

Search continues for MIAs, POWs

By Kirsten Dietz
Section Co-Editor

The Vietnam War may have officially ended 11 years ago, but one private, non-profit organization is still fighting to resolve the cases of more than 2,400 men still missing in action.

The National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia, incorporated in 1970, is trying to obtain the release of all prisoners, the fullest possible accounting of the missing and the repatriation of soldiers' remains. More than 1,400 families are members of the league.

Significant strides have been made over the past two years in negotiations with the North Vietnamese, says Rosemary Jersak, one of five regional coordinators for the League. More remains have been returned in the past year than any time since the end of the war, and the atmosphere has never been better for making substantial progress on the issue, according to the league.

Two years ago, the governments of North Vietnam and the United States began their first high-level talks on the MIA issue. Jersak says these would not have been possible without Ann Griffiths, executive director of the league, who is credited with starting the high-level talks between the United States and Vietnam, as the two countries have no formal diplomatic relations.

Now the United States and North Vietnam are in the middle of working under a two-year plan, which says Vietnam has to try to account for all the missing by July. "Try" is the key word in this open-ended agreement, Jersak says. If the deadline was firmly set, she says, July would be the end, even if everything was not resolved.

In the latest round of talks, the fourth this year, four U.S. military specialists went to Hanoi Oct. 29 for technical talks aimed at resolving the status of those missing in action. Technical talks between the two nations began in December 1982.

One U.S. goal in the talks is to secure an agreement on a second U.S.-North Vietnamese excavation of a warplane crash site to search for remains. Last year, the first joint dig produced wreckage of a U.S. B-52 bomber and bone fragments. It was regarded as a milestone in the MIA search effort.

The governments of North Vietnam and Laos have acknowledged the possibility that some Americans might be alive in remote areas, outside government control or authority. The two have now agreed that accounting for the missing is a humanitarian issue and that they will cooperate in resolving it.

The peace agreement signed in Paris, which ended the war, states that the parties involved would return "captured military personnel and foreign civilians," help "each other to get information about those missing . . . in action" and work to "facilitate the exhumation and repatriation of the remains (of the dead)."

But because the United States did not win the war, U.S. authorities have not had access to the areas where the missing were last seen alive or were thought to have disappeared or been captured.

Jersak says the only reason North Vietnam is at the bargaining table is because it is being boycotted by the other Southeast Asian nations. These nations have convinced North Vietnam that it's in their best interest to release an account of all MIAs.

However, Jersak says, the negotiations are very tricky.

She says the United States is doing anything it can to avoid upsetting the North Vietnamese, therefore much of what is happening can't be made public

because they have requested no publicity. Jersak says another thing that might cause North Vietnam to end the talks is action by "Rambo types" who go in on their own and try to find captives.

"We do anything to derail these talks now, and that's the end of it," Jersak says. "We would never, ever get the Vietnamese back to the table."

However, until Reagan was elected, she says the league relied on these Ramboes and secretly raised money for them.

"They all worked for us," Jersak says. "That's why we can bad mouth them now. We know what loonies they are."

"Up until we got Reagan, that's the only way we could have gotten the guys

out. The government wasn't doing a thing. The Defense Intelligence Agency was literally closed down.

"A lot of the families have been ripped off over the years, they have paid dearly. But now they see for the first time real hope that we're going to get this thing solved."

The league sees Reagan as the source of that hope, and credits him with the progress it has made in the last few years. Jersak says Reagan values input from the league, and had Griffiths in his office to brief him the first week of his presidency.

Reagan has declared that the nation's highest priority is getting as much information as possible about Americans who still are imprisoned, missing or unaccounted for in Indochina.

Jersak says 400 bodies of American servicemen are believed to be stored in a Hanoi warehouse.

The years before Reagan took office were difficult for the league, Jersak says.

"Those were eight hard years when we went up to Washington and banged on doors," she says.

Congressmen referred to League members as "those crazies" and "professional MIA wives," she says.

In 1973, President Richard M. Nixon said all the prisoners had been sent home, which Jersak says was "a death slap" to the League and its goals. Nixon's 1975-76 Select Committee on POW/MIA Mississippi and President Carter's 1977 Woodcock (Presidential) Commission on POW/MIA both issued reports which said all MIAs and POWs were dead.

