

AHU RECOVER AUSTRALIAN DIGGERS' REMAINS

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Mr Brian Manns, the Army History Unit's (AHU) Deputy Head has had the lead in the ongoing investigation work into the Australian soldiers killed in action in the Vietnam War, but whose bodies were not recovered.

In total, six Australians were lost in Vietnam, but their bodies not recovered at the time of Australia's withdrawal from the conflict. Two of the missing were the crew of a RAAF Canberra bomber, and the remaining four were soldiers.



The recovered 'Dog Tags' of PTE Gillson, found on Anzac Day 2007, in the Nui Gan Toi Mountains 60km NE of Saigon.

For several years a group of Australian Vietnam veterans who formed an organisation known as "Operation Aussies Home" (OAH) have been investigating the six Australian "MIA" cases. After a lot of work, including a lot of time spent in Vietnam, OAH finally found the makeshift grave that contained the suspected human remains of two of the Australian soldiers in April this year. The two, LCPL Richard Parker and PTE Peter Gillson were killed during a contact between A Coy of 1 RAR and a Vietcong force in an area north of Bien Hoa in November 1965.

As a result of the discovery, Brian Manns was directed by the Deputy Chief of Army to take a team of forensic experts to the site in order to recover and identify the remains. The team of six included MAJ Jack Thurgar, one of the Army Reserve research officers in the AHU headquarters, and four experts. These included forensic odontologists CMDR Matt Blenkin of the Royal Australian Navy, forensic anthropologist Mr Russell Lain, Dr Denise

Donlon from the University of Sydney, and Mr Tony Lowe, an archaeologist from the firm of Casey and Lowe.

The team arrived in Bien Hoa on the evening of Sunday 22 April 2007 and were briefed by members of OAH. The next day the team met with Vietnamese MIA officials and work to recover the remains commenced on Tuesday 24 April. The work was hot, difficult and painstaking and by Friday 27 April the remains had been removed from the ground. Over the weekend of 28 and 29 April the odontologists and the anthropologist worked hard to confirm that the remains were indeed those of Richard Parker and Peter Gillson. That identification was completed on the afternoon of Sunday 29 April.

On Monday 30 April 2007 the remains were handed over to officials of the MIA department of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in order that its experts could confirm the team's identification. The team then left Vietnam for Australia.

One of the odontologists, Russell Lain, later travelled to Hanoi to assist the Vietnamese forensic experts in their confirmation of the earlier identification.

On 31 May 2007, Brian Manns and Jack Thurgar traveled to Hanoi and accepted custody of the remains of the two Australians from the Vietnamese government on the following day. On Monday 4 June the remains were ceremonially loaded aboard a RAAF C130 by soldiers of 1 RAR and commenced their long flight back to Australia. The aircraft touched down in Darwin on the morning of Tuesday 5 June and for the first time, members of the Parker and Gillson families were able to spend some time with the remains of their long awaited loved ones.

The C130 flew from Darwin to Richmond, near Sydney, the next day. The two soldiers were formally welcomed home by Mr Bruce Billson, the Minister for Veterans' Affairs and the Minister Assisting the Minister for Defence, and the Land Commander, MAJGEN Mark Kelly during an emotional tarmac ceremony. The crowd at the ceremony included a large contingent of Vietnam veterans, and its climax was a fly-over by two Iroquois helicopters.



COL Mieu, Head of the VN Govt MIA Department formally transferring the remains of LCPL Parker and PTE Gillson to Mr Brian Manns AHU in Hanoi.

Brian and Jack transferred custody for the two men's remains to the funeral director and headed home to Canberra buoyed by the expressions of gratitude from both of the Australian soldiers' families. The completion of the task for both Brian and Jack was attendance at both funerals in Canberra and Melbourne.

Brian has subsequently been directed by the DCA to continue investigating another of our Vietnam War missing, LCPL John Gillespie, who was a medic on a RAAF dustoff that was shot down and burned in the Long Hai Hills in Vietnam in 1971. LCPL Gillespie was trapped in the burning aircraft and despite the best efforts of the RAAF crew members could not be extricated. It is hoped that further investigation may provide information that will lead to a thorough search of the crash site, or any other site of burial in order to finalise the case.

In conjunction with the Gillespie investigation and recovery work, Brian and Jack will also make Vietnamese authorities aware of the last missing Australian Army serviceman, PTE David Fisher. PTE Fisher, who was serving with the SASR in Vietnam, was lost when he fell from a rope suspended from a helicopter during a "hot extraction" in 1969. Despite several days of searching, his body was never found.

Army has now solved the riddle 50% of its Vietnam War missing, and it is hoped that the other 50% of the mystery can also be solved.



Image courtesy of Dept of Defence
PTE Gillson returning to Australia. 1 RAR Bearer Party descending the ramp at RAAF Richmond from the C130 which transported him back to Australia.