Sunday, April 15, 2001 LA Times

Honor MIAs in Memory

Of all the indescribable losses inflicted in battle, the cruelest, most

lasting to survivors may be the casualties known as missing in action, those

souls who go off to war and never return, dead or alive. MIAs are presumed

dead. But the lack of certainty leaves scabs, not scars, on the lives of

wondering widows, widowers, parents, siblings and children.

World War I still has 3,350 MIAs, World War II 78,000, Korea 8,100 and

various Cold War incidents 120. Today's 1,982 Vietnam War MIAs are some 600

fewer than at war's end, predominantly airmen who flew off a radar screen

into their family's memory somewhere over Southeast Asia.

Vietnam's MIAs are different in many ways. Modern forensics and

dedicated detective work facilitate the U.S. military's traditional and

admirable fervor to identify and bring fallen comrades home. Vietnam as a

highly political war also turned its MIAs into a durable political cause,

abetted by books and movies suggesting evil conspiracies as well as by a

dedicated, effective grass-roots lobby of friends and families. They

convinced the government to make MIA accounting a condition of normalized

relations with Vietnam. And the search for a relatively few Vietnam MIAs,

like many government programs, took on an enduring life of its own, a life

that continues today with 500 full-time MIA workers worldwide and a cost to

taxpayers of about $2 million weekly.

Vietnam, which lists 300,000 of its own MIAs, has by all accounts

fulfilled its promise, albeit with a cultural puzzlement over American

preoccupation with body fragments a quarter-century after hostilities ended.

Last weekend, workers recovered the bodies of 16 American and Vietnamese

killed in a helicopter crash while looking for MIA remains in old crashes.

U.S. officials vow to reexamine not the hunt's financial or human costs but

only whether to continue using Russian helicopters flown by Vietnamese.

Maybe a new century is the time to bow our heads and begin closing the

book not on the hallowed memory of the Vietnam missing but on the proactive

quest for remains, to make the search instead reactive as it has long been

for other conflicts. Today whenever a farmer or hiker uncovers American

remains from other wars--in Russia, New Guinea, North Korea, even

China--Americans rush to retrieve them with full military honors, as they

should. This weekend a U.S. P-51 pilot will begin the trip home from France

57 years after his crash. It is no disrespect to anyone to allow unfound

remains to rest in peace.

Now, who better to begin this delicate discussion and overdue healing

than a new president, the son of a once-downed combat flier?

-----------------------------------------

Submitted,

Senior Chief Don Harribine, USN(Ret)