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America's POW Secrets Exposed

"You are here to learn," a Communist Chinese camp official explained to an American POW near the Manchurian-Chinese border in early 1951. The POW, U.S. Army Major Fred A. Smith, was told by the communist official that his enforced schooling "may take one year, ten years, 20, 30, or even 40 years, and some of you may die here. But if you die, don't worry. We will bury you deep so that you won't stink."

Major Smith was fortunate enough to make it home, where his testimony became part of the official record. But his words, and many of the accounts of his colleagues, were buried and forgotten. The fates of hundreds — if not thousands — of fellow prisoners of war were thus sealed — not just by the communists, whose patterns of deception are a hallmark, but also by the U.S. government to which the captured had given their devotion.

Now, however, more evidence is being exposed to public light about this longstanding stain on America's honor, including revelations about how much the U.S. government knew of hundreds of POWs who were left alive in the hands of the communists after the Korean conflict (as others had been after World War II, and as more would be during the Vietnam War). Despite the passage of decades, there is ample reason to believe that some U.S. servicemen are still being held alive in North Korea and elsewhere.

Recent congressional testimony also provided ghastly details about the tortures of American prisoners at the behest of the Kremlin, including mind-altering procedures and terrible medical experiments. After this monstrous treatment, many of our men were executed, while others (from both the Korean and Vietnam Wars) were subsequently transferred to the Soviet Union. This testimony comes not from the imagination of a pulp fiction writer spinning his sensational tale, but from a top associate of the Soviets who was himself involved in the program. This high-ranking and reliable defector long tried to provide his proofs to U.S. officials, but they wanted none of it.

Truth Long Buried

The truth is that much of the evidence just now seeping out has been known for decades; the U.S. government had it available and sat on it, preferring to provide a shield for the communists and blinders for the public.

As far back as 1953, retired Lieutenant General James A. Van Fleet, who had commanded the U.S. 8th Army in Korea (and whose son was among the POW/MIAs), was quoted in the **New York Times** as saying that "a large percentage of the 8,000 American soldiers listed as missing in action are still alive." Van Fleet was not alone in this assessment. General Mark Clark, former U.S. commander in Korea, upon his sudden resignation from the Army in 1953, accused the communists of holding several thousand American servicemen after the prisoner switches supposedly had been completed. But even such blunt comments from well-respected leaders



evoked no results; indeed, the remarks were soon forgotten.

Nevertheless, reports continue to surface about Americans being held alive in North Korea from the days of the Korean War. A recent report that appeared in the Bangkok-based **Asia Times** included an interview with a former Pyongyang secret police official, Oh Young Nam, whose father was reportedly a bodyguard to the late North Korean dictator Kim Il Sung. Oh Young Nam reported that between 1982 and 1993 he made numerous visits to a secret prison camp north of Pyongyang where elderly black and white men were housed, which was described to him by guards as a facility for U.S. prisoners from the Korean War. He said that one segregated sector was marked “USA” in Roman letters. Defector Oh recalled that once, during the early 1980s, he offered a beer to a black American at the camp.

After both the Korean and Vietnam Wars, Washington kept a tight lid on the story of abandoned POWs. Consider the frustration, four decades after the comments by Generals Van Fleet and Clark, of a Vietnam War hero, Colonel Millard Peck, who headed the Defense Intelligence Agency’s MIA/POW office. Peck’s assignment came after a series of embarrassments exposed the DIA’s “mindset to debunk” reports about living POWs in Southeast Asia.

After being stymied at each attempt he made to follow up on live sighting reports, Peck resigned in disgust in the spring of 1991. In his resignation letter, the Green Beret colonel said that the POW effort “is being controlled and a cover-up may be in progress. The entire charade does not appear to be an honest effort, and may never have been.... That national leaders continue to address the prisoner of war and missing in action issue as the ‘highest national priority’ is a travesty.”

Since then, the Clinton Administration has thrown its diplomatic arms around the communist Vietnamese and tossed money and aid to the North Koreans — even as these communist regimes continue to threaten our allies in Seoul and our own troops on the Korean Peninsula.