Carter ordered that all cases with an MIA status be changed to KIA in 1978.

"It never occurred to us that the government would abandon us," Jersak says.

She contends that the commissions' reports were not valid, as the findings were based on the word of the North Vietnamese rather than on fact. She says North Vietnam hand-picked all those who went on the trip.

Currently, the main, but not only, source of POW/MIA information available to the U.S. government is Indochinese refugees.

The lack of political stability and the gloomy economic conditions in the Southeast Asian region has caused a continual flow of refugees from Laos, Cambodia and North Vietnam. Interviews have been conducted with many of these refugees by both government and private individuals, and reported sightings of Americans by these and other sources continue to reach the U.S. government. The U.S. government has an established program to follow up on each report.★



A&M student recalls Vietnam war

'I hope I never experience that again'

By Polly Bell
Reporter

My Nam Le once wore a rifle strap. Now he wears a backpack full of books. His diet, once a cup of rice a day, is now three meals daily at Texas A&M's Sbis Dining Hall.

But the nightmares still remain.

"I'll remember it (the Vietnam War) for the rest of my life," Le said. "It was really terrible."

"The dead bodies were green and smelled putrid. There were so many of them (dead bodies) that they were just shoved along the sidewalks waiting for relatives to come and identify them."

Le, a junior mechanical engineering major at A&M, was once an officer for the South Vietnamese army in the Vietnam War.

Now 34, he was in his first year of law school at Saigon University when he was drafted into the South Vietnamese army at age 20.

He said the draft originally applied to males 18 and older who had failed their college entrance exams. If they passed the exams, they could continue their education.

But in 1972, Le said South Vietnam found it necessary to increase its number of troops because of increased at-

tacks by the North Vietnamese.

To do this, the requirements were changed to include all males 17 or older.

For nine months, Le said he trained to become an officer in the army. He said he learned how to fight in the jungle, use a gun and organize the 30 soldiers under his command.

After the Paris Peace Talks in January 1973, Le traveled to the Caillay Province in South Vietnam for five months to try to convince the residents of the area that the United States wanted to help, not harm, them.

After the North Vietnamese took over Saigon, they "asked" all South Vietnamese officers to register for a "re-education camp." They told officers, including Le, to bring food, money and clothes for 10 days.

"Most of us joined thinking it was only for 10 days — little did I know I would end up there for three years," Le said.

He said the camp tried to convert the officers to communism.

"It was mental torture," he said. "I hope I never have to experience that again."

Every day the officers in the camp were forced to cut down trees in the jungle, build houses and grow food for

the North Vietnamese, he said. The prisoners were confined in groups of 1,000 and relocated every six months.

Le said he received a cup of rice a day. If he was good his family would be allowed to visit. They could bring him food twice a year as a reward for his good behavior.

Le's most vivid nightmare is of the night he stole a canoe and escaped from the camp.

"I couldn't sleep," he said. "My body was shaking and my teeth ached. But the minute I got in the canoe, I knew I was free."

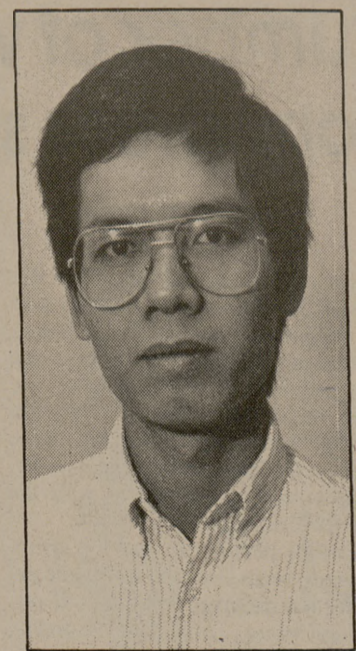
But not every refugee from South Vietnam had the same experience as Le.

Tung Pham, a sophomore electrical engineering major, grew up in Saigon and said he never saw the violence of the war since it took place mainly in the jungle.

However, he said he did see the impact of the communist control on the residents of Saigon.

Pham said the North Vietnamese soldiers would take businesses and money away from the upper class and put these people in the country to do hard labor.

Often, Pham said, these people couldn't take it. They would come back to the city and live on the streets after



My Nam Le

the communists had destroyed their homes, he said.

Since the upper class people were not used to hard labor, many committed suicide, Pham said.★