



Intelligence Community Assessment

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**Vietnamese Storage of Remains
 of Unaccounted US Personnel**

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FOR THE NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE COUNCIL
 ROOM 266
 CEGB

ICA 96-05
 October 1996

Copy 0012

This Assessment was prepared by Richard C. Bush, National Intelligence Officer for East Asia. It was coordinated by the Defense Intelligence Agency and other DOD elements and by the Department of State's Bureau of Intelligence and Research. The CIA defers judgment on this Assessment to those Community components with expertise and information files on the location, identification, and availability of US remains in Southeast Asia.

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Scope Note

Vietnamese Storage of Remains of Unaccounted US Personnel

This Intelligence Community Assessment was prepared in conjunction with the declassification of Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) 14.3-87, *Hanoi and the POW/MIA Issue*, dated September 1987. In considering the request to declassify this Estimate, the Intelligence Community conducted its usual examination to ensure the protection of sources and methods. In the course of this, we developed reservations about some of the judgments in the 1987 Estimate and became aware of some additional research that has a bearing on them. We thought it appropriate to place these points on record in this companion paper to the declassified Estimate.

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Discussion

What the Estimate Says

Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) 14.3-87, *Hanoi and the POW/MIA Issue*, September 1987, in two places addresses the subject of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam's (SRV's) storage of remains of US military personnel. The Discussion section states:

There is a considerable body of evidence that the Vietnamese have detailed information on the fates of several hundred personnel. North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces had policies governing the handling of US remains that included removing identifying data, burying the remains, and sending the identification and location of the grave site to Hanoi. We estimate that the Vietnamese have already recovered and are warehousing between 400 and 600 remains.

Thus, Hanoi could account quickly for several hundred US personnel by returning warehoused remains and by providing material evidence that could aid in determining the fate of other personnel.

The analogous text in the Key Judgments section is basically the same. The only difference is that the opening phrase of the first sentence and all of the second sentence are omitted.

The "Estimative" Process of SNIE 14.3-87

The first draft of the SNIE, which was prepared by a DIA analyst, stated: "They [the Vietnamese] have warehoused a number of remains; estimates range from approximately 400 to 600." In

contrast, the second and subsequent drafts made a stronger statement, we assume as the result of editorial changes: "In addition, we estimate that the Vietnamese have warehoused between 400 and 600 remains." This statement was not subjected to close scrutiny. Community analysts who participated in the preparation of the SNIE deferred to the principal drafter of the Estimate on the number of warehoused remains because the drafter's agency had sole responsibility and expertise for assessing technical aspects of the remains issue.

Numbers of Remains Stored

Origins of the 400 Figure

The only estimate of remains stored by Hanoi based on direct information and available at the time of the preparation of the SNIE was that of a Sino-Vietnamese mortuary worker who left Vietnam in 1979 (hereafter "the mortician"). He gave rough estimates of the number of remains that he prepared from 1969 to 1973, as follows:

Mid-1969 to 1970	20-30 sets
1971	30-40 sets
1972	30-40 sets
1973	"Almost" 200 sets

The mortician stated that he personally processed the remains from 1969 to 1972. The "almost 200" sets in 1973 were processed on a crash basis by Vietnamese military personnel

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working under the mortician's supervision. The mortician also reported that in the mid-1970s he was periodically detailed to repair damage to remains at a facility at 17 Ly Nam De Street. He recalled that about 30 to 40 sets of remains were reprocessed.

On several occasions up to mid-1977, the mortician was able to look through a doorway into a room at 17 Ly Nam De Street where he saw a large number of boxes placed on risers, approximately 10 tiers high, on three sides of the room. He was not allowed to enter the room but estimated there were about 400 boxes.

The mortician's reporting that Hanoi had a program to recover, process, and store remains has since been confirmed by Vietnamese officials.¹ Yet his various quantitative estimates are not precise and are subject to qualification. He consistently stated that his figures were estimates:

- The mortician did not have access to the room where the remains were stored nor did he have a master list of remains. He was not able to count the boxes or otherwise make a precise calculation and gave no basis for the 400 number.
- There was no way that the mortician could be sure that all the boxes in that room held remains or that the remains were those of Americans. Some of the boxes may have been empty and others may have contained indigenous Mongoloid remains mistakenly recovered by untrained Vietnamese specialists. Hanoi has transferred remains to the United States that have turned out to be Mongoloid, not American.

¹ Those officials also asserted that they had returned all the remains accumulated.

The uncertainty of the mortician's estimate of 400 boxes at 17 Ly Nam De Street is replicated in his discussion of the subset of stored remains that he either personally processed or supervised the processing. As noted above, his year-to-year recollections are stated as fairly wide ranges (20 to 30, 30 to 40)—further evidence of the vagueness of his recollections. (An aggregation of these year-to-year figures would yield an overall estimate of 280 to 310 sets of remains.)

Given the roughness of the mortician's various estimates, we cannot conclude with a high degree of certainty that Hanoi held 400 sets of remains in 1977. As such, it should not serve as a firm baseline.²

Where Did the 600 Figure Come From?

