

Joint Task Force-Full Accounting Briefing Transcript

Lt. Col. Franklin Childress
Public Affairs Officer

Helicopter Accident in Vietnam

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Camp H. M. Smith, Hawaii

Lt. Col. Childress: Good Afternoon, I am Lt. Col. Franklin Childress, the Public Affairs Officer of Joint Task Force-Full Accounting.

I would like to talk to you today about the recent helicopter accident in Vietnam. I would like to give a statement, after which I will take your questions. Please hold your questions until the end.

This afternoon it is my sad duty to inform you about an accident involving seven Americans and nine Vietnamese personnel in Quang Binh Province in central Vietnam.

Before I continue with my statement, I want to first tell you that our hearts, prayers, and deepest sympathies go out to all the families of those involved in this incident both American and Vietnamese. We cannot express the sense of loss we feel as a family and as a unit as a result of what has happened.

Let me now turn to the facts as we know them.

Late yesterday afternoon, a Russian made MI-17 transport helicopter, belonging to the Vietnamese military carrying 16 crew and passengers crashed Saturday evening, April 7 in Vietnam during a routine mission while preparing for a recovery operation involving unaccounted-for Americans lost during the Vietnam War.

The Vietnamese have reported that there were no survivors.

American and Vietnamese officials are taking appropriate actions to recover and identify those onboard and to notify the next of kin.

This accident remains under investigation. Now, I'll take your questions.

Question: You said that the helicopter was preparing for a mission, can you give us any further circumstances?

Lt. Col. Childress: That's a very good question. A joint field activity involves an activity of recovery and investigation that takes place jointly between U.S. and Vietnamese officials. We normally send a recovery team of about 95 personnel from Hickam Air Force Base into U'taphao Naval Air Base in Thailand. From there, they deploy into Vietnam using theater airlift or C-130s. Then, they deploy to six separate recovery operations in Vietnam, specifically, and there is going to be one investigation element planned for this next field activity. What the team was doing over there is called joint advance work, which means they were doing preliminary preparations – working with the provincial officials. They were going to these sites to make sure that the logistics and infrastructure were set up.

When the teams arrived, everything would be set up and ready, and that was the reason they were out

flying this particular mission.

Question: Reuters reported that the helicopter went into a mountain during heavy fog, do you have any details about that?

Lt. Col. Childress: We don't have the details. I've heard that from the Reuters statement. I've also seen one news report that said 20 individuals. The information we have is there were 16 individuals on the aircraft, so I am not sure if there is some information out there that's incorrect. But again, we're going through the investigation process, so in terms of heavy fog, we don't have that information right now.

Question: Does this present much of a set back to the MIA mission losing this many personnel?

Lt. Col. Childress: Well, it is obviously a tragic accident, and we're going to have to assess from this situation exactly what's going on in terms of our MIA recovery operation. Right now, we're just in the mode of trying to find out what happened, and then, we'll be in the mode of accessing what we're going to do as a result of the accident.

Question: How many sites did you say there were?

Lt. Col. Childress: The plan was to excavate six recovery sites.

Question: Were these considered promising sites? Was there concrete evidence that there were MIA remains at these sites?

Lt. Col. Childress: When we go to the recovery sites, we have investigated the sites, and we have very good information that we'll be able to go out and find remains or other material that will lead to recovery of the Americans. And we've had good success in the recent history of being able to go out and actually recover remains that led to the identification of Americans who were lost during the Vietnam War. So, yes, before we actually put the excavations on the list, the investigation and all the other work is done. So, the jigsaw puzzle is being put together, and by the time we get to this point, we have a pretty good idea if we got the right aircraft, the right incident lost and we're looking for the right individuals who were lost on this aircraft.

Question: Can you tell us more about the Americans that were on board? Were they stationed here in Hawaii?

