

The "Mortician's" Story

by Joe Schlatter

"The Mortician" (Mr. Tran Vien Loc) has a story that is important to the MIA issue.

Too often, the story is not reported fully or accurately. I will try to do both here. Stated simply, "The Mortician" said that he was involved in recovering, processing, and storing the remains of Americans. The story, however, is more complicated than that.

First, let's look at some background on Vietnamese traditional burial practices and Vietnamese- Chinese relations.

[Vietnamese Traditional Burial Practices](#)

When Uncle Nguyen dies, he is put in the ground, in a wooden casket or wrapped in a shroud. After three years, the corpse is exhumed. Now, what you have is a dirty skeleton; most of the flesh has decomposed, soil has attacked some of the bones, etc. The bones are cleaned up and, in some cases, treated with a creosote-like preservative. Then, the bones are either re-interred, put into a "bone jar" and kept on the family altar, or cremated.

As time went on, and especially after the French took over in Indochina, folks recognized that there were some public health problems inherent in this practice of handling decomposed remains. So, the practice gradually evolved of using professional "mortuary technicians" (my wording) to do this work, instead of family members and friends. Mr. Loc was one of these technicians. Remember the approximate three year time period for remains to stay in the ground. It will become important later on!

[Vietnamese - Chinese Relations](#)

In the best of times, their relations are okay. In the worst of times, they go to war with each other. China has this view of the world that the little States on China's periphery are inferior to China. And, those inferior States should act inferior and not get too uppity. The Vietnamese, as we all know by now, do not see themselves as inferior to anyone. Now, I have stated this somewhat lightly, but that's the way it is. The greatest heroes of Vietnamese history are people who led Vietnamese armies to defeat the Chinese, in China those who sallied forth into Northern Vietnam every few centuries to enforce Chinese suzerainty. The Vietnamese dislike for and distrust of the Chinese is on a national, cultural, and personal level. Remember that!

[Who Is Mr. Loc ?](#)

After consolidating the country in 1975, the Vietnamese set about settling old scores and tightening their control on the South and on untrusted elements throughout the country. In 1976, they turned their attention to undesirable foreigners. Two Americans, *Herman MacDonald* living with his family in the northern Delta, and *Vito Baker*, living with his family near Da Nang, were picked up, taken to Saigon, turned over to the Red Cross, and told to get out of the country. Hundreds of Chinese had their businesses and bank accounts confiscated and many of them were forced to leave Vietnam, winding up back in China, or in Hong Kong, Taiwan, etc. One of these was *Mr. Loc*.

Loc's having to leave Vietnam is not unusual. In spite of the fact that he was born and raised in Vietnam, he was still considered Chinese by the Vietnamese (look at the cases of the overseas Koreans in Japan). Three generations in Japan and they are still classified as Koreans and are watched by the police. The Japanese cannot understand how we let people become Americans after a few years. U. S. DoD interviewers were working the camps in Hong Kong, seeking any information people might have about Americans during and after the war. *Mr. Loc* stepped forward and told his story. *Loc* introduced himself and told about his profession.

He then said that, in the period following the French withdrawal, he was part of a team that worked with the French to recover French dead. He described his activities and the activities of the recovery teams in some detail. We went to the French government who checked their files. Out came a photograph of a turn-over of French remains and there, in his white lab coat and steel pot, was *Mr. Loc*.

Loc then went on to describe how in 1966 or 1967, he was not certain which, he was approached by North Vietnamese government officials who asked him to work on remains that were being recovered.

Now, remember the approximate three-year time delay between burial and exhumation? Americans began to be shot out of the sky over the north in 1964. If the Vietnamese were treating our dead the same way they treated their own -- and why not --- they would exhume dead Americans after about after about three years in the ground. So, the recovery of Americans who died in their crash/died in captivity/were shot avoiding capture, would have started about three years after we started losing guys over the North. *Loc's* 1966-67 start date makes sense. *Loc* agreed to the contract.

He would be contacted from time to time by people from a military unit who would take him and his equipment to a military cemetery in the Hanoi suburbs. There, he would go into a building where there would be remains in boxes, baskets, and bags.

