

# A Curious Trade: The Recovery and Repatriation of U.S. Missing In Action from the Vietnam War

SARAH E. WAGNER

*Anthropology, George Washington University*

I was the custodian of this arm... When I amputated his arm, our medics took [it], took the flesh off it, put it back together perfectly with wires, and then gave it to me. When I left the country six months later, I didn't want to throw it away. I put it in my trunk and brought it home, and all these years it has been in my house.

———Sam Axelrod, U.S. Army doctor, upon traveling to Vietnam in July 2012 to return the arm bones of a former Vietnamese prisoner patient

My arm bone is evidence of my contribution to the war. I will keep it in my house ... in the glass display cabinet.... I can't believe that an American doctor took my infected arm, got rid of the flesh, dried it, took it home and kept it for more than 40 years.

———Nguyen Quang Hung, former Viet Cong soldier upon receiving his arm bones<sup>1</sup>

Human bones are ambiguous objects, rife with possibilities of care and control, of worship and study, of curation, extraction, and exchange. This article addresses an example of the final phenomenon: the circulation and exchange of a particular type of human remains—namely, those of U.S. service members Missing In Action (MIA) and presumed dead from the Vietnam War. Like the news piece quoted above celebrating a doctor's decision to return the arm bone of a Vietnamese soldier to its rightful owner forty years late, my entry into the elaborate system of exchange surrounding American MIAs is predominantly through the lens of U.S. policy and practice. From that vantage point, the bones that “count” are American—thought to belong to U.S. service members—and their path homeward toward recognition is through the hands of U.S. military and scientific personnel.

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<sup>1</sup> “Vietnam War Veteran Reunited with Long-Lost Arm,” *BBC News*, 1 July 2013, at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-23124347> (accessed 14 Oct. 2014).

However partial, this perspective is nevertheless revealing; it showcases how these sought-after bones can tack between roles as objects of recovery, sale or barter, scientific study, ritual burial, and public commemoration. This movement brings shifts in their worth, exposing different “*regimes of value in space and time*” (Appadurai 1986: 4). In their mutable worth, MIA remains illustrate the dynamic symbolism of war dead that evokes differing sensibilities about familiar or foreign soil, and about care and belonging. Like relics—and relics provide a provocative parallel in their own circulation and veneration—remains of missing service members, even in their most fragmentary forms, are replete with the suggestion of power. But, as I will argue here, the story of circulating and exchanged remains is about not just powerful symbols, but power itself—caring for war dead demonstrates authority, and such authority falls to those who control access to the desired object, be it through formal or informal channels. Furthermore, power requires authentication, and the bones of missing American war dead become, in this system of circulation and exchange, a means to demonstrate knowledge, perform certainty, or exploit ambiguity.

The absent bodies of U.S. service members have given rise to a vast network of state and non-state actors engaged in the MIA issue in the United States,<sup>2</sup> a central node of which is the personnel and facilities within the U.S. Department of Defense tasked with recovering, repatriating, and identifying its missing war dead (Hawley 2005: 81–114; Sledge 2005: 65–179; Allen 2009). As much as this is an American endeavor, a significant portion of the “accounting” efforts takes place outside the United States and requires the assistance of other governments and peoples. Indeed, the U.S. government’s ability to recover remains often depends on the overlapping interests of other states. Reciprocity enables repatriation, and MIA remains have served as a key article of purchase or barter for decades, both during and after the Vietnam War, as they have with other conflicts including World War II and the Korean War.

In the case of the Vietnam War this curious trade in knowledge and physical remains, freighted with the various aims of its diverse participants, has developed through two historically intertwined ventures: state-sponsored casualty resolution efforts, and the much smaller, informal trafficking of skeletal remains, identification media, and information about American MIAs.<sup>3</sup> Regarding the former, scholars (Allen 2009; Martini 2007: 165–67; 193–198; Franklin 2013: 271) have demonstrated how the remains of fallen U.S. service members are often cast as “bargaining chips” in negotiations between the United States and Vietnamese governments. In the second, informal realm of remains

<sup>2</sup> See Michael Allen’s comprehensive analysis of this network’s complex dynamics (2009).

<sup>3</sup> In the context of the U.S. military, identification media may include identity documents, dog tags, and military-issue equipment.

trading, where presumed U.S. MIA remains are bought and sold in hopes of securing monetary rewards or “automatic entry into the United States” (Hawley 2005: 99), the stakes appear to be lower, but the symbolic worth of American bones operates in a similar manner. In each instance, as quintessential commodities in Marx’s broadest definition, the bones promise to satisfy a particular human want. To do so, however, they have to manifest authenticity. That is, like relics, their “agency [does] not depend on their authenticity, but the perception that they [are] authentic” (Wharton 2006: 11).

In the end, regardless of how they are procured or what is known or verifiable about their provenance, recovered remains arrive at the same destination, the Central Identification Laboratory of the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC), headquartered at the Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam in Hawai‘i. There they enter yet another value regime as forensic staff probe them for osteological and molecular clues of individual identity. State authority is demonstrated through scientific means when the symbolic worth of the specific missing service member is re-engaged, his individual identity is restored, and individuated commemoration is made possible (Wagner 2013: 645–49).

#### AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ENTRY INTO MIA RECOVERY

Against the backdrop of the MIA issue’s thorny history within and beyond the United States, my analysis of remains recovery and identification and the accompanying system of exchange centers on a specific event: a U.S.-led recovery mission to central Vietnam in the early summer of 2012. Following three years of ethnographic and archival research on the U.S. government’s MIA accounting efforts, including six months as a visiting scientist at the Central Identification Laboratory at JPAC, I was granted permission from the lab to participate in a recovery mission in Southeast Asia. For twenty-eight days I worked alongside twelve other American personnel from JPAC and some fifty Vietnamese laborers on an excavation to locate and repatriate the remains of five American service members who died when their CH-46 helicopter crash-landed on the side of a mountain in 1967. At this same time seven other U.S.-led teams were carrying out excavations and investigations at different sites across Vietnam.

The month coincided with a spike in U.S. political grandstanding and advocacy related to the missions, testament to the mercurial cachet of the MIA issue in U.S. foreign and domestic policy. I begin my discussion with a press conference that occurred during the mission, which broadcast the geopolitical stakes surrounding the recovery of U.S. war dead in the region and specifically Vietnam. By no means singular, the event is part of the decades-old, evolving discourse of U.S. Vietnam-era recovery and repatriation efforts and the Department of Defense’s expanding forensic scientific infrastructure and expertise. It underscores the explicit frame of reciprocity that structures state-level

negotiations around the MIA issue at the same time that it showcases the evolving politics of repatriation.

The first half of the article examines the linkage between past and present militaries, and contextualizes the informal practice of remains trading and contemporary casualty resolution efforts such as the 2012 mission, by placing them within the broader history of U.S. MIA recovery, repatriation, identification, and burial. The article's second half considers the quotidian practice of the recovery mission to expose the layers of economic and social exchange that occur alongside the wider political designs of the U.S. and Vietnamese governments. These layers complicate any commodity-exchange interpretation of recovery and repatriation efforts, and reveal how bones are also powerful in their capacity to create social ties of reciprocity, albeit temporary and asymmetrical ones, through common efforts to recover them. I conclude by returning to the theme of authentication and the symbolic worth of U.S. war dead, looking at how scientific knowledge re-enters the system of exchange around MIA recovery and identification when remains are transferred from Vietnamese to U.S. state authority and repatriation begins.

