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Bring Them Home! - American POWs still languish in Southeast Asia

"There is no credible evidence to indicate that any Americans are currently being held against their will in Indochina."

— Official U.S. position
1976-1981

"Although we have thus far been unable to prove that Americans are still detained against their will, the information available to us precludes ruling out that possibility."

— Official U.S. position
1981-present

"We determined after this visit and lengthy discussions with Vietnamese officials that it is not a question of whether there are live Americans in Vietnam. The question is who are they? Why are they there?"

— Rep. Gerald Solomon (R-NY)
February 19, 1986

A remarkable transformation in American public and official opinion has taken place over the last ten years on the question of whether or not American servicemen captured during the Vietnam War are still being held against their will in Southeast Asia. From denial to doubt, the U.S. government has moved inexorably towards the "strong possibility" that American POWs are, in fact, still being held by the Communist governments of Indochina.

An overwhelming majority of the American public is also convinced that American POWs are alive in Southeast Asia. According to an ABC-**Washington Post** poll released in March 1985, 73 percent of Americans believe the North Vietnamese are holding American POWs. A year later, a poll conducted for the Seattle Times found that 63 percent of Washingtonians believe that American servicemen are still being held captive by the Hanoi government.

Some might dismiss such popular opinion as the product of Hollywood movies like **Uncommon Valor**, **Missing in Action**, and **Rambo**. But skepticism does not explain why many current and former government officials with access to highly classified information collected by U.S. intelligence agencies also believe that American POWs are still alive in captivity.

Lieutenant General Eugene F. Tighe Jr., head of the Defense Intelligence Agency during the late 1970s, explained his personal opinion to a House subcommittee in 1981: "American servicemen are alive and being held against their will in Indochina."

Then national security adviser Robert McFarlane observed during what he assumed was an off-the-record briefing session: "How do I really feel about it? I do think there *has* to be ... there have to be



live Americans over there.”

A growing number of Congressmen have come to the same conclusion. Last July, seven Congressmen expressed their convictions in a letter to President Reagan. “Our analysis of the data is now complete,” they wrote. “Based on extensive classified briefings we have received and the volume and clarity of the information we have seen, we write to inform you that American POWs remain captive in communist prisons in Southeast Asia. We are firm in this belief and we have not been, nor will we be dissuaded by the arguments to the contrary made by bureaucrats who have handled this issue since the end of the Vietnam War.” [The letter was signed by Robert K. Dornan (R-CA), Bill Hendon (R-NC), Christopher H. Smith (R-NJ), Frank McCloskey (D-IN), David Drier (R-CA), Robert C. Smith (R-NH), and John G. Rowland (R-CT).]

Yet, some of those bureaucrats apparently do not believe their own arguments. In August 1985, former Representative John LeBoutillier (R-NY) wrote, “Privately, Defense Intelligence Agency analysts concede that POWs are still alive there, differing only on how many there are. The most recent estimates range from 20 to 253.”

So the existence of American POWs in Southeast Asia is more than a Hollywood fantasy. To the contrary, the continued incarceration of American servicemen in Communist prison camps in Vietnam, Laos and, possibly, Cambodia is a fact supported by hard evidence.

Background to Betrayal

On January 23, 1973, President Richard M. Nixon announced the signing of the Paris Peace Accords, officially ending American involvement in the Vietnam War: “A ceasefire, internationally supervised, will begin at 7 p.m. this Saturday, January 27, Washington time,” the President explained. “Within 60 days from this Saturday, *all* Americans held prisoners of war *throughout* Indochina will be released. There will be the fullest possible accounting for those who are missing in action.” [Emphasis added.]

A day later, Henry A. Kissinger, then Nixon’s national security adviser, stated: “Chapter III [of the agreement] deals with the return of captured military personnel and foreign civilians as well as with the question of civilian detainees within South Vietnam The return of American personnel and the accounting of missing in action is unconditional and will take place within the same time frame as the American withdrawal.”

America had obtained “peace with honor” in Vietnam, President Nixon proclaimed. Operation Homecoming was promptly launched. By March 27, 1973 all American prisoners of war were to be released and on their way home. Yet problems began to develop almost immediately. On January 27th, the Hanoi government provided its list of POWs to be released. On January 29th the **New York Times** described the problem that created:

The Communist side has notified the United States that it holds American military prisoners in North and South Vietnam who will be released within the next two months.

To the concern of Nixon Administration officials, however, North Vietnam has supplied no



information on or lists of American prisoners who may be held in Laos.