He recognized the remains as having been in the ground for about three years and as having been recently exhumed. His job was to clean them up, disinfect them, and treat them with preservative. *Loc* recognized the remains as being the skeletons of people who were not Vietnamese and who were bigger than Vietnamese. On some occasions, he would lay the remains out on a table in anatomically correct fashion (that is, he would lay out the bones in correct position). Soldiers would then come in with papers, photos, dog tags, personal items, etc., and lay them alongside the remains and take photographs of the whole affair. The soldiers would then gather up the items, the skeleton would be placed in a little ceramic casket (later they used wood), and he would not see them again. This went on for several years. *Loc* estimated that he prepared 264 (and I am not certain of that number) remains.

Loc also said that, around 1970 (???) he was taken on a few occasions to a place on Ly Nam De Street in downtown Hanoi. There, he was taken to the grounds of an old French colonial house, into a "warehouse." In the warehouse, according to *Loc*, was a big stack of the little boxes into which remains had been put. He said that by counting the boxes up, down, and across, he estimated about 400 were stacked up there. *Loc* also said that there were American prisoners being held in an adjacent compound.

He is talking about a place where U. S. POWs were held that they called "The Plantation." It was located on Ly Nam De Street in Downtown Hanoi and, in the compound, was a very fine old French colonial home -- hence the name "Plantation." The POWs who were in the Plantation at this time reported, during their debriefings, that they were moved into an adjacent compound, a bamboo screen was erected, and they were kept away from the rest of the compound. They also reported truck traffic delivering things to the warehouse in the plantation compound. *Loc's* job here was to clean up remains.

The boxes -- at least, some of them -- contained remains, some of which had begun to mildew and deteriorate. *Loc* cleaned them up, disinfecting them, and put on more preservative. He stated that some of the remains he worked on appeared to have been processed by people who were not good at it, hence the deterioration.

[The Stored Remains](#)

When I hit the speaking circuit in 1988, one of the points I always made was that of stored remains. Over the years, *Joe Harvey* and *Paul Mather*, and, from time to time, senior U.S. delegations, have talked with the Vietnamese about giving us what they knew about missing Americans. The response was usually polite, but not helpful. However, occasionally, the Vietnamese would contact the U. S. Embassy in Thailand and say that they had recovered some remains believed to be Americans and would we come get them.

We would fly in a recovery mission and they would turn over to us some number of little wooden boxes full of skeletal remains. Often, they would associate a name with a set of remains ("the remains in box number 7 are XXXXX."). These remains were taken back to the Central Identification Laboratory -- Hawaii (CILHI) for identification.

The condition of the remains varied -- some were nearly complete skeletons; others were only partial and fragmentary. Some still had fresh soil on them, and others had not been in the ground for a long time. And, some of the remains showed clear signs of having been processed and stored above ground; they were free of soil (except maybe some dried soil in bone cavities), the bones were dried out (if they had been underground they would have been moist) and many of them were treated with a creosote-like preservative.

Loc was taken to the CILHI where he demonstrated that he had good anatomical knowledge and he examined some of the remains that had been returned. He said that he could recognize his own work and that some of the remains he was shown were ones that he had worked on. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that the Vietnamese had some number of remains 'warehoused' and they were passing them out to us as they pleased.

Sometimes the names they gave us at turnover were correct. Occasionally, they would say that Box 1 contains 'Captain X' and Box 2 contains 'Lieutenant Y' (two guys from the same aircraft). When the CIL id'ed the remains, the opposite was true. The Vietnamese must have switched their records somewhere along the line.

One memorable event was a remains turnover in December 1988, when the remains of the missing men from several B-52s lost in the Christmas bombing and other crews from two-seaters were turned over. We thought that they may have been 'emptying the warehouse'. Not so. Later on, more remains showing signs of storage were returned.

[So, What To Make of This?](#)

1. The Vietnamese had a system in place to recover the remains of American dead.

They recovered not only dead, but also individual equipment items, personal items and pocket litter -- then they cataloged it all. Why recover and warehouse remains, then feed them out to us a few at a time?

One theory is that the Vietnamese were playing a macabre game. They knew we would discover what they were up to and they thought that, as soon as we realized that they had remains, we would give them something in return (in fact, we confronted them with the evidence time and again).

Another theory is that they knew we would not talk with them about economic and political matters, but that U.S. M.I.A.'s would keep us coming back to the table. There are other theories, but only they know the answer.

2. How many remains were (are) warehoused?

What about *Loc's* numbers?

He says that he processed '2XX' remains and that he saw approximately 400 boxes in the 'Warehouse'. Do we add these numbers and come up with 600-plus in storage at some time? Did the 400 include *Loc's* 2XX? Did he exaggerate a bit? A lot? Or, did he underestimate?