#### CONTEXTUALIZING VIETNAM-ERA MIA EFFORTS

The joint press briefing in Hanoi on 4 June 2012 tackled several issues, among them, predictably, the war's Missing In Action. Addressing his Vietnamese counterpart, U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta uttered a series of "thank-yous," all tied to the so-called shared project of recovering war dead. These were a general expression of appreciation for the Vietnamese government's "long-standing assistance" in identifying and locating remains of "our fallen service members and those missing in action in Vietnam." He also gave a specific nod of gratitude for Vietnam having granting access to three "new areas for remains recovery" (previously off-limits), and made a final, more unusual gesture of thanks, "for the letters that he will be giving me," for which Panetta would reciprocate with a comparable wartime "trophy" the following day. He wrapped up his acknowledgments by emphasizing progress made and deepening ties: "Our commitment to [accounting efforts for] both sides that were involved in the war, I think, is critical to our personnel serving today, to make clear that we stand by our pledge to leave no one behind. Our continued progress in this area, as well as other legacies of war, reflects, I think, without question the growing maturity of our relationship between the United States and Vietnam."<sup>4</sup>

The June 2012 visit to Vietnam had proven a busy one for Panetta. The day before the press briefing, he became the first Secretary of Defense since

<sup>4</sup> See the U.S. Department of Defense, News Transcript, "Joint Press Briefing with Secretary Panetta and Vietnamese Minister of Defense Gen. Phung Quang Thanh from Hanoi, Vietnam," at: <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=5052> (accessed 16 Sept. 2014).

the war's end to visit the Cam Ranh Bay deep-water port in southern Vietnam. Cam Ranh Bay was no mere sentimental stop on a diplomatic tour of a former enemy state; Panetta's courting of renewed access to the U.S. wartime logistics hub and military base signaled a new era, not only in U.S.-Vietnamese defense relations but also in shifting U.S. security designs in the Asia-Pacific region, the much-heralded "pivot" to Asia.<sup>5</sup> Nor was Cam Ranh Bay a side issue for the Vietnamese Defense Minister, General Phung Quang Thanh: the port's complex history of wartime and postwar reciprocity extended well beyond the United States, and was closely tied to Soviet and Chinese interests.<sup>6</sup> The Vietnamese were inviting increased commercial activity at a time when a stepped-up U.S. naval presence might offset China's increasing military assertiveness and expanding energy exploration in the South China Sea,<sup>7</sup> although they also did so as part of an effort to diversify their own multilateral relations and, by extension, obligations of reciprocity.<sup>8</sup>

The two top-ranking defense officials peppered their statements with references to deepening bilateral ties and common interests, to "mutual" concerns, benefits, and trust, alongside "shared" values, commitment, and objectives,<sup>9</sup> and it was within this context that they also referred to an exchange of symbolic worth: *Do ut des*, letters for a diary. The next day the Vietnamese government returned to its former foe three sets of letters from U.S. service members, among them four written by a soldier killed in action in 1969, which had recently surfaced in the Vietnamese media. In return, Secretary Panetta would deliver a diary that a Marine had removed from a dead Vietnamese soldier and taken home to the United States.<sup>10</sup> These "war trophies" accentuated another diplomatic issue at hand: on the occasion of Panetta's visit, the Vietnamese

<sup>5</sup> Three days earlier, on 1 June 2012, Secretary Panetta had announced at a meeting in Singapore with defense officials from twenty-eight Asia-Pacific countries that the United States would recalibrate its strategic defense presence in the Pacific, dedicating 60 percent of its naval forces to the Pacific and 40 percent to the Atlantic, up from the previous 50–50 split. See Wan (2012); and Clinton (2011).

<sup>6</sup> In 1979, the Vietnamese government granted the Soviet Union access to the port through a twenty-five-year lease. In addition to shipping, the Soviets used Cam Ranh Bay to eavesdrop on the People's Republic of China. This was one of several means for the Vietnamese government to repay its foreign debts to the Soviet Union.

<sup>7</sup> As a commercial port that could allow U.S. naval vessels to dock for repairs and supplies, Cam Ranh Bay represents an appealing point of access to the South China Sea, itself a site of recent tension between Vietnam and China. On the contested control of the South China Sea, see Rosenberg (2010); and Perlez (2012).

<sup>8</sup> In the press briefing, Minister Thanh explained: "This is the foreign policy of independence and sovereignty, and we do not depend on any country. And this is also the foreign policy of representation and multilateralization of our relations with all other countries." U.S. Department of Defense, "Joint Press Briefing."

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* In the press briefing the two officials affirmed their commitment to a 2011 defense-related memorandum of understanding.

<sup>10</sup> The diary came to light when the Marine sought help in returning it to the deceased soldier's family, and eventually the story was covered on the U.S. Public Broadcasting System program *History Detectives* (Baldor and Jordan 2012).

government was lifting restrictions on access to three search and recovery sites where the remains of missing U.S. service members might be located.<sup>11</sup>

That the U.S. government unfurled a tactic of its pivoting, twenty-first century defense policy alongside ongoing negotiations to recover and commemorate its war dead demonstrated the vital thread connecting national loss and gain. Panetta spelled this out. Accounting for the Vietnam-era missing, and specifically opening up the three new sites for search and recovery were “critical to our personnel serving today, to make clear that we stand by our pledge to leave no one behind.” In acknowledging the bloody past and extolling normalizing relations, Panetta chose to assert U.S.-Vietnamese “shared” aspirations for future prosperity and stability through the idiom of the past conflict’s human toll: “There were many lives lost in that war, both from the United States and from Vietnam. If we can work together, both of our countries, to develop a better relationship between the United States and Vietnam, all of the sacrifice involved in that war will have proven worthwhile because we will improve the peace and prosperity of the Asia-Pacific region.”<sup>12</sup> In one broad stroke, he stripped “sacrifice” and “loss” of their specificity and eschewed altogether the problematic of commensurability,<sup>13</sup> flattening it instead in favor of future mutual gain. Despite the highly focused efforts to recover American bones that underwrote Panetta’s visit, the endeavor, as he cast it, was communal and its burden shared.

### *War’s Symbolic Dead and a Shifting Social Contract*

Why are these bones so powerful and so coveted? We know well that war dead can both polarize and unite (Mosse 1990; Winter 1998; Sant Cassia 2005; Kwon 2008; Wagner 2008; Ferrándiz 2013), sometimes surprising us in their simultaneously transgressive and sacred worth (Barbian, Sledzik, and Reznick 2012). In her analysis of dead bodies in postsocialist politics, Katherine Verdery explains, “Remains are concrete yet protean”; “what gives a dead body symbolic effectiveness in politics is precisely its ambiguity, its capacity to evoke a variety of understandings” (1999: 28, 29). War dead occupy an especially ambiguous position as their unnamed remains become forceful emblems of the state (Anderson 2006 [1983]), barometers of changing political winds, and repositories of national memory.

Since the American Civil War, caring for the remains of fallen U.S. service members has been the responsibility of the state (Neff 2005; Faust 2008; Budreau 2010), and the U.S. government has expended significant resources

<sup>11</sup> Regarding war trophies from Vietnam, see, for example, Sledzik and Ousley (1991) on six Vietnamese skulls confiscated from U.S. service members in the early 1970s.

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, “Joint Press Briefing.”

<sup>13</sup> On the vastly disproportionate statistics of death and destruction, Edwin Martini argues, “A comparison or equivalency with the United States is not even possible” (2007: 40).

to recover and identify war dead lost on foreign soil. The techno-scientific, operational, and analytical capacities to do so have grown in direct response to the Vietnam War and its era of embittered protest and deep distrust. During and after that war, opacity characterized the U.S. Department of Army's approach to the Prisoner of War (POW)/Missing In Action (MIA) accounting efforts (Allen 2009; 2011). In recent years, the Department of Defense's mandate for "the fullest possible accounting" has stretched the arc of investigation and repatriation efforts beyond just Vietnam to include World War II, the Korean War, and the Cold War. The scientific facilities and expertise dedicated to MIA accounting reflect the government's level of investment: the nerve center of its recovery and identification efforts, JPAC's Central Identification Laboratory, is the largest forensic anthropology facility of its kind in the world, with over sixty forensic anthropologists, archaeologists, odontologists, and historians on staff. In 2003, it became the first forensic anthropology laboratory to be accredited by the American Society of Crime Laboratory Directors-Laboratory Accreditation Board. The Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory, which works closely with JPAC to identify unnamed remains of American service members, has developed extraction and analysis procedures that have led advances in forensic genetics within the field of mass fatality identification, from Disaster Victim Identification to post-conflict missing persons. In sum, compared to other states, the U.S. government forensic scientific resources cultivated to recover, repatriate, and identify its missing war dead are unique.<sup>14</sup> Despite its significant costs, the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command's mission remains one of the few defense expenditures that since its inception has consistently garnered bipartisan support from both Democratic and Republican administrations and Congresses.<sup>15</sup>

But war dead are more than just protean symbols at the state's disposal, since a powerful obligation curbs their malleability. The symbolic worth of war dead is rooted in the implied social contract between the U.S. government and surviving relatives, the military (veterans and current servicemen and women), and the general public. A military death is cast as the ultimate sacrifice an individual can make on behalf of his or her country, and the social contract between the state and its subject derives from the promise to care for the *individual* killed in battle. Caring is multifold: having sent the individual to die doing its will, the state is responsible for locating, naming, and burying his

<sup>14</sup> Though other countries such as Portugal, Australia, South Korea, and Israel also seek to recover and repatriate missing service members, and some expend considerable resources to do so, my emphasis here is on the U.S. government's forensic scientific resources, infrastructure, and expertise.

