



GAO

Accountability * Integrity * Reliability

United States General Accounting Office
Washington, DC 20548

July 20, 2001

The Honorable Martin T. Meehan
House of Representatives

Subject: The Peace Corps Failed to Properly Supervise Missing Volunteer and Lost Track of Him

Dear Mr. Meehan:

This letter responds to your May 11, 2001, request for information surrounding the disappearance of Walter J. Poirier, a Peace Corps volunteer in Bolivia, who reportedly was last seen on or about February 22, 2001, in La Paz, the capital of Bolivia. Specifically, you requested that we conduct an investigation to determine (1) whether the Peace Corps failed to properly supervise Mr. Poirier's activities and (2) the actions taken by the Peace Corps and the U.S. Embassy in Bolivia when informed that Mr. Poirier was missing. As you know, GAO is currently conducting a separate overall review of the Peace Corps' operations regarding its volunteers.

We conducted our investigation from June 1, 2001, through mid-July 2001 in accordance with investigative standards established by the President's Council on Integrity and Efficiency. We interviewed Mr. Poirier's parents; representatives of the Peace Corps, including the Office of Inspector General (OIG); agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI); U.S. Embassy personnel in Bolivia; Peace Corps volunteers; and Bolivian nationals who had contact with Mr. Poirier.

In summary, we determined that Mr. Poirier failed to follow certain Peace Corps location and notification procedures.¹ Although the Peace Corps Associate Director responsible for Mr. Poirier while he was in Bolivia knew that Mr. Poirier was not following these procedures, he took no steps to correct the situation and, as a result, lost track of Mr. Poirier. Furthermore, the Associate Director's failure to adequately monitor Mr. Poirier contributed to the difficulties encountered by the U.S. Embassy in its efforts to locate Mr. Poirier. Once it was determined that Mr. Poirier was missing, the U.S. Embassy, Peace Corps, multiple entities of the Bolivian National Police, and fire/rescue teams in and around La Paz and throughout Bolivia conducted an extensive search. As of the date of this letter, Mr. Poirier has not been found.

¹ Prior to beginning assignments, all Peace Corps volunteers in Bolivia are to take an 11-week training course that includes Peace Corps location and notification requirements for that country. We were told that Mr. Poirier attended such a course.

The Peace Corps Failed to Properly Supervise Mr. Poirier and Lost Track of Him

The Peace Corps Associate Director for Bolivia was directly responsible for Mr. Poirier while he was in Bolivia, as well as over 40 other Peace Corps volunteers in Bolivia. The Associate Director, who was responsible for helping the volunteers find housing and set up meetings with their Bolivian project supervisors, was also supposed to periodically check on the volunteers' well-being.

Mr. Poirier was assigned to work on a tourism project in the Zongo Valley, a remote area about 3 hours outside of La Paz. The Associate Director said that on December 22, 2000, he drove Mr. Poirier to the Zongo Valley to conduct a site inspection and to find a suitable place for him to live near the site. The Associate Director located a house in the village of Camisique where Mr. Poirier was assigned a room in which to live. The room was not available at the time, however, and Mr. Poirier returned with the Associate Director to La Paz that same day. This was the last day the Associate Director saw or spoke to Mr. Poirier. Mr. Poirier never moved into the room in the village of Camisique and it was not until March 6, 2001, that the Associate Director, after visiting the house in Camisique, learned that Mr. Poirier did not live there. Instead, Mr. Poirier had rented a room in the village of Zongo, further up the Zongo Valley from Camisique.

The Associate Director told us that Mr. Poirier failed to file a locator form, which is required so that volunteers can be reached if an emergency occurs. The Associate Director also said that Mr. Poirier failed to follow "out of site notification" policy, which requires volunteers to notify their Associate Director, their secretary, or a person they reside with when they are going to be away from their in-country place of residence for more than 24 hours. The Associate Director added that he had problems with Mr. Poirier's apparent reluctance to move out of the apartment that a group of volunteers had rented in La Paz to the room he thought Mr. Poirier had rented in the village of Camisique. The Associate Director said he knew through discussions with other volunteers that Mr. Poirier was still living in the La Paz apartment in January 2001, even though he should have been living in the village of Camisique at that time.

The Associate Director could not explain why he did not reach out to Mr. Poirier to discuss his failure to follow established procedures, saying only that he was very busy supervising other volunteers. The Associate Director said that it is the responsibility of the Peace Corps' office receptionist, who actually receives and files the locator forms, to notify him if a volunteer fails to file the form. The Associate Director believed that Mr. Poirier had not filed a locator form. However, the receptionist told us that Mr. Poirier did file a locator form on January 31, 2001, which indicated he was living at an apartment in La Paz. When we showed the Associate Director Mr. Poirier's locator form, he said that he had never seen it. The Associate Director also said that it did not really matter that Mr. Poirier had filed a form providing his La Paz address, because he did not submit a locator form with his actual address in the Zongo Valley.²

² During a search of Mr. Poirier's residence in the village of Zongo, a completed locator form with that address was found. The form had not been submitted to the Peace Corps' Bolivian office.

Furthermore, the Associate Director told us that when he returned a March 2, 2001, message from Mr. Poirier's Bolivian project supervisor on March 5, he learned that Mr. Poirier had missed a scheduled meeting with her on March 2. The Associate Director told us that the project supervisor required that Mr. Poirier touch base with her every 2 weeks. The Associate Director said he relayed this information to U.S. Embassy personnel when it was determined that Mr. Poirier was missing.