Lt. Col. Childress: The reason I can't go into great detail is that the families are being notified right now, and because, there are so few individuals over there. If I were to give you a lot of information about the individuals involved, it may lead to identifications, and I don't want to do that right now. We just want to let the service casualty offices do the notifications. We're very concerned about the families getting this information, because it is a tragedy. And again, we don't want to give the families information over the media that would cause them pain other than what they're already having.

Question: So, you couldn't even confirm if they were stationed here in the state?

Lt. Col. Childress: I can't give you that information. Like I said, there are so few people over in that area that that may lead to identification or family members knowing who they are.

Question: Can you explain the difficulty of this mission – if it was difficult or not or if they were on some kind of deadline? Through witness reports, they were travelling through fog, so do you know if there was some kind of time restraint that they had to be somewhere and had to travel through these conditions?

Lt. Col. Childress: One of the things you need to realize is that every mission we go out on in Vietnam, Laos or Cambodia, is a dangerous mission, and there are 12 temperate regions. Sometimes, you can go

into an area that is totally clear, and then right over the next hillside, it's totally fogged in. So, it is a very difficult area to operate in. We have been operating in this area since 1992 with Joint Task Force – Full Accounting, and before that, our first operation was in 1985. So, we've been flying on these types of helicopters for a number of years, and this is the first accident we've had involving these helicopters.

Question: Concerning the American victims, are we talking about all servicemen? Are we talking about some civilians aboard? And I know, as you said, you don't want to give out too much detail, but can you at least tell us the branch?

Lt. Col. Childress: No, I can't tell you the branch. The information I have is: they were all servicemen.

Question: Can you describe the terrain the helicopter is in? Is it going to be difficult to get them out of there?

Lt. Col. Childress: I am not specifically aware of where the crash took place, whether it was in jungle or in the valley, but indications are that we will be able to recover the remains of these individuals. Vietnamese officials have been to the site, and we're sending American teams to actually go assist that recovery operation. So again, that's one of the things that is ongoing and right now one of the challenges we've had up to now. A lot of people are asking, why hasn't there been more information coming out from this particular case? When we got the word, it was dark in Vietnam, and it is only just now sunrise. It's 17 hours -- a day ahead of where we are in Hawaii. So again, it's a major challenge, in terms of the time difference, of getting information and people on the same in daylight.

Question: In terms of the MIA recovery, when is the recovery operation supposed to start?

Lt. Col. Childress: The recovery operation is supposed to start in the first week of May. I think May 3 is the first day of the operation. We normally deploy the teams about five days in preparation of that. I believe the date they were scheduled to deploy is the 28th or 29th of April, depending on what time of day it was – maybe early morning hours of the 29th or late evening hours of the 28th.

Question: Were the 95 personnel from the recovery team already in country?

Lt. Col. Childress: No, they were scheduled to depart from Hickam Air Force Base on that date – the 28th or 29th of April. So, they are not in country. They were doing preparation to go.

Question: At this time, they're still in the United States?

Lt. Col. Childress: One of the challenges – one of the aspects we have is that we receive augmentation personnel from all over the Pacific Command area of responsibility. We get communications technicians; we get medical technicians, we get life support technicians; and we get linguistic capability. So, we have people supporting our operations, and they would be coming in this week. That's the flow. They come in for a couple of weeks of training, and then, they deploy out with the teams in April. That was the scheduled flow. Obviously, we're relooking that scenario of the whole joint field activity. But again, the decision has not been made, and we're working the issue of the recovery operation right now. That's the most critical issue we're working.

Question: Does the Vietnamese helicopter look like the Vietnamese were piloting?

Lt. Col. Childress: It's MI-17 helicopter piloted by the Vietnamese. That's correct.

Question: Is it a military helicopter?

Lt. Col. Childress: I believe it is a military helicopter. I am not familiar with the tail number. I have been over there many times myself and flown on these helicopters, and they traditionally are military helicopters that we contract from the Vietnamese government. It is a northern flight service contract that

is in conjunction with the Vietnamese government.