<sup>15</sup> Costs associated with recovery and identification efforts have varied significantly across cases and conflicts (e.g., exhumations of Korean War unknowns versus recovery operations in Southeast Asia).

or her remains, and with its scientific, legal, and military institutions the state levies its authority and resources to carry out that obligation of care.

If we look at the history of U.S. military engagement over the last century, we find the terms of this social contract have changed over time. As the country has expanded its global power, imperialist in its aims but decidedly anti-colonialist in its operations (Ho 2004), its military and forensic practices have evolved, especially regarding repatriation. While repatriation efforts date back to the Spanish-American War, when U.S. soldiers' remains were sent back from Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines (Budreau 2010: 25, 27–36), the notion that the state was *obliged* to repatriate remains of service members who died on foreign soil developed gradually in response to the wars of the twentieth century.<sup>16</sup>

A conflict the U.S. belatedly joined, World War I made explicit the terms of the social contract between the government and grieving families. Surviving relatives were given the choice of leaving their fallen kin interred overseas in a national cemetery or having the remains returned to them for burial at home. Some families of the estimated one hundred thousand American war dead decided against bringing the coffins home, including Theodore Roosevelt, who insisted that his son Quentin “lie where he fell and where the Germans buried him” (Trout 2010: 227). But the Great War pledged nevertheless “triggered a massive and highly controversial repatriation of war dead from the battlefields of Europe to the United States between 1919 and 1922,” a “colossal task” that “set an enduring national precedent for generations” (Budreau 2010: 21).

World War II policies followed suit, with surviving relatives again given ultimate authority over the disposition of loved ones' remains, and an estimated 70 percent of families chose to have them repatriated. For war dead whose remains would lay in rest overseas as well as the thousands of unknown (unidentified) service members, permanent national cemeteries were established in fourteen locations, ten of them in Europe.<sup>17</sup> Historian Kurt Piehler argues,

There is no solid evidence to suggest that the decision not to maintain permanent cemeteries in Asia or other regions of the Third World was motivated by racism.... Nonetheless, government reluctance ... mirrored the ambivalence many Americans felt toward these regions. Most felt the United States had little in common, culturally or politically, with most African or Asian peoples or nations (1995: 132).

<sup>16</sup> Historian John Neff explores the notion of burial in a “foreign” or “strange land” in the context of the American Civil War, where Southern commemorative practices followed the “dictates of a separate mythos predicated on difference and distinctiveness.” This was exemplified by the decision to disinter the remains of Confederate Soldiers at Gettysburg and ship them home to the South, where they would “no longer lay neglected in Northern soil” (2005: 143, 157).

<sup>17</sup> The four non-European permanent national cemeteries were located in the Philippines, the U.S. territories of Hawai'i and Alaska, and Tunisia.



The Korean War signaled important changes not only in the practice of remains repatriation but also in the ideological thrust underwriting care for war dead, shifts that mirrored the United States' expanding role as a global power. Although that war was waged under the aegis of the United Nations, the United States led the fight and paid its price in war dead. It adopted the practice of "concurrent return" (Allen 2009: 129; Cole 1994: 55–56)—repatriating remains while the war was still being waged. This abrupt departure from procedures during the previous world wars reflected uncertainties about the war's outcome and "whether future access to a U.S. military cemetery in the Republic of Korea could be guaranteed" (Piehler 1995: 155). A temporary mortuary facility was set up in Kokura, Japan, where the American Graves Registration Services sought to identify and process remains for return to the United States. At the war's end, the United Nations negotiated the exchange of war dead, an enormous undertaking dubbed "Operation Glory." The Kokura lab and the postwar exchange together evinced deep-seated anxieties over foreign and specifically Asian enemy control of U.S. remains. These concerns were also ideological in nature: many Americans conceived of the enemy as communist and atheist and therefore more likely to desecrate the sacred remains of U.S. fallen. "Americans had always been reluctant to bury their war dead in Asia, and after 1950 they would never willingly do so again" (Allen 2009: 129).

Although recovery efforts and forensic practice had changed substantially with the Korean War (Cole 1994: 62–74), the horror of the Vietnam War—broadcast on the nightly news with its high casualties, contentious politics, and protracted duration—injecting new urgency into the slogan "no man left behind." In concrete terms, heightened repatriation efforts reflected improved logistical capacities to recover remains. One need only recall the hyperbolic, unsettling scene in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* of the Air Cavalry, with its fleet of helicopters strafing the beach village to the strains of Wagner's Ride of the Valkyries, to grasp the United States' expanding reliance on air power not only to deliver violence but also to insert and extract soldiers, living and dead. Evolving medical expertise and the positioning of triage facilities closer to the front lines, as well as improved forensic technology, meant that otherwise unrecognizable sets of remains, if found and repatriated, were more likely to be identified.

The pledge to repatriate U.S. war dead from Vietnam was also distinctly grounded in the politics of the time, from the domestic turmoil of the late 1960s to the war's turning tides signaled by the Tet Offensive in 1968. "Leave no one behind" cut to the core of a strained social contract. Unlike the world wars, in which the United States reluctantly entered the fray late, Vietnam was a war of choice, part of its imperialist expansion that pushed the ideals of republicanism alongside an agenda of "investment on a global scale" (Ho 2004: 227). The U.S. government sent its men and women to

die for its cause in a culturally and geographically distant land, and it was obliged to return them. Thus, backed by members within the forceful MIA lobby, whose “contempt for antiwar activists, government bureaucrats and for the Vietnamese was unmistakable,” the highly politicized issue of Vietnam’s POW/MIAs raised the mission of recovery, repatriation, and identification to a new level, that of “fullest possible accounting” (Allen 2009: 7; 137–78).

### *War Tolls and Their Reckoning*

As an act of exchange capable of generating significant social and political capital both at home and abroad, remains recovery also emerged from the robust field of wartime and postwar economic enterprise. This comes as no surprise. From arms and minerals to cigarettes and sex, wars fuel and destroy economies in their explicit and illicit exchange of goods. Realist logic insists that nations—whether sovereign states or “coalitions of the willing”—wage war to protect or seize resources. Yet such explanations overlook the messy conditions and appetites that not only drive but also result from war. In the wake of initial incursions, markets arise to slake wartime thirsts, channeling the flow of wealth to centers of power along well-worn routes of inequity. Anthropologists have probed the relation between wars fought for resources and the unintended though often predictable modes and sites of transaction that follow, mapping violence and its reverberations across time and space (e.g., Malkki 1995; Gusterson 1996; Lutz 2001; Nordstrom 2004; Mantz 2008).

The Vietnam War was no exception. Complicated, protracted, it ravaged land and destroyed communities, families, and lives. Some 15 million tons of bombs were dropped over Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, and the United States and its South Vietnamese allies spread 73 million liters of chemical agents there, 62 percent of it Agent Orange, whose full impact, particularly with its deadly dioxin, is still unknown today (Martini 2012: 2–3). In Vietnam alone, an estimated three million people were killed between 1954 and 1975, while 58,282 U.S. forces are listed as Killed in Action or non-combat deaths.<sup>18</sup> An additional 1,652 U.S. service members are still missing.<sup>19</sup> An estimated three hundred thousand Vietnamese remain missing, though the true figure is unclear since postwar tabulations have raised thorny issues of which

<sup>18</sup> According to Vietnamese government estimates, “In April 1995, the Ministry of Labor, War Invalids, and Social Affairs released an estimate of 1.1 million communist military deaths and almost two million civilian deaths due to war-related causes from 1954 to 1975” (Hirschman, Preston, and Vu Manh Loi 1995: 791).