We are uncertain on what evidence the 600 upper margin of the SNIE's 400-to-600 range was based. There are at least three possibilities:

- In 1977 a refugee passed on a hearsay report that there were 600 sets of American remains in a warehouse in Haiphong. DIA tried but was unable to corroborate this report.
- The 600 number may have been simply a combination of the 200 sets whose processing the mortician supervised in 1973 plus the 400 he said he saw in 1977.

² It has become part of the public record that the mortician claimed to have personally processed over 400—either 426 or 452—sets of remains, which seemingly contradicts his other statements. Actually, the mortician carefully differentiated between the sets of remains he said he worked on (280 to 310) and what he believed was the total number of boxes (400). He arrived at the 426 figure by combining the 400 boxes he estimated he saw in the room in 1977 and two other groups of remains that he worked on that could not have been in the room: 23 sets of remains of Americans who died in captivity, which were repatriated in 1974 and three sets that he processed in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), of which two were repatriated in 1976. The number 452 was probably a mistranslation of what was said during a tense Congressional hearing.

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- The number may have been a simple extrapolation: the 400 remains that Hanoi purportedly held in 1977 were increased by 50 percent to account for the number of remains Hanoi could presumably recover during the subsequent decade.

In none of these possible explanations, however, is there a compelling evidentiary basis. In short, there appears to have been no solid basis for the 600 end of the 400-to-600 range. As with the 400 number, it should not be regarded as a firm baseline.

Other Relevant Evidence

Effectiveness of the Vietnamese System

Implicit in any discussion of the storage issue are assumptions about the success of the central government's efforts to recover remains (see inset). Documentary research and field investigation suggest that the effectiveness of Hanoi's location-and-recovery policy depended on several factors: Vietnamese knowledge that death had occurred; the accessibility of the place of death; the circumstances of the death; the diligence of local authorities in burying bodies and documenting the fact of burial and the location; the degree to which graves and crash sites were preserved over time; the time that elapsed before the central government decided to recover remains not yet under its control; and the extent of SRV capacity to find the graves, recover American remains, and ensure recovery to Hanoi without error. For example, recovery of remains:

- Was far more successful in northern Vietnam, where American deaths were the result of aircraft shootdowns, and where both a civilian and military administrative apparatus existed to locate bodies, put them in temporary graves, record necessary data, and send reporting to higher echelons.

- Was much less successful in the south, and even less so on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Recovery in these areas was less successful for several reasons: combat was more varied and continuous, the civilian administrative network was less established (or even absent), many sites were remote or inaccessible, transferring remains information to center authorities was difficult, and fewer eyewitnesses of original burial were available. In the south, it appears there was only a very limited effort to comply with postwar instructions to recover American remains. We have no specific evidence that an effort was made to recover American remains along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

In North Vietnam, burial by local authorities—and therefore the possibility of remains recovery—was more likely in cases where a plane crash occurred in populated areas in which the pilots ejected from their aircraft. Burial and recovery were less likely when a crash took place in remote or inaccessible areas or when the pilot did not eject.

Documents concerning remains recovery that Vietnam has turned over to the United States in recent years have provided a new and more detailed basis for evaluating the effectiveness of the effort, and therefore the possibility that Hanoi is still storing remains. For instance, a 1994 study by DOD's Office of POW/MIA Affairs (DPMO) of remains recovery in all of Military Region 4, for which the records transferred to the United States are the most complete, concludes that "based on information currently available, DPMO can find no 'smoking gun' . . . to support the thesis that Vietnam is still withholding significant numbers of remains collected in MR4 prior to 1978." Anomalies have occurred, but most of them appear to be the result of administrative errors.

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*SRV Policies on Burial and Remains
Recovery*

Burial and Documentation. During the Indochina conflict, it was standard Hanoi policy that Americans who were killed in action should be buried on the spot. Vietnam lacked the capacity to transport corpses rapidly and under refrigerated conditions; local sanitation was also a concern. At least in northern Vietnam, traditional Vietnamese burial practices were followed: bodies were enclosed in whatever material was available (for example, a parachute or plastic) and then placed in temporary graves, where tissue decomposition was relatively quick and complete.⁴

As suggested in SNIE 14.3-87, it was also SRV policy that authorities at local levels (1) file reports on incidents involving the death of American personnel, (2) send to Hanoi artifacts associated with dead Americans, and (3) retain information on the location of the graves. The Enemy Proselytizing Department of the General Political Directorate of the Ministry of National Defense supervised this process throughout Indochina.

Review and Recovery. At several points after 1969, Hanoi tasked authorities at local levels to compile information on burial sites and, in some cases, to disinter the skeletal

⁴ According to North Vietnamese custom, Vietnamese corpses would remain in these temporary graves for at least three to five years, after which the skeletal remains would be exhumed, treated, placed in a small casket, and buried permanently. There is no evidence that American remains were subject to this practice at the local level. Exhumation of remains thought to be American usually occurred when higher authority ordered it.

remains and transfer them to higher levels, where they might be reburied or placed in an aboveground storage facility. Research based on documents turned over by Hanoi during the last few years indicates (a) that these requirements were unevenly observed from place to place and over time, and (b) that the Center sought to reinvigorate compliance periodically, when there were changes in administrative jurisdiction over remains management and when hopes were revived for improvement in US-Vietnamese relations.

