



Written by **Kirk Kidwell**

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American POWs in Southeast Asia

Are American prisoners of war still being held hostage in Southeast Asia? A growing number of military and intelligence officers are publicly charging that not only are American POWs still alive in Vietnam and Laos, but that the U.S. government has been negligent in taking actions which would result in the rescue of American prisoners.

The debate over whether American POWs are still being held against their will in Vietnam has raged since 1973, when the government of North Vietnam released a total of 591 American prisoners of war over a three-month period. For the families of those still missing, the issue has never lost its urgency. But for many Americans, who would like to put the Vietnam War behind them, the issue has seemed far removed.

Over the past several years, however, a series of movies has reenergized the national debate over Americans still missing in Southeast Asia. First came **Uncommon Valor** in 1983. Then, **Missing In Action** in 1984. And now, last year's box-office hit **Rambo: First Blood, Part II**. Once again, the specter of American servicemen being held by Communist governments in Southeast Asia has captivated the nation.

Yet Hollywood cannot claim all the credit for this resurgence of popular interest about the fate of the 2,441 Americans still missing in Southeast Asia. Last October, Robert McFarlane, at the time National Security Advisor to President Reagan, commented during what he assumed was an off-the-record discussion that "there have to be live Americans there." He went on to admit, "There is more that we ought to be doing than we are."

McFarlane's comments aroused a great deal of controversy in Washington. But it was not until last month, when two high-ranking U.S. delegations traveled to Vietnam and Laos to discuss a timely resolution of the matter, that the issue began to receive widespread national attention. In the aftermath of the trip taken by the second of these delegations — which was headed by Senator Frank Murkowski (R-AK), chairman of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee — a series of hearings was scheduled for January.

"We will proceed in an open forum to hear from the administration and those who maintain the position that there still are American servicemen being held against their will in Southeast Asia," Senator Murkowski stated. "In the light of public debate, the Committee will attempt to give all Americans a clear picture of this troubling portion of the MIA/POW issue."

The picture emerging from the two days of hearings held thus far is that American POWs are, in fact, still being held captive in Southeast Asia. "It is my personal opinion that American prisoners of war, servicemen and civilians who were left behind are still being held today against their will in Southeast Asia by the Communist governments of Vietnam and Laos," retired Colonel Earl P. Hopper told the committee.



Hopper, whose son has been missing in Southeast Asia since he was shot down over the Vietnamese-Laotian border in 1968, presented the committee with a pair of documents written by the Central Intelligence Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA). He claimed these documents prove “beyond a doubt that the Central Intelligence Agency knew American prisoners were in Laotian prison camps” in the early 1970s.

“It is significant,” he noted, “that these reports give the number of American prisoners held at specific locations in Laos. More significant, however, is the CIA’s designation of these camps as confirmed prison camps. [The report] states that in order for a prison camp to be confirmed, it must be reported by two or more independent sources.”

“Why weren’t these prisoners returned and where are they today?” Hopper asked. “Someone knows the answer to these questions. The burden of responsibility to obtain answers rests squarely on the shoulders of the United States government. To date, they have not fulfilled that responsibility.”

Hopper’s testimony leads to the conclusion that when American POWs were released from North Vietnam in 1973, the U.S. government knew more POWs were being held in Laos and apparently did nothing about it. None of the Americans captured in Laos were ever returned alive. Over the last thirteen years, the Laotian government has, however, returned fifteen sets of remains.

Yet the question remains: Are American POWs still living in captivity in Laos? According to sworn testimony presented to the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee by three U.S. Army officers, the answer to that question is yes.

Retired Army Major Mark Smith testified: “As recently as five days ago, I personally viewed evidence which proves beyond any doubt that in excess of thirty Americans and other nationalities are being held as prisoners of war in Southeast Asia. This evidence cannot be described in detail but can generally be described as current and specific evidence which one of my sources in Southeast Asia has allowed me to see.”

Smith, together with Sergeant First Class Melvin McIntire, told the committee of the experiences related to the live POW issue which they encountered while serving on active duty with the Special Forces Detachment in South Korea (SFD-K). Smith and McIntire have also filed suit against the Reagan Administration over what they believe to be a concerted effort by government officials to cover up evidence about living American POWs in Southeast Asia.

When Smith — a former POW who was released in 1973 — was first assigned to SFD-K, he did not believe that there were any American POWs still being held against their will in Southeast Asia. However, in 1981, he became acquainted with a military officer in Thailand who gave him “a complete briefing on suspected and known locations of United States prisoners of war. The suspected and known locations of POWs as reported to me were all in Laos.”

Over the next three years, in conjunction with Sergeant McIntire, Major Smith established a network of agents among “the Thai military, the Laos resistance, the Pathet Lao, the free Vietnamese, gun smugglers, gold smugglers, drug smugglers, and anyone who could provide



information.”

By early 1982, Smith and others became convinced that American POWs were being held captive in Laos. “I learned of approximately 200 living Americans in Laos who were prisoners of war,” McIntire testified. “I was being provided information in detail sufficient to identify the number of American prisoners of war being held in the general vicinity. I was also being told of the conditions under which they were being held.”

Smith regularly briefed representatives of Military Intelligence, the DIA and the Joint Casualty Resolution Center in Bangkok on the progress of their investigation. However, in 1984, “there was a major compromise of one Laos agent who was reported to have been shot by the Vietnamese.” As a result, Smith sought to establish a different channel of communication which would allow him “to bypass American military intelligence channels because of all the leaks.” Informed sources have told THE NEW AMERICAN that the individual who was responsible for this compromise was Lieutenant Colonel Paul Mather, assigned to the Joint Casualty Resolution Center.

In April 1984, Smith’s testimony noted that “in conjunction with preparing a briefing paper for a certain U.S. Army Major General, I received the code word from a general officer in Thailand that there were three American prisoners of war available to be taken out of Laos in May 1984.” This general has been identified by reliable sources as Army Major General Kenneth Leuer, currently commanding general at Fort Polk.

Smith recalled that after General Leuer had read two cover letters accompanying the briefing paper, he “turned white, handed the briefing back to me, and said ‘this is too hot for me to handle, big guy.’ I told him at that time: ‘If you as a Major General can’t handle this, what am I supposed to do with it?’ I was told that if I was smart, what I would do was to put the briefing through a shredder and forget the entire issue.”

Two weeks later, when Smith notified General Leuer that three American POWs held in Laos could be brought out if the U.S. met certain condition, “all SFD-K operations to Thailand or to Southeast Asia were declared unauthorized and terminated.

“Prior to this time,” Major Smith added, “SFD-K operations had been going on for three and a half years. I was told that it was no longer the SFD-K’s job to develop or have any further participation in the POW/MIA issue. I was told that if I wanted to be a Lieutenant Colonel in the Army, I should forget about the POW/MIA information which had been reported to intelligence channels for the past three years. I was told in no uncertain terms that I should forget the matter.

“The conclusion I reached about the significance of this change of method of operations,” Smith told the Veterans Affairs Committee, “is that the production of intelligence on American prisoners of war was determined by some agency of the U.S. government to be unacceptable.”

Claims Backed By Others

As incredible as the story told by Smith and McIntire may seem, it is not without support. Lieutenant Colonel Robert Howard, their commanding officer in Korea, told the committee: “I



would like to say to this committee that the information that was presented here by Major Mark Smith and Sergeant First Class McIntire is honest, truthful information. And I appear here today to confirm their statements.”

When asked whether the intelligence information on which the Smith and McIntire claims are based was available, Colonel Howard replied, “I have been told that some of the evidence is not available now because some of the evidence has been destroyed.” However, reliable sources have told The New American