<sup>19</sup> Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office, “Vietnam-Era Statistical Report,” 28 Feb. 2013. Updated reports are available on this Office’s webpage: <http://www.dtic.mil/dpmo/vietnam/statistics/>.

lives—patriots or enemies/traitors—merit counting and commemoration (Kwon 2008: 48–49; Malarney 2001).<sup>20</sup>

Just as the war's tolls defy easy summary, postwar reckoning has its own tangled history, as the American public recalls the "Vietnam War" and the Vietnamese make sense of "The War of National Salvation against the Americans" (Chiến Tranh Chống Mỹ Cứu Nước), or simply the "American War." Sites of memory and mourning (Winter 1998) have garnered particular attention: the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on the Mall in Washington, D.C. (Hagopian 2009; Sturken 1991; 1997; Tatum 1996; 2004; Berdahl 1994) and the Vietnam crypt at the Tomb of the Unknowns in Arlington National Cemetery (Allen 2011; Wagner 2013) are known for their emotive force, and in Vietnam memorials to fallen heroes, military campaigns, and sites of atrocity likewise shape national imaginaries and collective memory (Kwon 2006; 2008; Schwenkel 2009a; Malarney 2001; Tatum 1996). In seeking to understand the war and its legacy, scholars have also focused on the circulation of war images and art (Schwenkel 2008; Hagopian 2009; Rowe and Berg 1991; Tai 2001), film (Dittmar and Michaud 1990; Bradley 2001; Martini 2007: 46–76, 121–61), and culturally freighted artifacts and war relics bought and sold in local markets (Walters 1997; 1999; Alneng 2002; Schwenkel 2009a: 82–88; Corey 2010; Lair 2011; Curtis 2011), and their intersection with Vietnam's expanding tourist industry (Kennedy and Williams 2001; Curtis 2003).

Discursively, the POW/MIA issue is inseparable from the politics of postwar reconstruction and the "normalization process" (Allen 2009; Schwenkel 2009b; Mather 1994), but it is the phenomena of wartime and postwar human remains trafficking and state-led remains recovery that illustrate most vividly the powerful symbolism of war dead whose remains circulate among enemies, allies, strangers, and intimates. The movement and exchange of both real and counterfeit MIA bones, like the "souvenirs of death" such as the Zippo lighters and dog tags sold at local markets (Schwenkel 2009a: 87–88), tell a striking tale about how that symbolic worth alters with changing contexts, and about who capitalizes on the possibilities created by the shifts in value.

### *Remains Trading*

In his study of U.S. efforts to account for American MIAs in Southeast Asia, *The Remains of War*, Thomas Hawley grounds his analysis in the materiality of the unaccounted-for body, including in its extreme fragmentation. For Hawley, these bodies and their fragments are the "effects of the various practices that enable them to assume intelligible meaning" and the "results of

<sup>20</sup> Schwenkel notes that during postwar negotiations, "Vietnamese preoccupations with locating the remains of an estimated three hundred thousand of their own MIAs (on the side of the revolution) remained largely unacknowledged in these discussions, as a concern for 1,500 U.S. bodies trumped one-third million Vietnamese" (2009b: 34).

particular ways of representing the post-Vietnam-war era” (2005: 5). While I share Hawley’s focus on modes of materializing meaning, and especially on the discourse of certainty, I understand the remains of U.S. war dead in Vietnam not merely as objects acted upon and rendered intelligible, but as *generative* sources imbued with specific though mutable social worth. Different people’s understandings and engagements with these remains, the significance they attach to them, generate social action and in turn produce both new meanings and new social relations, including bonds of reciprocity and new configurations of power.

The capacity of these particular human remains to generate meaning and obligate reciprocity stems from their potent, though ambiguous, symbolic value. Once again, relics prove an instructive model: “A relic is a sign of previous power, real or imagined. It promises to put that power back to work” (Wharton 2006: 9). The *reliquiae* of medieval Christianity “[reach] out to the supplicants, the supplicants infuse the relics with their hopes” (Freeman 2011: 14). Despite decrees prohibiting their sale, medieval relics were “bought and sold, stolen and traded” precisely because of their sacred worth (ibid.: 255, 267), and their authenticity had to be demonstrated either by external evidence or “miraculous intervention” (Greary 1986: 177–78). In a similar manner, Vietnamese bone merchants who acquired and sold human remains drew on hopes, on the imagined power of the deceased’s memory and the symbolic meanings of America’s war dead.<sup>21</sup> The imagined power is latent and indirect: the buyers were purchasing an object they imagined to be powerful, meaningful, not to themselves per se but to American officials seeking to recover their “fallen.” The merchants were trading on that very abstraction of power, and in doing so they exploited the uncertainty surrounding the bones, mimicking authenticity when necessary.

To the trained eye, trafficked remains are often patently inauthentic: taphonomic<sup>22</sup> signatures indicate long-term, above-ground storage; bones have been cut, sawed, drilled, or snapped into smaller pieces; remains written or painted on (Mann et al. 1998: 81). They have not rested easily, these bones, having served mundane ends as objects of curation, storage, proliferation, and, above all, material worth. Nor are they always what they seem, or what people hope they will be seen as. Sometimes alterations reveal a more disturbing side of the trade, as forensic anthropologists Tom Holland, Bruce Anderson, and Robert Mann explain through the example of remains purportedly belonging to U.S. servicemen that were smuggled out of Vietnam by refugees:

Of particular interest were four femurs (two right and two left), each measuring somewhere in the vicinity of 45+ cm (the distal ends were damaged or missing so no accurate

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Bank 1990; and Branigin 1991.

<sup>22</sup> In forensic anthropology, taphonomy is the study of the factors affecting the preservation, condition, and recovery of skeletal remains.

measurement could be obtained) ... [thus] somewhat longer than the average Vietnamese, Laotian, or Cambodian femur commonly encountered at CILHI [Central Identification Laboratory, Hawai'i]. Closer examination ... revealed that the femurs had in fact been altered. In fact, eight femoral shafts had been cut transversely—four approximately two-thirds down the shaft and four approximately three fourths down the shaft—and then reconstructed into four “longer” femurs. The new femurs were held together by the insertion of a metal re-bar into the medullary cavity, and a mortar “disk” measuring about 1 cm in thickness was used to secure the metal rod and to “caulk” the joint. The femurs were then covered with a reddish clay slip to camouflage the joint. The result was four longer femurs that apparently were more “Western” in appearance (1997: 267).<sup>23</sup>

This fabrication further illuminates the logics of remains trading. To begin with, Vietnamese bone merchants went to great lengths to counterfeit seemingly “Western” remains. Indeed, however clumsy the craftsmanship, the traffickers were responding to a demand and tailoring their goods for a specific consumer; they had a rudimentary grasp of human osteology and altered the bones to mimic the perceived difference in physical stature of “Western” populations. Many of the remains trafficked turned out to be those of Southeast Asians, and some were even animal bones. The re-bar-rigged femurs speak to a trade that sought to exploit ignorance and hope in the pursuit of profit as the bone merchants recognized and put to use American sensibilities and official policy regarding its war dead.

The enterprise had learned from past transactions and evolving U.S. practice. The “cottage industry”<sup>24</sup> of remains trading had its roots in the French Indochina War, during which the French military actively sought to repatriate remains of fallen army and legionnaire troops and the Vietnamese cooperated in return for “economic considerations.”<sup>25</sup> It expanded in response to the U.S. military’s efforts, though inconsistent and at times derelict, to extract its wounded and to recover its fallen (Holland, Anderson, and Mann 1997: 265–66). To repatriate war dead from Southeast Asia, the U.S. military had first to recover remains and often this was operationally impossible. Because air crashes and ground losses frequently occurred in hostile territory not controlled by United States and its allied Army of the Republic of Vietnam forces, many casualties were categorized Killed in Action, Body Not Recovered. In those circumstances the remains often served as objects of care and

<sup>23</sup> See also Hawley 2005: 256 n. 6.

<sup>24</sup> This same term, “cottage industry,” appears in the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs final report, referring not just to remains trafficking but the larger postwar enterprise, “specializing in the creation and dissemination of false POW/MIA information and ‘POW/MIA hunting’” (quoted in Allen 2009: 227).

<sup>25</sup> According to H. Bruce Franklin, the argument that the Vietnamese “ransomed” French bodies overlooks that war with the United States had already begun, forcing the French to bury their dead in Vietnam because of “the difficulty in transporting the remains” (1992: 27). France’s forces included troops from French colonies (e.g., Algerian, Tunisian, Moroccan), and decisions to repatriate remains likely reflected racialized hierarchies of national belonging.

control for either enemy forces or local populations, some of whom became involved in the broader wartime and postwar economic activity of scavenging.

