

Soldiers to search Himalayas of China for crash sites

WASHINGTON (Army News Service, July 31, 2002) -- A 14-man search and recovery team from the Army's Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii will venture into the eastern Tibetan Himalayas of China Aug. 9 to excavate two aircraft crash sites from World War II.



U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory Hawaii team preps for the Himalayas by moving up the Gulkana Glacier by rope at the Northern Warfare Training Center near Black Rapids, Alaska, June 13. (photo by SGT Doug Stubblefield.)
(Click on the photo to view a higher resolution photo)

This mission is by far one of the most challenging missions the lab has tackled, CILHI officials said. They added that a special team has been formed for the mission with some of the most skilled personnel.

The team has been training extensively and will continue to do so until it leaves for China, officials said, so that all members will be prepared for the difficult terrain and high altitudes they will face.

The team is led by Capt. Daniel Rouse. Sgt. 1st Class Sean Bendele is the team NCOIC. Anthropologist James Pokines, Mortuary Affairs Specialists Staff Sgt. Thomas Woods and Sgt. Michael Harris, and Photographer Cpl. Ricardo Morales will be on the team. They will be joined by several augmentees from units around the world, including three mountaineering specialists, one medic, one doctor, two linguists, and one embassy representative.

Several additional CILHI personnel have been going through the extensive training as alternates in case any team members cannot deploy. Those alternates are Dr. Andy Tyrrell, Mortuary Affairs Specialist Staff Sgt. Joaquin Andujar, Medic Sgt. 1st Class Alvin Nielsen and Photographer Sgt. Douglas Stubblefield.

The team is expected to be deployed for about two months. The two sites are at about 15,500 feet and 16,200 feet above sea level.

The team will attempt to recover four personnel that were aboard a C-46. The aircraft was based at Sookerating, India, and was reported missing in flight enroute from Kunming, China, to its home base during March 1944. It is believed the aircraft became lost, ran out of gas and crashed. The aircraft wreckage fell into a ravine in front of a small cave half way up a mountain.

The other site the team will conduct a recovery operation at is also a crash site of a C-46. CILHI analysts are unsure how many were aboard that aircraft as it has yet to be correlated to a specific flight.

The terrain is going to provide an enormous challenge for the team, officials said. The team will spend time traveling on rugged roads in four-by-four vehicles, will cross rivers via ferries and foot, ride horseback for days at a time, all before they reach the base of the mountain where the first C-46 crash site is located. After all that, the team will still have to hike up and down the mountain two hours each way everyday to reach the crash site. Once recovery efforts are

completed there, the team will move to the other crash site.

The other site will encompass the same type of logistics to get to, but the trek will end with a four-day hike across a glacier.

Throughout the entire deployment, each team member will be carrying his individual rucksack, which will weigh about 80 pounds. In addition, the team will be responsible for transporting and traveling with approximately 5,000 pounds of equipment necessary for the excavation of the two sites.

"The training has been difficult, but it has been worth it. I look forward to the challenge," Harris said. "Unity is one of our goals prior to leaving on mission and we have been coming together to really form a team."

In the five years that Bendele has spent at CILHI, and the 18 years he has spent in the Army, he said this is the most difficult training he has encountered physically to get ready for a mission.

"This is body by Rouse," he said referring to the physical training program Rouse has created for the team:

- Altitude training at Mauna Kea (14,000 feet) on the Island of Hawaii
- Glacier and mountaineering training at the Northern Warfare Training Center in Alaska.
- Strenuous physical training five days a week to include weight training and cardio exercises.
- Twice a week the team takes two- to three-hour road marches up the mountains of Oahu carrying a rucksack full of equipment.

Morales agrees the training has been difficult.

"The physical training we've been conducting can be tiring but it's necessary in order to be prepared for any challenges we might encounter in Tibet," he said.

Regardless of the grueling training, Morales said it is an "extraordinary privilege" to be part of a team that will be traveling to a part of the world few have seen and bring home service members who gave their lives.

"As a photographer, shooting the landscapes of the Himalayas from an elevation of 16,000 feet and documenting this difficult recovery mission is probably a once in a lifetime opportunity," he said.

(Editor's note: This article was written by CILHI and the U.S. Total Army Personnel Command public affairs team. CILHI is a component of PERSCOM.)