The official “mindset” against finding the truth about our missing men goes even further, and is not merely a product of an entrenched bureaucracy, says Representative Robert Dornan (R-CA), chairman of the House Subcommittee on Military Personnel. “This shameful institutional performance is best described,” declared Dornan, “as an unrelenting ‘predisposition to discredit and dismiss’ all information and reports that have merit and might lead to resolving cases of Americans known to have been alive in communist captivity and, frankly, may still be, in some seemingly God-forsaken cases.”

Testimony From Ike Aide

An article in the August 5th issue of THE NEW AMERICAN reported on current internal Pentagon analysis, including eyewitness intelligence accounts, of U.S. POWs reportedly held in North Korea. This was the subject of July hearings before the Dornan subcommittee, during which government officials were asked about details of what a Defense intelligence analyst called the “recent flurry” of “very compelling reports” leading to a conclusion that American prisoners were still alive in North Korean hands. In fact, this magazine provided a preview of what eventually occurred in hearings in mid-September.



As THE NEW AMERICAN reported earlier, former top intelligence officer Philip Corso, a retired colonel, testified of his own knowledge about how U.S. POWs were shipped from North Korea to Siberia, with their whereabouts purposely kept secret from the American public. Corso, who tried without much success to expound on his account several years ago (during Senate hearings sabotaged in part by those sympathetic to preserving the cover-up), served on President Eisenhower's National Security Council.

Corso's special expertise on POWs stemmed from service as head of the Special Projects Branch/Intelligence Division/Far East Command under Generals MacArthur, Ridgway, and Clark. Author of a study on communist atrocities and brainwashing of American prisoners, Corso was also a member of the Panmunjom truce delegation. He told the hearing in mid-September about the men who had been abandoned, some of whom perished as a result of "Nazi-like" medical experiments.

Corroborating the testimony of Corso, who was personally involved with Eisenhower's decision to hide from Americans U.S. knowledge of at least 900 Americans who were alive in enemy hands, are documents from the Eisenhower Library. Materials recently declassified at the request of the Dornan subcommittee indicate that in December 1953, four months after the August 1953 "Operation Big Switch" prisoner exchange, the Army was aware of the names of 610 persons who had "just disappeared from the camps." Likewise, the Air Force knew of more than 300 unreturned men, leading to the belief that the Reds were holding U.S. military technicians.

There is also a summary — declassified only this year — of testimony in 1955 of a former MVD officer about American POWs being held in Siberia, some of whom were intended for future use as Soviet agents.* The various Soviet secret services recruited from among POWs, including at least 75 Americans who had been prisoners in Korea and were later identified as communist agents. Such seems to have been the case of the infamous British traitor George Blake, who was captured in 1950 when he was vice-consul in Seoul, held for three years, and found guilty of being a Soviet agent in 1961. Former KGB London resident (head of station) Oleg Gordievsky noted in **KGB: The Inside Story** (Harper-Collins, 1990) that the MGB, his agency's progenitor, was "given unrestricted access to Western POWs held by the Chinese and North Koreans," including Blake.

Among other revelations, Corso pointed out that "in the past I have tried to tell Congress the fact that in 1953, 500 sick and wounded American prisoners were within ten miles of the prisoner exchange point at Panmunjom but were never exchanged." In addition, Corso testified about reports from sources — including American POWs, intercepts from the National Security Agency, agents, defectors, Red Chinese and North Korean POWs, Nationalist Chinese, and others — that American POWs were sent to Siberia.

"My intelligence," said Corso, "centered around three train loads of 450 POWs each. Two of these trainloads were confirmed over and over, the third was not as certain. Therefore, the final figure was, 'confirmed 900, and 1,200 possibly.' These were the figures that I discovered with President Eisenhower while I was a member of his NSC." Continued Corso: "The bulk of the sightings were at Manchu-li, on the border of Manchuria and the USSR. Here the rail gauge changed and the U.S.



POWs had to be transferred across a platform to a waiting train going into the Soviet Union.”

In short, Corso concluded, “the prisoners were sold down the river.” No doubt about that. Just as the former security official says, “We abandoned them.”

Moreover, the colonel testified how after his military tour he was assigned to the Operations Coordinating Board of the White House, National Security Council, where he handled virtually all projects on U.S. POWs. “Here I found out that U.S. policy forbade that we win in Korea.” Colonel Corso even cited the specific directives for the “no win” policy, further elaborating that “we called this the ‘fig leaf policy.’”