While some Vietnamese gave the remains ritual care, including burial, others saw bones, dog tags, identification media, and knowledge about U.S. casualties as a potential means for profit and mobility. A market arose in direct response to the U.S. military's own bureaucratically managed logic of care (Allen 2009: 227). While there are no concrete numbers to establish how widespread remains trading became within Vietnam, Department of Defense reports indicate that the illegal trade related primarily to losses in southern Vietnam and that the Vietnamese central government took control of the majority of trafficked remains during the 1980s. According to the June 1999 report of the Defense Prisoner of War/Missing Personnel Office, several "private" warehouses of trafficked remains were alleged to have held hundreds of U.S. remains, but "only a very few turned out to be American."<sup>26</sup>

The remains trade relates directly to U.S. policy at the end of the war. With the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in 1973, the U.S. government began actively soliciting information about its missing service members and issued reward guidelines that specified monetary sums or equivalent material goods that would be paid in return for direct and second-hand information about MIAs, as well as crash sites and grave sites. The program was publicized through print media (posters, leaflets, pocket and wall calendars) and radio broadcasts, and undercut the explicitly "humanitarian" intent behind Article 8b of the Paris Accords, which addressed the resolution of the fate of unaccounted-for service members (Mather 1994: 16–20; Allen 2009: 87–91). Even more problematic was that it contradicted the U.S. government's insistence that it did not pay for human remains.

As war disperses people, it also disperses knowledge. Department of Defense campaigns to solicit information and recover remains therefore were not confined to Vietnam's postwar domestic populace. They also targeted those fleeing the country at war's end. U.S. officials, intelligence analysts included, understood that the remains trade offered hope to the tens of thousands of refugees who sought shelter beyond Vietnam.<sup>27</sup> But, as in most war-torn societies, hope can make easy prey by exposing the vulnerable and exacerbating suffering. Like merchants of trafficked bodies (Scheper-Hughes

<sup>26</sup> See page 27 of the report, "Vietnam's Collection and Repatriation Report" at: [http://www.dtic.mil/dpmo/vietnam/documents/vietnam\\_collection\\_study.pdf](http://www.dtic.mil/dpmo/vietnam/documents/vietnam_collection_study.pdf) (accessed 14 Oct. 2014). In 1990, Vietnamese authorities discovered two rings of remains traders with a cache of 1,200 skeletal remains between them; see Branigin 1991; and the related report, "U.S. Team to Check Mystery Skeletons," *Los Angeles Times*, 16 June 1990. [http://articles.latimes.com/1990-06-16/news/mn-105\\_1\\_malaysia](http://articles.latimes.com/1990-06-16/news/mn-105_1_malaysia) (accessed 14 Oct. 2014).

<sup>27</sup> In the two decades that followed the communist victories in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia in 1975, three million refugees fled their homelands. By 1978, nearly sixty-two thousand so-called boat people (refugees who fled by boat to neighboring states) were living in camps throughout Southeast Asia (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2000: 79; 82; Knudsen 1983).

and Wacquant 2005) and trafficked and “transferred” organs (Scheper-Hughes 2005; Sharp 2007), traders of human skeletal remains capitalized on rumors of monetary gain, and mobility in the form of visas to resettle in the United States. Their promises were not entirely unfounded, since campaigns were launched in these countries similar to those carried out in Vietnam. Throughout Southeast Asia’s early postwar refugee camps, appeals for information appeared on posters and were broadcast via loudspeakers. U.S. officials called on camp residents to come forward with information about Americans living freely or in captivity, burial sites, and aircraft crash sites that might have remains, and began a concerted program to interview those claiming to have such information.

Knowledge of this kind quickly became an object of exchange, which, like remains, had to manifest authenticity. “Firsthand accounts have generally been more detailed than hearsay information, particularly as the hearsay is passed through more and more ‘tellers’” (Mather 1994: 78). Such hearsay, proffered as second- and third-hand information, frequently employed the same formulaic narratives, with precision in detail giving way to patterned explanations about how crash sites were located or remains acquired.

Just as analysts discerned patterns in the circulating stories (Allen 2009: 228–29), U.S. investigators and forensic anthropologists working on casualty resolution since the late 1970s have grown familiar with remains traders’ tactics and with the stories that often accompany peddled remains. In addition to selling bones of uncertain provenance and passing off Southeast Asian skeletal remains as “Western,” bone merchants increased their trade by parsing out their “store”: they would snap off or cut out small pieces from a larger bone and then sell the un-diagnostic fragment along with paper rubbings of a U.S. dog tag (Holland, Anderson, and Mann 1997: 268). In this way, a single bone was parceled out to multiple buyers, bringing greater profit.<sup>28</sup> Remains traders understood the need to authenticate their product and drew on the corollary market of circulating identification media and knowledge of reported MIAs. Dog tag rubbings further fueled the exchange by linking American names with generic bone fragments. Value shifted accordingly: transmogrified through their movement from one value regime to the next, the bones became means for economic gain or passage to a new land.

If the majority of remains acquired by the United States through remains trading were of Southeast Asian origin, turnovers through official Vietnamese channels proved more reliable. Unilateral turnovers often occurred in conjunction with other diplomatic activity and negotiations related to reconstruction aid, and eventually normalization. They were part of a complex melding of

<sup>28</sup> Here again, relics provide an apt corollary, as Annabel Jane Wharton describes in the example of the True Cross made in Jerusalem: “It was readily divisible; its particles were as effective as the whole” (2006: 19).



motives, practice, policy, and performance that has characterized the overall casualty resolution process from the immediate postwar years to the present day. Despite the notion that Article 8b was humanitarian in principle, its implementation has been highly politicized by both parties. The POW/MIA issue allowed the U.S. government to “stall diplomatic and economic normalization and to deny reconstruction aid” (Schwenkel 2009b: 34). That the Vietnamese engaged in their own delaying tactics gradually became clear with the conditions of remains turned over to the United States and the timing of the transfers.<sup>29</sup> Some of the skeletal material showed taphonomic signs that indicated long-term, aboveground storage, suggesting to the forensic personnel examining them that the Vietnamese government may have been “warehousing” them for several years.<sup>30</sup> Department of Defense reports intimate that the Vietnamese may have held an estimated three hundred sets of U.S. remains between the late 1960s to the mid-1990s.<sup>31</sup>

However delayed, unilateral returns served as “leverage” in postwar negotiations. Beginning with the Reagan and Bush administrations and intensifying with President Clinton’s overtures in the mid-1990s, “These patterns [of remains repatriation and U.S.-Vietnam cooperation] hardened over the next decade as annual crash-site excavations and the regular return of remains led first to a ‘Roadmap to U.S.-SRV Normalization’ in early 1991, the end of the trade embargo in 1994, normalization of relations in 1995, and a bilateral trade agreement in 2001” (Allen 2009: 253).

#### THE 2012 RECOVERY MISSION

I now turn to contemporary U.S.-led remains-recovery efforts to illustrate how bones of missing American service members spur new modes and sites of reciprocity, forging social ties at the same time as they elicit demonstrations of authenticity and authority from both U.S. and Vietnamese personnel.

The dynamics of this contemporary system of exchange come to the fore during the on-the-ground field activities of a “recovery mission,” when U.S. military teams travel to Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia) in search of MIA remains.<sup>32</sup> Though shot through with diplomatic posturing

<sup>29</sup> These tactics were also related to U.S. refusal to address the Agent Orange problem. On the use and effects of the deadly agent in Vietnam, see Martini (2012: 53–96; 203–10).

<sup>30</sup> U.S. forensic personnel learned of the Vietnamese government’s storage and curation practices from an exiled ethnic Chinese mortician who provided testimony before a congressional hearing in July 1980. He was flown to the Central Identification Laboratory in Hawai‘i to explain the taphonomic patterns stemming from their conservation methods, including periodically removing and drying molding bones over a charcoal fire (Holland, Anderson, and Mann 1997: 265; author interview with Dr. Thomas Holland, July 2012; on the congressional testimony see also Mather 1994: 84–87).

<sup>31</sup> Defense Prisoner of War/Missing Personnel Office, “Vietnam’s Collection and Repatriation Report,” 22–25.

