



A Sailor hands another a fresh bucket of dirt that is headed for the screen line to be sifted through in hopes of finding Sailors' remains.

Sailors search for Sailors in Southeast Asia

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On a January morning in 1968, a Navy commander, three lieutenant junior grades, four second class petty officers and a third class petty officer climbed aboard their OP-2E Neptune aircraft and prepared for take-off. They would not live to see the sunset that day.

The nine Sailors were members of VO-67, a secret squadron that operated out of an airbase in Thailand during the Vietnam War. Their mission that fateful day was to pepper the jungle of Laos with tiny sensors so sensitive they could be used to detect slight movements, or listen in on conversations. The sensors would be used - to collect intelligence and bomb the enemy.

That January morning, two other planes left the airstrip in Thailand with the exact same mission, and they safely returned to the airfield. The third plane carried the crew that went down. It was reported by another pilot that the commander's last radio contact simply said, "I'm going down through this hole in the clouds." What happened next is still a mystery. Whether they came under enemy fire or had a piece of navigation equipment malfunction is anyone's guess. What is known is that their plane went down on the side of a cloud-cov-

ered mountain in Laos, nearly a mile above the jungle floor, and for more than 30 years they lie untouched - until now.

Thirty-four years later, Parachute Rigger First Class (AW) Nicholas Williams and Chief Hospital Corpsman (FMF) Paula Africa are searching for their fallen shipmates. The two are strapped in and nearly dangling at times, from the side of a mountain, only 100 feet from the summit. They systematically search through grids on a 35-degree mud and rock-filled slope. "This is an outstanding mission," Williams says as he passes buckets of dirt and chunks of aircraft wreckage to Africa. Williams is permanently assigned to Aircraft Intermediate Maintenance Detachment, Naval Air Station Whidbey Island, Wash., and volunteered to work as a life support technician augmentee with Joint Task Force-Full Accounting (JTF-FA) based in Hawaii. The Bagley, Wis. native says he gladly volunteered, but wasn't sure if he could join the recovery teams that search for missing-in-action (MIA) 10 times each year in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam.

"My senior chief could only pick two of us to go out on this mission," the 16-year Navy veteran recalls, "and I was lucky enough to be selected."

The mountain was initially deemed too dangerous to attempt to excavate in 1996 when an investigation team located the crash site, but with help of Army mountaineers they decided it could be done. Last year the crash site was excavated for the very first time and possible human remains were repatriated and are in the identification process. But this time around, it's fresh dirt, undisturbed remains and new pieces of the puzzle.



A Marine Sgt. (right) and her teammate examine a piece of aircraft wreckage while working the screen line.

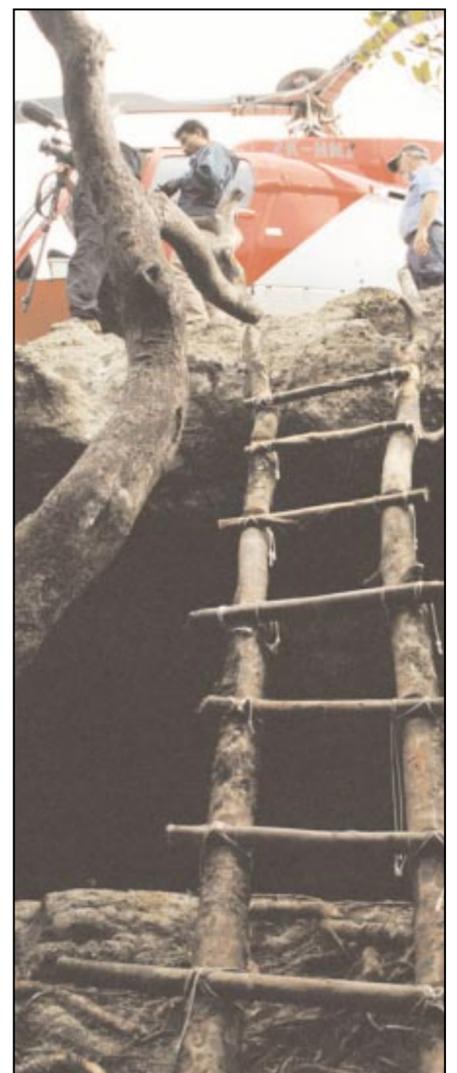
Williams and Africa are no stranger to the POW/MIA search and recovery efforts in Southeast Asia. "I've done one mission in Vietnam and this is my second in Laos," said Africa. The Keuka Park, N.Y. native confesses, this mission is the most rewarding yet. "This is my third mission overall, but the first time we've found remains at a site that I've been at. It's just so exciting because you know it may bring closure to a family that's been waiting for answers for a very long time," the chief says while taking a break from the bucket line. Africa is assigned as a medic at the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii. The lab works very closely with JTF-FA and is responsible for positively identifying remains, either through dental records or coordinating mitochondrial DNA testing, if the bone fragment is large enough for the DNA testing process.

Although the team lives in a make shift base camp on the mountain and hikes roughly 45 minutes up to the excavation site every day, their spirits remain high. It's the second time this site has been excavated, and this trip alone has been a huge success. Some of the possible remains they've found are a piece of a mandible with teeth still attached, several individual teeth, other pieces of osseous material and the largest piece, possibly a tibia. Teeth are considered the most sought after remains because according to the anthropologists, they provide the best chance of making a positive identification.

Some of the most powerful material to hold and touch are items from their era. Some of the things the team recovered during this trip include wrist watches, a .38 caliber pistol, General Motors car keys, a 35mm camera, coins, a charred and slightly mangled pewter second class crew from a Sailors utility cover and dog tags. To the Sailors working on the mountain, this particular site carries a lot of meaning and emotions. "Every mission is important," the chief insists, "but this mission - searching for Sailors - it's definitely extra special to me."

Today, there are still 399 Sailors who haven't come home from the war in Southeast Asia.

For more information on Joint Task Force-Full Accounting or how to become an augmentee, go to www.pacom.mil/jtffa.htm.



The landing zone, or 'LZ' is a boulder that juts out of the side of the mountain. The site has been coined 'Smoke Mountain' because of the thick fog that hangs over the mountain most days, often cancelling scheduled airlifts to the site and forcing the team to set up camp on the mountain.



The nine Sailors posed for a snapshot in front of their OP-2E Neptune in 1968.

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