

VFW Joins DPAA in Vietnam for 30-Year Commemoration

Past Commander-in-Chief returns to Hanoi more than three decades since his first diplomatic mission to Southeast Asia

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WASHINGTON – Last week in Hanoi, Vietnam, Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) Past Commander-in-Chief Larry Rivers and VFW Executive Director Ryan Gallucci took part in a series of events surrounding key anniversaries in U.S.–Vietnam relations. The visit coincided with the 30th anniversary of reestablishing diplomatic ties between the United States and Vietnam, as well as the 40th anniversary of the first American recovery mission for those missing in action from the Vietnam War.

“I want to thank the (VFW) Commander-in-Chief for inviting me to be his representative here,” said Rivers. “It means a lot to me personally.”

VFW Commander-in-Chief Al Lipphardt chose Rivers – a Marine Corps Vietnam veteran – to represent the organization because Rivers played a key role in reestablishing veteran-to-veteran relations with Vietnam in the early 1990s, building up to the formal establishment of the American embassy in Hanoi in 1995. Rivers, who at the time served as the VFW Washington Office Executive Director, personally participated in several visits to Vietnam in the 90s, alongside key leaders like Senators John Kerry and John McCain, demonstrating that American veterans from Vietnam sought to work with former adversaries to advance common interests, like accounting for missing service members.

“I remember very vividly the many events that took place in the early ’90’s ... the role the VFW played, the very difficult and hard decisions we often made in order to make this reconciliation come about,” said Rivers. “Our leadership and our foresight as an organization has paid dividends.”

In addition to formal celebrations of these key anniversaries, the VFW delegation attended a series of meetings and events around Hanoi to promote the evolving relationship between

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the United States and Vietnam. These events included attending the symbolic handover of wartime files and artifacts at Vietnam's Archive III as well as the presentation of DNA sequencing equipment to the Vietnam Academy of Science and Technology. The equipment, which was presented to the institute by U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam Marc Knapper and DPAA Director Kelly McKeague, will provide state-of-the-art capability to help Vietnam identify its missing from the conflict that ended more than 50 years ago.

"It was important to us to move forward to a more normal relationship so we could have access to the rest of the country," said Rivers. "Access alone and the more than 700 families that have been brought to closure because of our recovery efforts, it was worth what we did some 30 years ago."

During a meeting with the Veterans Association of Vietnam, Rivers highlighted the ongoing support from VFW members who continue to return war artifacts for the VFW to formally hand over to help Vietnam identify its missing. On Tuesday, the VFW turned over another set of artifacts to the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington, D.C., alongside DPAA leadership.

"The VFW has a record of service and should be proud of our efforts, not only during times of war, but in times of bringing peace," said Rivers.

VFW also met with the Vietnam Union of Friendship Organizations (VUFO), which is an agency designed to foster people-to-people relationships between Vietnam and other nations. VUFO has played a key role in the VFW's relationship with Vietnam over the last 30 years.

"I think it is important to realize, just as we did after WWII, that enemies move on and become friends and allies," said Rivers. "I think that is happening here in Vietnam."

Finally, Rivers sat down for a one-on-one meeting with Ambassador Knapper to discuss the evolving relationship between the United States and Vietnam and also received a limited country team briefing alongside McKeague leading into the week's events.

"Certainly, we are proud to have been at the forefront, fought for our country, and now being a major force in bringing peace between former enemies," said Rivers. "It proves the VFW is the very best veterans organization and provides the very best leadership among the veterans community in the whole world."

As Rivers concluded his visit, he shared a special message to his fellow Vietnam War veterans living in the United States and abroad.

"I want to end by saying a sincere thank you to our many Vietnam veterans that are still alive, you served your country well, you should be proud of that service," said Rivers.

See photos from the visit and ceremony [here](#).