

MIA Recovery -- Russians Can't Believe Americans Care so Much

By Lt. Cmdr. Curtis Jenkins, USNR
Special to the American Forces Press Service

GARMISCH-PARTENKIRCHEN, Germany, Sept. 19, 2001 -- Say "POW" or "MIA" and nearly every American will think of Vietnam. While many American POWs and MIAs were lost there, thousands are missing in Europe, China and the Soviet Union from World War II, the Korean War as well as from Southeast Asia.

The Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office has a section in the U.S. Embassy in Moscow called the "Joint Commission Support Directorate, Moscow". It's where Eurasian foreign area officers try to locate or otherwise account for Americans who went missing in the Soviet Union from World War II through the Cold War. FAOs are a select group of U.S. military officers with regional politico-military expertise and language skills who work in a host country supporting peacetime engagement and forward presence.

Much of the FAOs' work involves research. They plow through archival documents, interview people who may or may not have pertinent information, and sift through whatever materials they can to glean anything that might help uncover the whereabouts of the servicemen or their remains.

Obviously, language skills are central to the FAO's work and absolutely critical for any hope of success. One word misread, one inflection not clearly discerned, and a possibly vital clue might evaporate. For many FAOs, their language and interpretive skills are developed and honed at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies here.

Among the FAOs in Russia searching for POWs and MIAs is Army Capt. David Willis. A native of Olympia, Wash., Willis is a Marshall Center student. He says that working to help find missing Americans is one of the most gratifying things he has ever done.

"Being a part of the team [to find missing Americans] is such a great honor," Willis says.

He finds the Russians he talks to cooperative and forthright.

"Every one of the Russians I've met has, to a man, expressed great admiration and even shock that Americans care so much about their own and go to such great lengths to recover their fallen comrades," Willis said. "They can't believe that even after all this time, we care so much."

National POW-MIA Recognition Day is Sept. 21.

(From a George C. Marshall Center news release.)

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