The mortuary worker who left Vietnam in 1979 played a key role in processing remains. Although he normally worked in the civilian cemetery system, his superiors ordered him to process remains for an agency of the General Political Directorate. He cleaned the remains, prepared them for preservation, placed them in a box, and reported any missing skeletal parts. The mortician saw no identifying data associated with the remains but on occasion would be told that the remains were American. Upon completion of the preparation, he would turn the box over to a military representative. He was told by military personnel that in another room the remains would be photographed with identifying data recovered from the aircraft wreckage. Finally, he believed, the box was sent to the US POW camp at 17 Ly Nam De Street in Hanoi for storage.

The most detailed analysis so far is of documents from Quang Binh Province, which was part of MR 4. Based on those documents, it appears that:

- As of 1972 the authorities had knowledge of 45 deaths of American personnel in the province.
- Those 45 Americans were the focus of the province's efforts to locate graves and recover remains.
- In 22 of the 45 cases, the Vietnamese reported that it was not possible to recover the remains.
- In the 23 other cases, graves were located and remains recovered.

In 22 of the 23 cases in which remains were recovered, they were repatriated to the United States, and the 23rd case continues to be a subject of confusion. Furthermore, no evidence has been found to contradict the hypothesis suggested by the documents that remains were not withheld.

To sum up, the ability of the Vietnamese Government to find and take control of remains was a function of several factors, including location, circumstances of death, and quality of reporting of original burial site. Although Hanoi sought to recover remains, it was not necessarily successful in doing so in every case.

A more reliable estimate of the extent of Hanoi's remains collection and storage efforts over time can only come after a detailed study of the records from various levels of the Vietnamese hierarchy that are now being turned over to the United States.

Physical Evidence of Storage

In the early stages of remains repatriation in the 1980s, analytical efforts were undertaken to determine whether the remains turned over by Vietnam had been warehoused. The number of repatriated remains that showed evidence of storage could then be used as a basis for judging how many sets were still available for easy transfer to the United States.

Several indicators of storage were established: completeness of remains sets, extent of bone mass, presence of preservatives, extent of water damage, markings on the bones, and caskets with mixed remains from widely different areas. In one estimate, 163 sets positively identified by November 1995 as being US personnel showed signs of storage.

Yet, as expertise on remains identification has grown, there is declining confidence in precise estimates of the number of sets of repatriated remains that were centrally warehoused. First and foremost, the absence of signs of storage does not prove that remains have not been stored. Thus, the finding that 163 sets of repatriated sets show signs of storage does not mean that all other sets were not stored.

Moreover, some of the indicators of storage used previously are now deemed to be of limited validity:

- Completeness of sets of remains was in part a function of how they were handled up until the time of final exhumation from temporary graves (recall that remains might be buried more than once before being stored above ground).

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Repatriation of Remains

At various points after the Paris Peace Accords, and particularly after 1984, the Vietnamese Government has turned over remains to the United States. As of November 1995:

- *A total of 707 sets have been repatriated; of those:*
 - *141 were the result of joint recoveries.*
 - *566 were turned over unilaterally by Hanoi (of these, a small percentage had been in private, not government, hands).*
- *Of the 566 sets of remains that Hanoi unilaterally repatriated:*
 - *274 have been identified as American.*
 - *87 have been identified as indigenous Mongoloid and returned to the SRV.*
 - *180 have not yet been identified.*
 - *The remainder are miscellaneous fragments.*

While suggestive, these data confirm the need for a comprehensive study of Vietnam's location-and-recovery effort, particularly after 1975.

- Bone mass was primarily a function of the microenvironment in which a corpse was initially buried.

- Vietnam apparently did not possess skeletal preservatives or the knowledge to use them.
- Some coloration of bones that might suggest human application were in fact the result of reactions with chemicals in the soil.

The conditions of skeletal remains, therefore, is a function of a variety of factors, not just whether they were warehoused. Most important among these factors are the microenvironment in which they were initially buried and the amount of time they were exposed to the degrading effects of Vietnamese soil (chemicals, bacteria, and fungi).

Thus, estimates of the number of central remains stored based on the physical characteristics of repatriated remains are of limited reliability.

Conclusions

The statement in SNIE 14.3-87 that Hanoi had warehoused 400 to 600 sets of American remains was based on limited direct evidence whose reliability was open to question. The 400 figure is not a precise point estimate, and the 600 figure was based either on uncorroborated hearsay evidence or was the result of questionable extrapolation. Subsequent evidence does not support the Estimate's hypothesis that Hanoi held 400 to 600 sets of remains.

Although the Vietnamese Government collected and stored remains from the Indochina war, without further research it is not possible to estimate with a high degree of certainty the number of American remains that were under Hanoi's direct control at any point in time.

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