Vietnam War and were declared Missing in Action (MIA) by the U.S. government.

They are tired. And so, when the government tells them their son, their husband, their brothers' remains have been found, they believe. Because no one has the doubts they do.

"There were questions, many questions I had," said Mrs. Pat Matsey of Beaver, Pa. "But you're alone. You don't talk to other families. You just feel you almost have to accept it, as probably 80, 90 percent of the families do."

That is also how Mrs. Elsie King of Calhoun, Ga., Mrs. Karla Carter of Moorhead, Wash., and Mr. Lawrence Hatley of Albemarle, N.C. felt, they said in interviews this week.

Two weeks ago, these people learned that the remains of Ralph Moriera, Jr. (Mrs. Matsey's son), Michael King (Mrs. King's son), David Nelson (Karla's half brother) and Joel Hatley (Mr. Hatley's son), which were found at an excavation site in Laos, had been positively identified.

Laos is a country in southeast Asia located next to Vietnam. The U.S. government said the four men's remains were found at the site of an alleged helicopter crash in Laos. A helicopter carrying the four men reportedly was hit by enemy fire in 1971 in the same area.

What the government did not tell the Matseys, Kings or Hatleys was that two years ago, in an NBC-TV Nightly News segment, a Laotian refugee said he was in prison with David Nelson seven years after the helicopter crash.

Pat Matsey, in her years of trying to learn more about what had happened to her son, never had been able to learn who else was aboard his helicopter when it went down March 5, 1971. Thus, she was unaware of the NBC broadcast or of any relation it might have had to her son.

When a reporter informed Matsey last week about the NBC report, she was stunned.

"I'm quite shocked to hear about Nelson," Mrs. Matsey said. "We were never told that and I feel at this point that we should have been, even if it was just a rumor. Had I known that, there would have been other questions I would have asked over the years."

The report of Nelson's imprisonment is making her question whether the teeth and wedding band that the government has told her are the remains of her son, Ralph Moriera, Jr., actually do confirm his death in the chopper crash.

The ring is in virtually perfect condition, several family members said, and does not look as if it had been in the ground for 19 years.

"The only thing I can say is the teeth appear to be Ralph's (when compared with dental records), but I did not have this other information," she said. "You know, this ring does not prove a great deal to me. I had letters from Ralph that said he went into areas sterile — with no dog tags, no wedding ring, nothing."

For years, Elsie King attempted to find out more about the crash and was certain that her son, Michael, was still alive. But the recovery of the teeth the government said belonged to her son, plus the excavation report's mention of Moriera's wedding ring, were what really convinced her that the searchers had indeed found the crash site.

King hadn't heard the doubts raised by Moriera's family about the ring's condition. King, now 73, said the government's disclosure is a way for her to have some peace at last, although she harbored her own doubts about dental evidence. The government assured her that four of the teeth found had belonged to Michael. Yet when she took the dental x-rays to her orthodontist, he was "90 percent sure" that only one of the teeth could be Michael's.

"Could be, could not be," she said. "To specifically say which teeth are my son's, which are his bones, I don't know. I really don't, and I really don't know if any of those are his bones. I am saying this — I think group burial under these circumstances can be the only way out for us. Perhaps we ought to accept these."

The remaining objects recovered from the crash site are 44 bone fragments and 10 teeth or fragments of teeth the government could not identify. But, even though there were seven or eight South Vietnamese on board that helicopter, the government has decided Nelson's and Hatley's remains must be included in the crash site.

Nelson and Hatley will now be taken off of the "MIA" list. This means the government will not respond to sighting reports of all four men "identified" in the crash site, according to Ted Sampley, who heads Homecoming II Project, a North Carolina veterans group that searches for POWs and MIAs from Vietnam.

Sherry Lawrence, a spokesperson for the Department of Defense, said the agency realizes some of the remains are Vietnamese and will include a recognition of that on the headstone.