Among some officials there was the belief that North Vietnam would be reluctant to turn over any list until a cease-fire was reached in Laos. There was also a belief that the list would ultimately come not from Hanoi but from the Communist-led Pathet Lao once a cease-fire is reached among the Laotian factions.

The Pentagon lists 6 prisoners and 311 men missing in Laos, but officials believe the number held by the Pathet Lao guerrillas is probably substantially higher....

The absence of any prisoner list for Laos may provide the first significant difficulty in a prisoner exchange that has thus far seemed to American officials to be working out as provided for in the Vietnam peace agreements....

The Defense Department spokesman Jerry W. Friedheim, said that the Communists' lists were "incomplete" because they did not include American servicemen captured in Laos. He emphasized that the United States would continue to press the other side for a listing of prisoners in Laos....

At a briefing on the agreement Wednesday, Henry A. Kissinger ... left the impression with some that North Vietnam would be responsible for prisoners in Laos when he said that "American prisoners held in Laos and North Vietnam will be returned to us in Hanoi."

However, the failure to account for POWs in Laos was not the only problem with the Hanoi government's list. The Communist Vietnamese also failed to account for 56 other Americans listed by the Pentagon as prisoners of war. An Associated Press article from January 30, 1973 explained:

The Defense Department said Monday 56 American servicemen previously carried by the United States as prisoners of war remain unaccounted for by North Vietnam.

Pentagon spokesman Jerry W. Friedheim said their names "are not on the two lists we have received so far."

These lists, handed to U.S. officials in Paris Saturday by the North Vietnamese, identified 555 U.S. fighting men held in Communist prison camps in North and South Vietnam as well as the names of 55 POWs the Communists said died in captivity.

The problem of POWs known to be held in Laos and North Vietnam but not included on the Hanoi government's list continued to plague the U.S. government's efforts to seek a full accounting of all Americans held prisoner and missing in action. The issue came to a head on March 22, 1973. Two groups of POWs had already been released. The third and final group was to be released by March 27th. Still the discrepancy between the U.S. government's list and North Vietnam's list remained unresolved. So Washington took the following action:

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Thursday, March 22 (AP) — The United States demanded today that North Vietnam supply a list of prisoners of war held in Laos and the date and place at which they will be released.

The United States delegation to the joint Military Commission demanded the information ... and said that meanwhile it was delaying withdrawal of the last American troops in Vietnam.



On March 25, 1973, President Nixon ordered all U.S. forces remaining in Vietnam to stay until “all prisoners of war are released.” The next day an agreement was reached whereby the Hanoi government would on March 28th release a final group of 147 prisoners — 107 men captured in North Vietnam, 31 captured in South Vietnam, and nine captured in Laos. In return, the U.S. would withdraw the remaining American troops (with the exception of 159 Marines guarding the U.S. embassy in Saigon) by March 29th.

Altogether 591 Americans held prisoner in North and South Vietnam were released. However, the nine prisoners allegedly captured in Laos by the Pathet Lao were in reality captured by North Vietnamese operating inside Laos and subsequently moved to North Vietnam for detention. Thus, none of the prisoners captured in Laos by the Pathet Lao were ever released. Nor were other POWs believed to have been captured by the North Vietnamese. In addition, none of the POWs known to have been captured in Cambodia was released or accounted for by the Communist Vietnamese.

Changing Their Status

But within a few weeks, despite promises by President Nixon for the release of “all Americans held prisoners of war throughout Indochina,” the U.S. government was proclaiming that all POWs had been released and that the remaining servicemen still missing in action were dead:

WASHINGTON, April 5 (AP) — The State Department said Wednesday it has “no credible information” that would support the Rev. Paul Lindstrom’s assertion that at least 200 Americans are still held as prisoners in the Indochina War.

The Manchester, N.H., **Union Leader** reported that Lindstrom, who headed the Remember the Pueblo Committee, said he had learned that at least 200 U.S. prisoners remain in Laos, Cambodia and China.

“There is no credible information available to us which would tend to support these charges,” said John King, a State Department spokesman.

WASHINGTON, April 12 (AP) — The Pentagon, two months after the first American prisoners of war began coming home, said today that it had no evidence that there were any more prisoners still alive in all of Indochina.

Despite the fact that interviews with all returning prisoners are nearly complete, a Pentagon official, Dr. Roger Shields said that none of the 1,359 Americans listed as missing were now technically considered prisoners. “We have no indication at this time that there are any Americans missing alive in Indochina,” Dr. Shields said at a news conference.