<sup>32</sup> Reflecting its military structure, JPAC refers to the archaeological excavations undertaken by its personnel as “recovery missions.”



and ideological divides, the missions are nonetheless billed as humanitarian efforts, and after decades of wrangling, subterfuge, and pressure the U.S. and Vietnamese governments have settled into predictable patterns of negotiation and performance that structure the enterprise of recovering remains. Officials from the Viet Nam Office for Seeking Missing Personnel (VNOSMP or VNO for short)<sup>33</sup> accompany the U.S. contingents to the approved sites, hire local workers, and monitor progress. The U.S. teams have their supplies flown into remote locations via helicopters when necessary. They bring equipment from the permanent headquarters in Danang and other stores from the military base back in Hawai'i, and purchase additional material at local markets. When base camps are required, advance teams build rudimentary structures on land cleared by local workers and prepare for the excavations, which are usually thirty to forty-five days long.

The 2012 mission I took part in followed this same format of preparation and entry. It was an extensively researched crash incident with several "Joint Field Activities" already undertaken to locate the site and its associated remains. Yet, despite all the previous investigations and surveys, the site itself was hard to read and at times intensely disorienting. The space evinced the war's complicated history, including traces of a wartime economy in which every scrap of metal counted and the remains of missing soldiers were valued not only as enemy dead or lost sons, brothers, or husbands, but also as objects for potential monetary gain.

### *A Landscape of Loss and Recovery*

*June 1967:* Struck by anti-aircraft artillery, a helicopter carrying an eight-man reconnaissance team and four-man flight crew crashes into the side of the mountain. It bursts into flames, firing off rounds of ammunition in the chaotic descent. Seven men escape, another five die, including the pilot whose Herculean efforts at a controlled crash landing in a clearing amid the thick canopy saved the other crew members' and passengers' lives. The exploding munitions, the fire, the force of impact, all combine to strew human and material wreckage across the mountain slope.

*1967 Onward:* The clearing sits on a draw at the intersection of two steep slopes. Heavy rains and the natural force of erosion push the wreckage downward, along a central and two smaller washes that empty into a creek below. While gravity plays a hand over time in dispersing the wreckage farther and farther away from the initial site, not all the disturbance stems from the laws of motion. Much more has occurred at the hands of local villagers and itinerant scavengers who cut up and cart off the metal of the downed chopper. They themselves rely on gravity for help, using the slippery incline of the draw to

<sup>33</sup> The VNO was established by the Prime Minister's Office on 9 February 1973.

haul vast sections down off the mountain. Following the laws of war and its deprivations, they take what they can and put it to use in their houses and gardens, fields and farms.<sup>34</sup> More valuable scrap metal (ferrous and non-ferrous scrap such as aluminum and tin) can be sold on local and international markets. Locals recall that a crane was used in 1985 to remove what remained of the helicopter frame from the mountainside.

Helicopter wreckage was not the only object of interest on the steep slope. "The lucrative bone market of Southeast Asia, superimposed over an agrarian peasant economy, leads to predictable ends. Crash sites of U.S. aircraft have literally been mined for their rich yield of scrap metal, personal effects, and human remains" (Holland, Anderson, and Mann 1997: 270). Reports surfaced from nearby Hue and Ho Chi Minh City, as well as farther-flung refugee camps in Southeast Asia, with the names of four of the five MIAs. Communications from the American Consulate in Songkhla to the American Embassy in Bangkok in 1984 were later forwarded by the Joint Casualty Resolution Center liaison in Bangkok to the Center's commander in Hawai'i with information purportedly connected to the June 1967 crash and two of its missing personnel:

Subject: Refugees Provide Information on MIAs

[XXX] and [XXX] arrived in a boat load of eleven persons at Songkhla on January 18, after leaving Rach Gia. [XXX] is [XXX's] nephew and both are natives of Hue. According to them, it is not unknown in their part of Vietnam for people to search the jungles for downed American airplanes in order to salvage gold and aluminum. In November 1982 they claimed to have discovered two American skeletons in a plane wreck in Thanh Hoa Province near Quang Binh Province in a heavily forested region. They found rings, papers and personal documents on the skeletons which they transported in nylon bags to their home village of [X].... They claim the bodies are buried near their home and that the dog tags of the two bodies are in safe keeping there.

They also produced rubbings of two other dog tags:

XXX	XXX
#####	#####
USMC M	USMC S
Catholic	Baptist

These were discovered on the bodies of the two downed fliers deep in the forest of Nam Dong District, Binh Tri Thien Province. They were found by a man named Thiet who later buried the bodies at his home in [X].... The same man Thiet is in possession of the two original dog tags.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> While there were no visible examples of the CH-46 wreckage used on private property along the route traveled by JPAC and VNO teams to and from the excavation site, photographs of such practice can be found in JPAC archives. For example, the display case dedicated to Southeast Asian recovery efforts at the Central Identification Laboratory includes images of machetes cut from airplane propeller blades and sandals made of rubber tires.

<sup>35</sup> Communication of 30 Jan. 1982 from Joint Casualty Resolution Center (henceforth JCRC) Liaison Officer, Bangkok to JCRC Commander, Barbers Point, Hawai'i, J-2 Records Room, file XXX, Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command, Hawai'i.

Thiet's name appears in subsequent reports,<sup>36</sup> as do the names of four of the five MIAs. In an effort to document authenticity, dog tag rubbings associated with the crash proliferated and entered the stream of postwar bone trafficking:

Source was told by his brother-in-law ... that sometime in 1981 after his release from Thanh Hoa Re-education Camp, he was approached by friends (NFI) who claimed to have found the remains of eight Americans they discovered while searching for sandalwood. [The brother-in-law] asked Source that if he were to purchase the remains, would Source hold them for him. Source agreed. The friend of [the brother-in-law] brought one set for them to view and [the brother-in-law] agreed to purchase the eight sets for a price of 220,000 dong. Each set was accompanied by a pair of dog tags. [The brother-in-law] and Source both had the idea that if they could purchase the remains and smuggle them out of Vietnam, they might be able to exit Vietnam under the Orderly Departure Program much easier.<sup>37</sup>

The Orderly Departure Program was established through the May 1979 Memorandum of Understanding between the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and was intended to alleviate the refugee crisis in Southeast Asia created by the "boat people" who had fled the country in the immediate postwar years. For the U.S. government, it also facilitated family reunification, and provided a means to resettle individuals left behind in its 1975 withdrawal, including "former employees, inmates of re-education camps, and children fathered by American servicemen" (Kumin 2008: 105). Dog tag rubbings gained additional value with the advent of the program. Along with other identification media and second-hand stories of remains recovered in the jungle inland of Hue, they hint at the different forms of scavenging that took place at the crash site, as well as the different demands of the postwar market.

*May 2012:* We arrive, the thirteen-person recovery team from the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command, and set to work on the mountain with its dense canopy and harsh underbrush. We too both fight against and work with the laws of motion and force, following the meager traces of the aircraft crash that are still left on the steep slope. Like the helicopter, over the next twenty-eight days we crash through and tear up the vegetation, but we encompass a wider area in our search for debris and remains.

The first days are disorienting. The vegetation is thick and our initial surveys cannot find a key marker: the "datum" left by a previous U.S. field

<sup>36</sup> For example, the memorandum, "Refugee Report, 'Dog Tag' Information, Crash Sites and Remains Dealers in the Central Highlands," from Paul Mathers, JCRC Liaison Officer to JCRC Commander, Barbers Point, Hawai'i, 26 June 1984, J-2 Records Room, file XXX, Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command, Hawai'i.