"For whatever reason, we know the rest of the remains were American," she said. "We would not have gone to the families if we didn't believe that."

The uncertainty has left Nelson's and Hatley's relatives feeling very frustrated, but helpless to do anything but attend the group burial next Friday at Arlington National Cemetery near Washington, D.C.

"In a way, I feel like we're back to Square One," Karla said. "As far as I'm concerned, he could still be alive — he could have died in the camp or he could have died later, but there's no evidence he died in the crash."

Mr. Hatley said he feels the same way.

"Now they're saying he (Joel Hatley) was with the crew, so they're declaring him dead and this is a way of closing the books on the case," he said.

The new information about Nelson "makes me think I've been lied to," he said. "They want all of these cases closed out, that's the purpose of this thing. We've had all kinds of reports that there are still boys in Southeast Asia, but I've tried to keep that off my mind. You dwell on something long enough and you lose your mind."

His son, Dale, said he still has the same doubts about his brother being dead that he did 19 years ago.

"As far as the government goes in this situation, I don't believe anything they say," he said. "They're saying they're through



Nearly two years ago, John Parcels, a former prisoner of war, (left), Somdee Phommachanh (center), and Somdee's friend, Tom Rother (right) waited patiently in a congressional hearing room in hopes that Somdee would be allowed to tell the Congressmen what he had seen in Laos. Somdee was not allowed to speak.

with the investigation ... that's going in one ear and out the other. My feelings haven't changed in 19 years."

But all will convene at Arlington Cemetery this Friday to honor their loved ones.

I'm going not necessarily because I believe he's going to be buried, it's more as a memorial," Karla said. "It's an honor to be buried in that cemetery, it's an honor to be memorialized there. He deserves it — but I don't know that it's actually him."

Lawrence Hatley said he's going, "because my family thinks it's the thing to do. I dread it, I was debating about it, but it seems like they're all saying we have no choice."

Mrs. King described her feelings about the pending burial as "sweet agony."

The source of families' doubts is Somdee Phommachanh, a former Royal Lao Army member who fought the Southeast Asian Communists. When he appeared on the NBC Nightly News report in 1988, he was a janitor at a Tecumseh, Nebraska school.

Phommachanh was a captive of the Communists, but was used as a medical orderly because he spoke a little English. One of the prisoners he says he took care of was David Nelson, who the Laotian said he buried when the American captain died in 1978 — seven years after the U.S. government declared Nelson dead in a helicopter crash.

In the NBC report, Phommachanh was able to pick out a never-before published picture of Nelson from a collage of 20 other servicemen whose photos were presented in a similar fashion.

Shortly after the segment was broadcast, however, Phommachanh was interrogated by employees of the Defense Department's Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), various sources said. Afterward, he would no longer speak about what he had seen in the camp. He still lives in Nebraska but is no longer employed as the school janitor. A school official said he

continues to avoid discussing his Laotian camp experiences with reporters.

Ted Landreth, a Los Angeles-based producer of a BBC television documentary about U.S. POWs in Laos that aired on American television in 1987 said incidents like this have prevented other Laotians from telling their stories.

"This is one of the first things we discovered when talking to Laotian refugees here and around the world," he said. "Whenever the U.S. government, mainly the DIA, found out someone was telling a story, something awful would happen, someone would descend on him and start threatening. That is certainly the case with Somdee."

Landreth interviewed Phommachanh for his documentary. The DIA sought to persuade the producer later that he had recanted his story, but Landreth said that was not so. Landreth, in fact, provided Phommachanh's name to the NBC news crew for the network segment.

Sampley contends that the government's motives are more far-reaching.

"There is a movement afoot by the Bush Administration to lay the POW/MIA issue to rest," Sampley said. "They're not identifying people, they're accounting and they're doing it solely for political reasons."

The Defense Department's Lawrence would not comment on anything about Phommachanh or about anything Sampley said.

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