American Guinea Pigs

Also testifying before the Dornan committee in mid-September was former General Major Jan Sejna, a onetime Czech official whom many experts consider the most important communist official to seek asylum in the West (he defected in 1968). Sejna was a member of the Czech Central Committee, the Parliament and Presidium, and the Party Group that gave orders to the latter two; he helped establish the Czech Defense Council and became its de facto secretary. He also was first secretary of the party at the Ministry of Defense and chief of staff to the Minister of Defense, among other posts.

Sejna, according to prominent defense analyst Dr. Joseph Douglass (who extensively debriefed Sejna and has worked with him on POW matters), was “one of the ten most knowledgeable officials in Czechoslovakia,” who met “regularly with top communist officials from the Soviet Union and around the world.” Subsequent to his defection, Sejna described the Soviet role in terrorism and trafficking in narcotics. Official government debriefers, however, did not want to listen to what he had to say about the abuse of American POWs. Though some have since sought to discredit him (even from within the Defense Intelligence Agency where Sejna currently works), former DIA director Lieutenant General James A. Clapper Jr. has vouched for Sejna’s reliability.

As Dr. Douglass pointed out in his own testimony before the Dornan subcommittee, it was not that the official debriefers analyzed the general’s information about our POWs, then rejected it — but rather that they did not want to hear it in the first place. When the public focus turned to congressional hearings on POW/MIAs, said Douglass, “there seemed to emerge in parallel a variety of efforts from people within the DIA and CIA and elsewhere to discredit General Sejna, sabotage his information, and alert the Czech and Russian intelligence services about what he was saying.”

Sejna was trying to expose the fact that American POWs had been subjected to hideous medical experimentation in a deliberate communist program that turned our soldiers into the equivalent of laboratory animals. Sejna testified that he first became aware of this program around 1956, though its beginnings went back to the onset of the Korean War.

He testified that “we received directions from Moscow to build a military hospital in North Korea. The advertised purpose of the hospital was to treat military casualties. But this was only a cover, a deception. The top secret purpose of the hospital was to experiment on American and South Korean POWs. The POWs were used as subjects for training military doctors in field medicine — for



example, treating serious wounds and conducting amputations. The POWs were used to test the effects of chemical and biological warfare agents and to test the effects of atomic radiation.”† The Soviets later became notorious for their use of cruel “psychiatric” treatment — what they called “punitive” medicine — on dissenters in the USSR, so that if those sent to a mental hospital weren’t crazy beforehand, they often were afterward. Another form of ruthless torture, Red Chinese mind-twisting, is described in Edward Hunter’s 1956 exposé **Brainwashing**. Moscow and Peking weren’t alone in the use of coercive human experimentation. The Nazis were infamous practitioners, as were the imperialist Japanese. Japan’s Army Unit 731 killed thousands of POWs, but most practitioners went unpunished so the Allies could share their knowledge of germ warfare. For more details — such as POWs being subjected to blood poisoning, lethal X-rays, electrocution, dehydration, boiling, freezing, enhanced air pressure until eyeballs burst, horse-blood transfusions, exposure to cholera, typhoid, anthrax, etc. — see, for instance, Gavan Daws’ **Prisoners of the Japanese** (Morrow, 1994).

The Soviets, continued the former communist general, “also used the American GIs to test the physiological and psychological endurance of American soldiers. They were also used to test various mind-control drugs. Czechoslovakia also built a crematorium in North Korea to dispose of the bodies and parts after the experiments were concluded.”

Americans were not the only ones used as guinea pigs. Sejna also attested to the use of South Koreans and prisoners from within the USSR and Czechoslovakia. Part of the idea was to test various races — those who were brought up differently and those with particular diets — to determine who might best withstand the stresses of nuclear war. However, explained Sejna, because “America was the main enemy, American POWs were the most highly valued experimental subjects.”

Sejna believes that by the end of the Korean fighting, most of those involved in the experiments were killed, except for 100 or so. These were flown in four groups, first to Czechoslovakia, then to the Soviet Union. Recalled Sejna: “I learned about all this from the Czech doctors who ran the hospital, from the Czech military intelligence officer in charge of the Czech operations in Korea, from Soviet advisers, and from official documentation that I reviewed in the process of responding to a Soviet request for Czechoslovakia to send medical doctors to the Soviet Union to participate in various experiments being run on the POWs who had been transferred.... I also reviewed reports of the results of autopsies of the POWs, and received briefings on various aspects of the experiments.”