<sup>37</sup> Memorandum, "Refugee Report, Two Sets of American Remains in HCMC and Six Buried in Hue," from Paul Mathers, JCRC Liaison Officer to JCRC Commander, December 1984, J-2 Records Room, file XXX, Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command, Hawai'i. In 1981, with an effective rate of 9.045 Vietnamese dong per U.S. dollar, 220,000 dong would have been the equivalent of U.S. \$24,322.

investigation team. The civilian anthropologist leading the excavation works with the EOD (explosive ordnance disposal) technician, a twenty-three-year-old who cut his teeth locating and disarming UXO (unexploded ordnance) in Afghanistan. Canvassing the swaths of land that local workers clear with deft strokes of their machetes, he sweeps his Excalibur II metal detector across the jungle floor. When its hum intensifies, he pulls out the more exacting tool, a hand-held detector that beeps and whines with its own insistent pitch at the presence of larger pieces of metal, most of which turns out to be “bomb frag.” Central Vietnam remains the region most affected by UXO contamination, a punishing legacy of U.S. bombing campaigns. According to the Vietnamese government, some 800,000 tons of ordnance remain (from the 15 million tons dropped by aircraft or surface delivered during the war), including “bombs, mines, missiles, artillery shells, mortar shells, and other UXO located at different depths.”<sup>38</sup>

On the second day, before the U.S. team moves into the base camp permanently, a corollary exchange takes place. Not two minutes into the walk on the logging road that leads to the dig site, one U.S. team member signals for everyone to head back to the main road. The EOD technician has spotted a munition: a 100-mm artillery round lying in the middle of the dirt track, which someone has carried in and purposefully placed along the route. As we file back toward the road to await the bomb disposal, nearby construction workers laugh knowingly, perhaps having seen who left the round earlier that morning. The munition hints at a subtext left mostly unexamined by the American team: some Vietnamese deeply resent the U.S. recovery efforts, with their minimal regard for Vietnamese MIAs, as well as, of course, the destruction wrought by U.S. bombing. If the source of the munition was unclear, the action demanded is obvious; the dangerous vestiges of war require care too, as much as, if not more than, the remains of American war dead.

The EOD tech will earn his keep this mission, and back on the slope he disposes of an additional three munitions. He and the anthropologist stick brightly colored pin flags in the soil for each “big hit” from the metal detector, and gradually a pattern of debris begins to emerge. The large field of subterranean traces is intimidating since the wreckage is so dispersed and there is no clear sign of where to begin digging.

A break-through eventually comes when a local man approaches the Vietnamese officials who have watched the U.S. team search up and down the draw (offering little assistance). While local and provincial representatives have been assigned to the mission, the majority of the VNO delegation is from Hanoi and

<sup>38</sup> See the Technology Centre for Bomb and Mine Disposal (BOMICEN) webpage dedicated to the “Contamination Situation”: <http://www.bomicen.vn/?lang=en&category=63>; and the Mine Advisory Group (MAG) report, “Why MAG Is Needed in Vietnam,” at: <http://archive.maginternational.org/vietnam/> (accessed 16 Sept. 2014).

has limited connection to the district, let alone the crash site itself. But the local “witness” (as I will call him, following the practice of early U.S. casualty resolution efforts) claims to know the crash location. He drops to his heels, squatting on the slope as he surveys the thick vegetation to his right and left. Here, he indicates, is where he saw the helicopter wreckage, bits and pieces of debris scattered across the forest floor. He had come across the site in 1995 and scavenged what he could from the already scant remnants.

The conversation between the Americans and Vietnamese proceeds haltingly. The JPAC anthropologist poses questions to gauge the witness’s intentions as much as the accuracy of his recollections. At issue is the authenticity of the information and the U.S. team’s capacity to judge that authenticity. The man nods his head nonchalantly as the interpreter relays the wary, compact questions.

Q: “What did he see? Ask him to describe exactly what he saw painted on the tree trunk.”

A: “A skull and crossed bones, spray-painted in pink, with an English word. It started with P and ended with E.”

The anthropologist shakes her head, “We wouldn’t have left that kind of mark.” The protocol of JPAC field investigations precludes the possibility of such signage, and the witness’s effort to demonstrate the authenticity of his knowledge falls short. But he possesses valuable information nonetheless. Soon after, the man, nonplussed, rises to his feet and collects his machete. Nodding at the Vietnamese officials standing nearby but brushing past the U.S. personnel, he takes his leave, heading down the rocky wash that leads back to the base camp and, beyond that, the main road. While the witness has lent support to the general location of the crash site, he has also openly acknowledged the ongoing practice of scavenging that stripped the area of evidence definitively correlating the incident with the site.

### *“Land Comp” and Other Exchanges*

By the time the main body of the recovery team arrives on site, the land that will serve as the base camp has already been cleared by the villagers and thus, apart from large trees, is emptied of the same thick vegetation that covers the crash site. The villagers had been hard at work, clearing and building, not only the base camp structures but also a 75-yard flight of steps up to the landing zone, itself utterly denuded of trees and ground cover.

The process of cutting and clearing is big business, encompassed in the two forms of monetary compensation the U.S. team will provide Vietnamese officials, either directly or as they negotiate on behalf of local land owners: “land comp” (payment for land clearing and use) and restoration (money to restore the land to its pre-excavation condition). In addition to land compensation, there is the intricate task of planning for and utilizing local labor. This mission would be typical in terms of labor, starting with a core group of approximately thirty workers and expanding to upwards of sixty when the excavation

begins in full force and villagers man bucket lines and help screen the dirt removed from the crash site. The workers are hired directly through the VNO. According to the terms negotiated, they are to receive approximately U.S.\$30 per day, but they actually pocket far less since the government takes its cut. Indirect channels of local redistribution are far more opaque, at least to the U.S. team, and follow complex networks at local, regional, and federal levels. Thus, although the explicit policy repeated at JPAC briefings is that the U.S. government does not pay for remains (Hawley 2005: 92), it does pay steeply to *access* those remains. Of its annual operating budget of some 48–50 million dollars,<sup>39</sup> 75 percent is allocated to its operations in Southeast Asia.

The geopolitics of the arrangement are unmistakable: the victors let the vanquished back in to collect their losses, but they control their every move, set the tone, and dictate the terms, including monetary ones—the land comp prices, the workers’ wages, the helicopter flight (“blade”) hours, and so on. In carrying out its investigative and recovery missions, the U.S. government seeks to drive its own hard bargains in purchasing local goods and services. When they enter and later exit the country, U.S. personnel stay at a newly built resort hotel in Danang, down the road from the wartime airbase with its concrete B-57 hangars tucked just beyond view from the posh grounds of the beachside resorts. With the promise of at least four missions annually of sixty to seventy members apiece, the U.S. government receives a steep discount for the deluxe accommodations, paying one-third the regular rate.

If the interactions among the official parties hew closely to prescribed roles while negotiating excavation logistics and operations, more spontaneous, personal exchanges take place between U.S. team members and local workers at the excavation itself, often out of sight of the VNO officials. After the first week of the dig, the noon break offers a chance for a different exchange. A few of the older Vietnamese workers invite the Americans to eat with them, and so begins a daily routine of gathering in tight circles, a small contingent of the U.S. team joining the villagers. The meals encourage conversation, and the two interpreters help navigate the early tentative exchanges. A few of the older workers speak of the past and of the war, and a former Army of the Republic of Vietnam medic seeks out the team’s medic to talk about their common work. The wiry old man, always first to the site in the morning and first to shoulder the heaviest loads up the mountainside, still remembers a few of the English phrases he learned during the war and tries them out each day with the medic.

<sup>39</sup> Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command, “Missions and Operations,” [http://www.jpac.pacom.mil/index.php?page=faq\\_opt&size=9](http://www.jpac.pacom.mil/index.php?page=faq_opt&size=9) (accessed 20 Mar. 2013; note this site has since been redone, and no longer contains budget information).

These exchanges lay the foundation for a series of gifts that take place at the end of the mission. Beyond the injection of resources into the local economy through this temporary market for labor, service, and goods, the excavation site provides the local villagers with a chance to make use of what the U.S. team discards or abandons. The downed helicopter, for all intents and purposes, is gone, with not a single substantial piece of wreckage left on the slope. Anything of value has long since been removed. And after the team leaves there will be a second round of dismantling and appropriating; the base camp's tarps and plywood will go to homes and businesses, as will any tools, food, clothing, and supplies left behind.

Surreptitiously, beyond the view of the VNO, U.S. team members assemble special "packages" of rice bags stuffed with goods to give to the villagers with whom they have labored most closely over the past month. To the most respected of the workers, a man whose tireless exertion outstripped everyone on the site, team members give their own prized possessions—assorted equipment, trowels, a utility knife, the microwave in need of repair. He will return later that day to present the team with a handwritten letter expressing his gratitude. In it, he addresses the two linguists, Mr. H and Mr. B: "I know we spend a lot of time together sharing stories and feelings.... We are sharing a little of our belonging and a lot of our heart as gifts. It is almost one o'clock now and I cannot sleep because I am still thinking. Because I cannot control my greed and accept your gifts for memories. That's why I write this letter to give to you tomorrow."