And, I have not read a report from CILHI for a long time, but, at last count, fewer than 150 of the remains returned from Vietnam showed signs of storage. So, one can conclude that there is a huge discrepancy between what has been returned and what can yet be returned. Maybe so, maybe not. I don't know. I cannot go as high as 600-plus, but I am skeptical of that the fewer than 150 returned to date are all we can expect.

Frankly, I think the debate over the numbers is not as important as the fact that we are on the ground in Vietnam, working from one end of the country to the other, conducting research in their museums, archives, etc., and interviewing their people who had contact with Americans. These activities and the continued presence of more and more official Americans in Vietnam will bring about more and more results. But waiting is just more painful for folks who have waited too damn long already.

3. What about the three Progressives?

Okay, so Bobby Garwood was one of the three guys *Loc* saw. Who were the other two? It would be easy to assume that they were two guys who, like Bobby, decided to cooperate and graduate. Maybe they were. Don't forget, though, that there were Caucasians other than U.S. POWs and a collaborator in Hanoi. Brits, Aussies, Eastern Europeans. And, what about Americans who sympathized with the Vietnamese who went to Hanoi and maybe stayed for a while? There have been political pilgrims in all ages. Remember the Americans who visited Stalin's paradise in the 1930s and came back announcing "I have seen the future and it works."? Why could these not have been a couple of Americans/Brits/Aussies who sympathized with the cause of the Vietnamese people and who went to Hanoi to work as translators, medics, engineers, what-have-you? And, did Bobby know these other two? He has never discussed these two guys, at least not with anyone I know.

Let's deal with one phony story before ending this tale. There is some mythology floating around that claims Mr. *Loc* was a colonel in North Vietnamese intelligence who was Bobby's "handler" and that he was sent to the U. S. to assassinate Bobby. No. Regardless of who claims what, the fact is that *Loc* is who he is and he is not a colonel or anything else in Vietnamese intelligence and he was not sent to assassinate anyone nor was he sent to accuse Garwood.

And there you have the Mortician's story!!!

*A full transcript can be reviewed of *Mr. Loc's sworn testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives on June 27, 1980.*

[Update as of 12 July 1999](#)

Those who follow the MIA issue know that one of the major elements of the matter is the question of Vietnamese recovery of US remains. US intelligence knew that the Vietnamese had a robust program of burying dead Americans who had fallen into their hands; recording the circumstances of recovery and burial; maintaining the graves to some extent; and, in some cases, exhuming the remains, transporting them to Hanoi, and processing them for storage. Eventually, recovered remains were returned to the US.

The most tantalizing reporting regarding this Vietnamese recovery and repatriation of US remains came from an individual known as "The Mortician." His story is in the article that precedes this update.

The questions regarding Vietnamese collection and repatriation of American remains that have nagged at us for years have been:

1. How many remains did the Vietnamese recover?
2. How many have they returned to us?
3. How many are left to return?
4. What will it take to get them all returned?

One opinion has taken at face value the mortician's estimates of some 400 recovered, processed, and stored remains.

For the longest time, The Mortician's story was all we had to go on. From time to time, the Central Identification Laboratory reported that they had received remains that clearly showed signs of storage -- preservative on bones, musty odor, paper or plastic stuck to the bones, etc. Because the number of remains showing clear signs of storage was considerably lower than the number estimated by the mortician, a loudly-voiced opinion held that the Vietnamese were holding out on us.

On the other hand, the Vietnamese stated in the early 1990's that all remains that they had recovered had been returned. The last repatriated remains that showed evidence of storage were in a group of 20 that were returned in September 1990.

Now, in 1999, a decade has passed with US personnel resident in Hanoi, searching through Vietnamese archives and records, interviewing wartime commanders and personnel, and investigating loss incidents, beginning at the site of the incident. We know a lot more now than we did then.

The Defense POW-Missing Personnel Office has just published an unclassified analysis of the question of Vietnamese recovery and repatriation of US remains. Anyone who wants a copy of it should write to:

Defense POW-Missing Personnel Office
2400 Defense
The Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-2400

Ask for a copy of the unclassified document:

Vietnam's Collection and Repatriation of American Remains- June 1999

DPMO may post the document to their web site. I have two copies of it and, if I ever get the time, I will type all 50-plus pages (single-spaced) into an article and post it on my MIA Facts Site (don't anyone hold your breath until I get it done).