Atrocities in Vietnam

Sejna testified that the same things went on in North Vietnam and Laos during the Vietnam War, noting, “The only difference is the operation in Vietnam was better planned and more American POWs were used, both in Vietnam and Laos and in the Soviet Union.” On several occasions, testified General Sejna, “my office was responsible for organizing the shipments of POWs and their housing in Prague before they were shipped to the Soviet Union. I personally was present when American POWs were unloaded from planes, put on buses whose windows had been painted black,



and then driven to Prague, where they were placed in various military intelligence barracks and other secure buildings until they were shipped to the Soviet Union. Between 1961 and 1968, when I left Czechoslovakia, I would estimate at least 200 American POWs were shipped to the Soviet Union through Czechoslovakia.” There may have been more, Sejna conjectured, shipped through North Korea and East Germany, though of these he had no firsthand knowledge. There were intelligence reports, however, of Americans being handed over to the Chinese during the Korean War, and Czech intelligence learned that the North Vietnamese provided U.S. prisoners to Red China.

Who knew of this? In Czechoslovakia, the general estimated, fewer than 15 people were aware of the transfer of Americans to the Soviet Union. As the written instructions said, at the beginning of the Soviet operation in 1951, the operation was to be conducted in such a way that “no one would ever know about it.” Regrettably, that cloak of silence long included American officials as accessories to the suppression. “I am only sorry,” remarked General Sejna, “that it has taken so long to find some people here in America who are interested in the Soviet operation designed to use American POWs.”

U.S. and Red Bureaucracies

All of this testimony and evidence notwithstanding, the POW investigations are still not unified and aggressive. Roadblocks keep being erected — not all of them by the regimes in Moscow, Hanoi, or Pyongyang. Senator John McCain (R-AZ), a former POW from the Vietnam War, continues (as he did during Senate hearings several years ago) to try to undermine revelations damaging to the Reds and to those protecting them. Testimony before the Dornan subcommittee shows that U.S. officials — who are currently placing much emphasis on retrieval of bones — are even giving the communist Vietnamese the names and backgrounds of individuals who supplied the U.S. with information during the Vietnam War. That sure makes it easy to round up damaging informants. In essence, we are supplying the suspects (or in this case, the guilty parties) with the evidence that the U.S. has against them.

Nor can one assume that these POW programs, kept secret for so many years, were inadvertent mistakes on the part of the communists. All their history proves otherwise. This is a point made by Commander William “Chip” Beck of the Defense POW/MIA Office. Beck states that the testimony of General Sejna, “that transfers took place, not only in Korea, but [also in] Vietnam, has been supported in conversations I have had with other reliable defectors.”

These Soviet covert-operation secrets, Beck notes, are being guarded even today by Russia, Vietnam, Laos, Red China, the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, and even Cuba. Why? In a statement for the hearing record, Commander Beck listed a trio of reasons:

- First, because POW operations remain among the most sensitive of Soviet-orchestrated operations, perhaps even higher than their nuclear secrets.
- Second, stated Beck, because “communism is not ‘dead.’ As its doctrine decrees, it is only underground. Of vital importance to the POW/MIA questions, there were no purges in the



communist intelligence services in the former Soviet Union [FSU]. Documents and records, as General Sejna points out, were transferred from Eastern Europe to Moscow. Those who ran the KGB still run the SVR, and a dozen other services in Russia and the FSU.”

- Third, stated the longtime veteran of combat, intelligence, and diplomacy, it remains “difficult, but not impossible, for communist veterans who participated in these programs, and may know the fate of our POWs, to come forward. Their lives, families, and well-being are still at risk. As one former KGB officer told me, ‘journalists and businessmen are being killed in Moscow and St. Petersburg for trying to break secrets far less sensitive than the POWs.’”

There is no arguing, as Colonel Philip Corso testified, that the “brainwashing and atrocities against American prisoners were conscious acts of Soviet policy.” What is even more galling, however, is that covering up these atrocities has long been a conscious act of the U.S. government.