Mr. Poirier's Bolivian project supervisor told us that she informally agreed to meet with Mr. Poirier on a regular basis to discuss the project. She added, however, that there was never any agreement with Mr. Poirier or the Peace Corps that he meet with her every 2 weeks. The project supervisor also said that on March 2, she telephoned the Associate Director and left a message for him. On March 5, the Associate Director returned her call, and she told him that she wanted to schedule a future meeting with him and Mr. Poirier. She said she never told the Associate Director that Mr. Poirier had missed a scheduled March 2 meeting.

We informed the U.S. Embassy and the FBI of the Associate Director's and the Bolivian project supervisor's conflicting statements. The FBI subsequently interviewed the Associate Director, and the FBI told us that he admitted that his statement to us and U.S. Embassy personnel that Mr. Poirier had missed a scheduled meeting with his Bolivian project supervisor had no basis in fact. The Associate Director told the FBI that he said Mr. Poirier had missed a March 2 meeting to deflect blame elsewhere because he felt responsible for not keeping a closer watch on Mr. Poirier. According to the FBI, the best information available indicates that Mr. Poirier was last seen at the project supervisor's office in La Paz on or about February 22, 2001.

The Associate Director told us that the last e-mail he received from Mr. Poirier was on or about January 29, 2001, when he wrote that he was having a problem with the financing for his project in the Zongo Valley. The Associate Director said the e-mail concerned him and that on or about January 31, he asked his secretary to contact Mr. Poirier by telephone. He said his secretary was unsuccessful in locating Mr. Poirier. The Associate Director assumed that he had moved to his rented room in the village of Camisique. The Associate Director also said that he became so busy supervising the other volunteers that Mr. Poirier "dropped off my radar screen." He said he made no further attempt to contact Mr. Poirier.

Both the Country Director and Deputy Country Director for the Peace Corps in Bolivia told us that the Associate Director was not keeping close enough contact with Mr. Poirier. The Country Director said no one followed up on Mr. Poirier's failure to turn in his locator form. When we told the Country Director that Mr. Poirier had turned in his locator form for the La Paz apartment on January 31, she said this was the first she heard of it. The Country Director also said that if the Associate Director had reason to believe that Mr. Poirier was not working and living in the Zongo Valley, he should have done something about it. She also said that if the Associate Director knew that Mr. Poirier was visiting La Paz or his project supervisor, he should have also known that Mr. Poirier was not completing his out of site notification reports. The Country Director said the Associate Director should have corrected this situation.

Mr. Poirier's failure to follow established procedures and the Peace Corps' failure to keep track of him led to early difficulties in focusing the search.

The U.S. Embassy Initiated an Extensive Search When Notified That Mr. Poirier Was Missing

The Peace Corps was alerted that Mr. Poirier was missing on March 4, 2001, when Mr. Poirier's mother called the Deputy Country Director for the Peace Corps in Bolivia and reported that she had not heard from her son in over a month. That same day, the Deputy Country Director called the La Paz apartment where she believed Mr. Poirier was staying. The other Peace Corps volunteers told the Deputy Country Director that they had not seen Mr. Poirier since January 31. The Deputy Country Director told the Associate Director on March 4 that she was not able to contact Mr. Poirier.

The Country Director told us that even if Mr. Poirier's mother had not called on March 4, the Peace Corps would have initiated a search for him based on the fact that Mr. Poirier had missed a March 2 meeting with his Bolivian project supervisor. However, the Associate Director made the statement about the missed meeting, which was a fabrication, after he learned of the disappearance of Mr. Poirier as a result of the mother's telephone call. Therefore, there is no reason to believe that the Peace Corps would have initiated a search at that time.

After he was notified on March 4 that Mr. Poirier was missing, the Associate Director attempted to locate Mr. Poirier on March 5, which included a telephone call and a trip to the Zongo Valley. On or about March 5, the U.S. Embassy was notified that Mr. Poirier was missing, and it immediately initiated and coordinated a search and investigation in an attempt to locate Mr. Poirier. The coordinated effort used available U.S. Embassy and Peace Corps personnel and various elements of the Bolivian government.

After being told about Mr. Poirier's disappearance on March 5, 2001, the Peace Corps' OIG sent an investigator to La Paz on March 16. The investigator searched for Mr. Poirier until March 31. On April 19, 2001, the FBI became involved after you, Senator Edward Kennedy, and Senator John Kerry asked for FBI involvement in an April 12, 2001, letter to Attorney General Ashcroft. The OIG investigator returned to La Paz on April 20 and stayed until May 3. The FBI's investigation took approximately 2 weeks and included polygraphing several suspects developed by the Bolivian National Police, and following leads that often led to remote parts of the Bolivian countryside.

The Bolivian National Police, which searched morgues, hospitals, prisons, hotels, and hostels in and around La Paz and throughout Bolivia, are still searching for Mr. Poirier. A Bolivian fire/rescue team conducted extensive searches in waterways and the Zongo Valley jungle. The U.S. Embassy and the Peace Corps have broadcast information about Mr. Poirier's disappearance throughout Bolivia in the print media, newspapers, tabloids, television, and radio announcing that a substantial reward is available. In addition, thousands of posters about Mr. Poirier's disappearance have been distributed throughout Bolivia.

We are sending copies of this letter to the Director and Inspector General of the Peace Corps; the Secretary of State; the U.S. Ambassador to Bolivia; and interested congressional committees. Copies of this letter will also be made available to others on request. This letter will be available at www.gao.gov. If you have any questions, please contact me at (202) 512-7455 or Assistant Director Patrick F. Sullivan at (202) 512-6722. Senior Special Agent John Cooney, Senior Attorney Barry Shillito, and Senior Analyst Shelia James made significant contributions to this investigation and letter.

Sincerely yours,



Robert H. Hast
Managing Director
Office of Special Investigations

(600897)