Question: More on the recovery team, you said American team was en route. Where are they coming from?

Lt. Col. Childress: We are putting teams together. At this time, we are working all of the country clearances and all of the particulars, so I can't really give you all the details until we are able to confirm all the details of being allowed to come into the country, etc. But, we have somebody driving up there. He is coming from Hue, which is a long way away from the site, and he's set to get there early in the morning. He is going to be the first American on the scene. So again, until we get people in there, and we'll be deploying people to go onto site to assist. Right now, I can't give the particulars of the recovery teams.

Question: That's a U.S. military person driving in to the site?

Lt. Col. Childress: He is a person who is in country. I don't want to give you the particulars of who that person is. Because again as I said, there are so few people in country, that it may give away who was on the helicopter. So again, it is a person employed by the U.S. government, and I don't want to tell you if it's military or civilian.

Question: What is the average length of these missions?

Lt. Col. Childress: The way the Joint Task Force – Full Accounting works is we conduct 10 operations per year. These operations are joint field activities, and they normally last for 30 days. There is about five days transportation, which is flying into Thailand and then out. So normally, people are deployed for approximately 35 days. And we do five operations in Laos per year, four operations in Vietnam, and one operation in Cambodia per year. We have a team right now in Laos finishing up a joint field activity, and they're scheduled to come out later on this month.

Question: So, the team from Laos was not involved in this? The team from Laos left in mid-March? This is not the team that was involved in the accident?

Lt. Col. Childress: That's correct.

Question: And you said you do five operations in Vietnam per year?

Lt. Col. Childress: Four operations in Vietnam per year.

Question: What number is this operation?

Lt. Col. Childress: I believe this one's the third operation this year.

Question: Do you know anything about what they were hoping to excavate?

Lt. Col. Childress: They were going up to set up. Some of these sites in central Vietnam are very remote. They were going up there to make sure that the infrastructure – if there was a base camp they were going to make sure that they got that. They were working compensation issues with the local officials. They were making sure they improved trails – to go out to the site one more time to make sure the terrain hadn't been altered by flooding or whatever. So, there's a lot of work that goes on in these joint field activities and the joint advance work. We normally do this work in preparation for these operations that we conduct in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam.

Question: Do you know whether they go in and check a reported downed B-52?

Lt. Col. Childress: No, that work, in terms of finding the site has already been done. What they're doing

is the investigation team has written detailed reports of investigation. They've told the people, given information regarding that site, that the excavation team would need to have to actually excavate. They've done work, back here in Hawaii, with the Central Identification Laboratory, who by the way, are the premiere forensic analysts in the world. They done work with those recovery elements that come out of the Central Identification Laboratory to work the case. So by the time the team gets out there, they know where they're going; they know what type of aircraft; they know how many individuals are involved. This is more or less setting the conditions for success when the team arrives in country on the site. So, it is just basically making sure the site is prepared for the team when they arrive.

Question: Do you know what the site was they were going to when the crash occurred?

Lt. Col. Childress: No, the information about exactly what they were doing at the time of the crash and which site they were going to is still very sketchy. We're trying to get that information, but until we are able to get a little bit more information, I can't tell you what site they had come from and what site they were going to.

Question: This advance team – are they the ones you normally call on?

Lt. Col. Childress: The joint advance work is typically something that's done. There are different people that go out on these -- based on ability and mission focus. That's what was going on, that joint advance work. Traditionally, some people rotate, and so it's not something to say that the same people were on every joint advance work. I've got time for one more question.

Question: Is this the first military death in Vietnam since the end of the war?

Lt. Col. Childress: Accidental deaths – Yes. This is the first time we've had an accident involving a helicopter – involving a field accident. I'll just say that Joint Task Force-Full Accounting has enjoyed an excellent field record since we started this operation. Again, it's a tragedy for both Americans and Vietnamese. We don't want to minimize the tragedy for the Vietnamese, because their families feel it just as much as ours do.

Thank you very much.