

## Personnel Recovery Conference Discusses Major Issues

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ARLINGTON, Va., Jan. 26, 2001 -- The primary goals of DoD's fourth annual personnel recovery conference were to heighten awareness of personnel recovery functions among top-ranking DoD officials and other government agencies, and chart a course into the future, said Mel Richmond.

With more than 410 conferees, this year's assembly here Jan. 22-24 was more than double the size of last year's, according to Richmond, acting director of operations of the Defense Prisoner of War/Missing Personnel Office. He pointed out that more than 35 flag and general officers and civilian equivalents attended, a significant increase over previous years.

The senior officials participated in the panel discussions and workshops more than ever before, Richmond noted. "They lent critical experience and expertise to the discussions. They listened to the problems and challenges facing our recovery forces, participated in developing solutions to the challenges, and voiced support for what the operators are doing."

"Our service men and women, our allies and coalition partners must believe that if they become isolated, we will do everything in our power to ensure they return with honor," Robert L. Jones, deputy assistant secretary of defense for prisoner of war and missing personnel affairs, told the international gathering in his welcoming remarks. Jones was senior host of the conference.

Warfighters in the field need to hear DoD senior leadership voice their support and willingness to work the issues, Richmond said. Bringing American soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines home has always been a top priority for the nation, Richmond said. DoD's increased emphasis on this important function during the past four years reflects that commitment, he added.

"The biggest difference in this year's conference was that conferees focused on many more issues," he noted. "And we're getting better at identifying what the issues are. One of the biggest issues, he said, is to get warfighters something better than the Vietnam-era survivor radios that many still use today. The old and current equipment don't work well together, he remarked.

That's why U.S. conferees, at least, were so interested in the new Combat Survivor Evader Locator System program and that procurement stays on track, Richmond said. He emphasized, however, that the new radio won't solve all the interoperability problems.

"In its current form, the CSEL is essentially a U.S.-only system," he said. "That's a serious issue, because we fight as a coalition and with allies now. When you can't talk to each other, different procedures and different signals present great challenges to any recovery effort."

Conferees discussed the possibility of developing a coalition version of the new radio. A prototype copy of the new radio and other search and rescue equipment were on display. Other conference exhibits included new personnel recovery mission computer software, protective gear, command and control systems, and other search-and-rescue items.

"Industry participation is very important to us," Richmond said. "Numerous representatives at the conference heard the challenges facing us. When they go back home, they can tell their companies what the personnel recovery community needs."

Richmond was particularly pleased about having representatives from allied nations for the first time. Participants came from Germany, the United Kingdom, Indonesia, Singapore, Canada, Australia, the

Netherlands and Thailand.

"We're a very small air force and we're starting to develop ourselves in search and rescue, both in the civilian and military sides," said Lt. Col. Tang Tong Seng of the Singapore air force. "We came here with the objective to learn as much as we can from an established air force like the U.S. Air Force.

"We've learned a lot and we're going back to share it with our side," he continued. "We learned that the doctrine of development is one element we're lacking."

Tang said civil search and rescue operations would be his air force's more likely responsibilities than military ones. "We have a 200-mile area of coverage and we want to do it well every time," he said. "We need to make sure our system is well oiled with all the proper command and control structures. That's what we want to develop."

"We don't train and equip to conduct civil search and rescue," Richmond said. "We train and equip to do our wartime mission, and it so happens that, sometimes, those can be used in support of civil authorities."

Just as the Singaporeans came to learn, so did U.S. Air Force Chief Master Sgt. Ricky Arnold. He's chief of the survival, evasion resistance and escape program at Air Combat Command Headquarters at Langley Air Force Base, Va.

"We train the rescue and recovery force and a large portion of the panels and workshops spoke directly to that," Arnold said. "We're not going to call them 'lessons learned' anymore, we're going to call them 'items for action.'

"Air Combat Command is a primary force provider, so we're going to ensure that the training issues we discussed here proliferate throughout our service," he said. "It's good to see all the 'arms' involved in personnel recovery mission brought together under one roof -- it's been a long time coming."



Capt. Jonathan Tan (from left) and Lt. Col. Tang Tong Seng of the Singapore air force chat with Mr. Mel Richmond, acting director of operations, Defense Prisoner of War and Missing Personnel Office, at the DoD Personnel Recovery Conference in Arlington, Va. Representatives from eight countries attended this year's conference, held Jan. 22-24. (Photo by Rudi Williams)



High-resolution image