The man also brings a live chicken that he offers for their final meal at the base camp. Flabbergasted, the team leader hesitates: "What will we do with a chicken?" But others in urgent, hushed tones push him to receive the gift with the proper decorum. They understand that to refuse it, as Mauss explained, "is to reject the bond of alliance and commonality" (2000 [1990]: 13) forged by the past month's hours of intense, communal labor. The chicken spends the rest of the afternoon tied up in a bag under the kitchen hooch, until one team member, who beneath his veneer of grit and bravado honed in the Forward Operating Bases of Iraq, takes pity on the bird and unties it, simultaneously cursing it for its incessant squawking and gently pulling at the knots that bind its legs. Already dusk, he carries it up to the landing zone and into the jungle, where he leaves it to its own fate. Like the others, he cannot bring himself to kill the bird, but nor does he want the man to return the next day to see what he could only perceive as the team's ingratitude for his gift. A willful beast, the chicken follows him back out of the jungle and under the bright stars wanders about the barren landing zone.

Bonds of reciprocity that arise among members of the two groups, displayed through gifts given and received, are temporary and inherently asymmetrical. Their asymmetry mirrors inequities of the enterprise at hand, a mission to recover American remains in a land scarred by U.S. bombs, one

whose own numbers of missing dwarf the U.S. toll by the hundreds of thousands. Nevertheless, the exchanges attest to the symbolic power of the sought-after bones to compel social action, however limited or ephemeral the effects of that action may be.

*Final Displays of Expertise and Authenticity*

So much of the excavation, its day-to-day labor and archaeological practice, seemed counterintuitive. When instructed to push cleared brush *up* the steep incline rather than down, many of the Vietnamese workers shook their heads in disbelief and frustration at such a nonsensical directive. Sifting seven tons of soil and debris daily through quarter-inch mesh screens in search of wreckage and remains likewise defied reason. But on day nine, a single tooth and then another appeared in the screens, to the surprise of everyone. Bluish in color, they looked almost fake; but to hold them in your hand, you felt their worth, that promise to put previous power—of a forty-five-year-long absent body and unknown fate—“back to work.” No longer an abstract idea, their materiality now exposed the specific cultural biographies (Kopytoff 1986) of the sought-after object: the individual missing service members from the June 1967 helicopter crash whose remains had lain undetected on the mountain slope for four decades despite Vietnamese and American efforts otherwise. Many team members felt that power exert itself as we studied the photographs of the five missing men mounted on a board back at the base camp, searching for clues as to which of them we might have just recovered. Infused with new purpose, the excavation efforts would soon yield five more teeth and three minuscule potential bone fragments.

These pieces of human remains became the objects of a final ceremonial exchange of knowledge: a joint Vietnamese and U.S. scientific examination at the conclusion of the month-long mission. Known as the Joint Forensic Review, the official event is an exercise in both performing expertise and showcasing authority. When the excavation draws to a close, the recovered “possible human remains” are handed over to the VNO until the review, which takes place, surreally, at the Danang resort. In one of its conference rooms, select American and Vietnamese forensic anthropologists and odontologists convene to examine and debate the status of the remains, whether they are indeed possible human remains, and whether they are “American.” If the experts agree that the osseous material might be human, and likely American, the Vietnamese grant official permission for repatriation.

On this occasion, the recovered teeth offer the Vietnamese and American odontologists an opportunity to compare methods. Subtle corrections to mistakes in identifying the precise kind of tooth are followed with equally courteous words of gratitude and praise. Extracted from sealed plastic evidence bags, examined and photographed, and again stored according to the chain-of-custody protocol, the remains have entered into another value regime, where they will



reside until they yield up enough molecular and osteological data to restore individual identity and enable individuated commemoration. The next day the Vietnamese authorities formally hand over the black evidence cases holding the possible remains before the repatriation ceremony on the Danang airport tarmac. Once secured within silver transfer cases—the same kind used to transport U.S. bodies home from Afghanistan—the remains are swiftly, deftly covered in the American flag—brought under the aegis of U.S. care and control. They are then ushered into the gaping belly of the awaiting aircraft that is “homeward bound” to JPAC’s Central Identification Laboratory in Hawai‘i.

#### CONCLUSION

One year and one day after the scant remains arrived at the laboratory, they were identified through DNA analysis and dental evidence as belonging to Lance Corporal Merlin Allen and Hospital Corpsman 3rd Class Michael Judd. They were then escorted to the mainland for burial by their surviving families and communities of mourners. Allen was buried on York Island (Lake Superior), Wisconsin next to his parents, on 29 June 2013, and Judd was interred in Arlington National Cemetery on 15 July. Members of the Minnesota and Wisconsin Patriot Guard Riders escorted Allen’s remains from Minneapolis to his Wisconsin hometown of Bayfield. As the motorcade rolled into Bayfield people lined the streets with flags in hand. Senior Ride Captain Ed Bergey explained, “It represents that there’s one more of our boys home—one more we took care of.”<sup>40</sup>

The rhetoric of “taking care of” and “bringing home” the synecdochic fragments of an American MIA recalls the decades-delayed obligation of the state. In underscoring the collective “our” and “we,” Bergey elided the government’s agencies and its veterans bound together in the social contract of caring for war dead, specifically Vietnam-era MIAs. Such an elision comes as no surprise, because it stems from yet another movement in meaning ascribed to the remains. By evoking a new cultural category—missing fallen come home—and thus new social meaning, the returned remains generate new configurations of responsibility and authority over the past. These configurations are made possible by the powerful, ambiguous bones that have traveled from the jungles of central Vietnam to an island in Lake Superior. The literal and figurative mobility of these remains—how they circulate and are exchanged among varying realms of worth—attests to their protean symbolic value, at the same time that they map power itself as it rests in the hands of those who control access to the desired bones. Complex systems of exchange have arisen in

<sup>40</sup> “Bringing Lance Corporal Merlin Allen Home after 46 Years MIA,” Northland Newscenter, 27 June 2013, at: <http://www.northlandsnewscenter.com/news/local/Bringing-Lance-Corporal-Merlin-Allens-Home-46-Years-after-MIA-in-Vietnam-213349731.html> (accessed 14 Oct. 2014).

response to that question of access, evident in the interconnected ventures of remains trading and past and present recovery efforts. The remains compel exchange, and thereby forge among the individuals who pursue them new social relations, including those of reciprocity—agonistic or empathetic, asymmetrical and temporary.

Finally, remains of missing U.S. service members allow those who control their possession a means to demonstrate the power derived from that possession. Authority turns on authenticity. Whether before the small-town crowd in Bayfield, on the mountain slope of the crash site, or in the conference room in Danang, authenticity is performed through different ritual acts that all center on making the object bones meaningful in the specific cultural context at hand, and thus asserting authority over that meaning. In their most generative capacity, the remains of American MIAs confer and reinforce power when recovery eclipses absence.

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Abstract: Amid its human and material tolls, the Vietnam War has given rise to a curious enterprise—the complex process of recovering and repatriating the remains of U.S. service members Missing In Action (MIA) and presumed dead. In this trade, the bones that “count” are American and the aims underwriting the forensic efforts to return them are rooted in an ideology of national belonging. The resultant exchange of both knowledge and physical remains has developed through two historically intertwined ventures: state-sponsored casualty resolution efforts; and the much smaller, informal trafficking of skeletal remains, identification media, and information about American MIAs. This article examines how these sought-after bones tack between roles as objects of recovery, sale, or barter, scientific study, ritual burial, and public commemoration. Through their mutable worth, MIA remains illustrate the dynamic symbolism of war dead that evokes differing sensibilities about familiar or foreign soil, about care and belonging. Like the *reliquiae* of medieval Christianity, remains of missing service members, even in the most fragmentary form, are replete with the suggestion of power. Their pursuit depends on reciprocity. Indeed, more than just powerful symbols, these bones manifest and confer power itself, as caring for war dead demonstrates authority, and such authority falls to those who control access to the desired object, whether through formal or informal channels. Furthermore, power requires authentication, and the remains of missing American war dead become, in this system of circulation and exchange, a means to demonstrate knowledge, perform certainty, or exploit ambiguity.