

'Mr. Good Morning, Vietnam' Working to Recover Remains

By Rudi Williams
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, July 19, 2002 -- Adrian Cronauer, loosely portrayed by Robin Williams in the movie "Good Morning, Vietnam," recently returned where he made that greeting famous as a disc jockey on Armed Forces Radio during the Vietnam War.

Cronauer was again on official duty in the city he knew as Saigon – now called Ho Chi Minh City – more than 35 years later.

The former Air Force announcer, now an assistant to the director of the Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office, was part of a delegation visiting sites in Southeast Asia where Americans are searching for missing servicemen. He wanted to see first-hand what members of the Joint Task Force for Full Accounting do in their quest for remains.

While he has read the reports and seen the briefings, Cronauer said it's different when you see it. "When I'm talking to veterans and families, I want to be able to say, 'I'm not just telling you what they told me, I've seen it for myself,'" he said.

"I learned that there are a lot of dedicated people over there trying to locate and retrieve the remains of missing service members," he said. "The military has promised that this is what will happen. And our motto at the office is, 'Keeping the Promise.'"

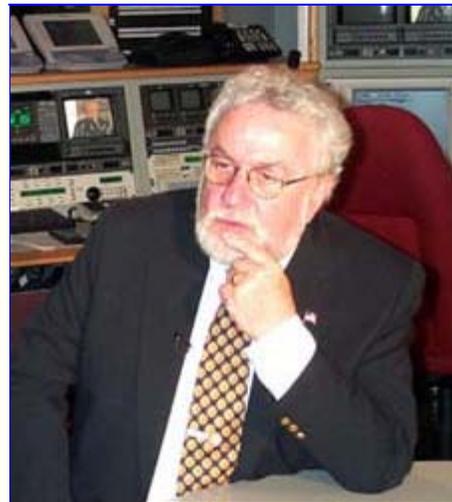
Cronauer had been offered his current job some time ago but was unsure about taking it. But during a post-Sept. 11 conversation with his wife, he said, "You know, Jean, if I was about 30 years younger, I might go back into the military."

Her response was: "Did it ever occur to you that if you took the job at the Pentagon, you might be able to make more of a contribution than you could in uniform?"

So Cronauer decided to put his Washington law practice on hold for a while and accept the job.

"The amount of resources we have to expend to keep the promise is significant," he noted. "You just don't walk out into the jungle and say, 'Oh, there's a plane, and we'll get those remains.' The soil in Vietnam is very acidic and remains deteriorate."

Cronauer explained the detailed work of anthropologists and forensic scientists in finding and identifying remains. For example, he said, researchers are in the Da Nang area of Vietnam trying to retrieve the remains of an American pilot whose plane hit the top of a mountain 30 some years ago. "We're digging up the site and all of the soil goes through a sifter that allows



(Click photo for screen-resolution image.)

Adrian Cronauer, who made the greeting, "Good Morning, Vietnam!" famous as a mid-1960s Air Force disc jockey on Armed Forces Radio is now doing his best to help locate and retrieve remains of missing servicemen in Southeast Asia and other parts of the world as a member of the Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office. Photo by Amy L. Vaughters. (Click photo for screen-resolution image; [high-resolution image](#) available.)

soil to go through and sift out anything the size of a human tooth," he said.

Cronauer's always looking for ways to work with families and veterans' groups to achieve the fullest possible accounting for missing Americans. This covers Americans missing in all conflicts from World War II to the present.

The department sends teams to North Korea to retrieve American remains. Operations there are conducted in the same manner as those in Southeast Asia.

Cronauer said North Korean cold, harsh winters and the government's lack of cooperation also thwarts investigator's efforts to repatriate remains.

He said that U.S. representatives are trying to get North Korean officials to agree to use oral histories. "They can tell us about the battles they were in and where they were," Cronauer said. "The prison guards can tell us where the bodies were buried. These people are getting older and slowly dying. We want to get as much information from them before they die."

Cronauer said he's slated to go to North Korea with a delegation in September, but there are no plans to return to Vietnam or Laos yet. He said a team went to the Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands to search for World War II remains.

There's also a permanent research contingent in Moscow searching through archives for clues about Americans missing from the Vietnam, Korea, the Cold War and World War II periods.

On Americans still alive as prisoners of war, Cronauer said, "Over the years, we've gotten hundreds of reports about possible live Americans being held somewhere in the world, including Vietnam. If there's any possibility that a live American might be held somewhere, our top priority is to try and find that person. We follow every report we get as far as we can to see where it leads."

But he said, so far, none of the reports has proven to be of any value. But "as long as the possibility exists, we're going to go out there and follow up every single lead we can find," he said. "I believe it's possible that there are live American captives, but I'm not sure how likely it is."

Part of Cronauer's job is to visit families across the country to provide updated briefings about their particular case and the work being done by his office, the Joint Task Force for Full Accounting and the Army Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii.

"We have a whole division that does family updates about 10 or 12 times a year," he said. Within that about a 300-mile radius, any family member of someone who's still missing or unaccounted can come to a briefing, usually held on a Saturday.

Families are given an overview of POW/missing personnel operations around the world, which includes nearly 100 people in Washington and more than 500 people around the world.

"That's one of the most rewarding parts of this whole job," Cronauer said. "These are people who sometimes for years have known nothing about their missing person - husband, father, brother or whoever it is. Now, they're learning something. And the satisfaction we can bring to them sometimes gives them a sense of closure."

The next family update is scheduled in Kansas City, Mo., Aug. 17; New York City, on Sept. 21; Salt Lake City, Oct. 26; and Tampa, Fla., Nov. 16.

Cronauer deals with veterans' service organizations such as the American Legion, Veterans of

Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans, AMVETS and smaller groups.

He has also been working closely with the National Alliance of Families, National League of Families and various groups of Korean War families.

"I try to give them a better idea of what our office is doing," Cronauer said. "When I came into the military, I was promised that my government would never abandon me. So we're trying to keep that promise."