As Representative Robert Smith (R-NH) noted in an interview with THE NEW AMERICAN on August 12, 1986: “It’s just like you run the curtain down and that’s it.”* Portions of this interview were published in the September 15, 1986 issue of THE NEW AMERICAN.

* Within a matter of weeks the Nixon Administration arbitrarily transformed the official U.S. position on American servicemen known to have been captured but as yet unaccounted for. One week, the U.S. government is pressuring Hanoi to release more prisoners than it admits holding.



Two weeks later, the administration claims that all POWs are home and that all other MIAs are dead.

Yet the Pentagon had in its possession a classified document dated "11 April 69" entitled "LIST OF US PERSONNEL IDENTIFIED BY ***** (FROM PHOTOS), ON 11 APRIL 1969."† Throughout the remainder of this article "*****" is used to designate deletions from previously classified documents at the time of declassification. This deletion may represent merely a word or even entire sentences.

† This document lists 53 American servicemen identified as prisoners of war from photographic evidence (22 were positively identified, 31 were rated a "possible identification"). Twenty-three of these men were never released by the North Vietnamese and are missing in action to this day. The document also contains the following footnote:

***** stated that two (2) American women were also prisoners. (No photo was identified.) He related that these women were school teachers from Hue. He stated they were young, one was tall and thin and one was short and heavy. These women told ***** that they were new in Vietnam.

In addition, in a sworn affidavit dated December 3, 1985, former Air Force intelligence analyst Jerry J. Mooney disclosed the existence of intelligence information accounting for hundreds of missing POWs. As a part of his assignment during the Vietnam War, Mooney collected intercepted North Vietnamese communications relating to captured American servicemen:

In my role as a senior analyst and having access to both operational and collateral data from other military organizations and national agencies I was able to associate North Vietnamese references to U.S. official listings of missing U.S. personnel I compiled a listing of over three hundred U.S. military personnel categorized as MIA/POW. At Homecoming One less than five percent of those on my list *known to be alive* were returned to the United States. [Emphasis added.]

Mooney's conclusion? "Based on my six years of experience in these assignments and based upon my intelligence background, I am presently convinced that there are living Americans who are prisoners of the Vietnam War being held in captivity in Southeast Asia."

Finally, an unclassified summary of casualties sustained in the Vietnam War dated December 5, 1973 lists 59 servicemen as "Current captured or interned." Thus, the U.S. government publicly denied the existence of live POWs even though it had "credible information" that some POWs were still being held.

The Missing

Who are these men? The August 1986 edition of the official **POW-MIA Fact Book** published by the Pentagon lists 12 men as examples of individuals "on whom there is 'hard evidence' (e.g. post-capture photography, U.S. or indigenous eyewitness to capture or detention, intelligence reports) that they were captured and detained by communist forces."

The following are descriptions of four of that missing dozen, based on the information published in the **Fact Book** and in other publications. These men represent only a small percentage of those



who may yet remain in captivity.

Robert Anderson, USAF: Colonel Anderson was shot down over North Vietnam on October 6, 1972. Both he and his co-pilot parachuted safely to the ground and talked with rescue planes. Anderson said, "I have a good parachute, am in good shape and can see no enemy forces on the ground." His co-pilot was immediately captured. Radio Hanoi reported that a number of U.S. pilots were captured the same day. Yet Anderson's plane was the only one lost on that day. His co-pilot was returned in 1973. Anderson is still missing.

David Hrdlicka, USAF: Colonel Hrdlicka was shot down over Laos on May 18, 1965. He successfully ejected from his aircraft and was observed on the ground. A helicopter pilot later landed at a nearby village and was told that Hrdlicka had been picked up by the Communist Pathet Lao. In May 1966 a recording allegedly made by him was broadcast, and in August of that year the Soviet newspaper *Pravda* published a photograph of Hrdlicka in captivity. Radio Peking also broadcast a statement quoting Laotian sources as stating that he was a prisoner. The Communist government of Laos has never admitted holding him, yet reports believed to pertain to him have been monitored for years.

Charles Shelton, USAF: Colonel Shelton is the only American still officially listed as a prisoner of war; all others have been arbitrarily re-classified as "presumed dead." Colonel Shelton was shot down over Sam Neua Province in Laos on April 29, 1965, his 33rd birthday. After parachuting safely to the ground, he made radio contact with his wingman and indicated that he was in good condition. A villager witnessed his subsequent arrest and capture by the Pathet Lao. Various intelligence reports have indicated that he was held with another American POW, who was presumed to be David Hrdlicka. One highly credible report from 1976 stated that he had been rescued from a cave prison complex by Free Lao resistance forces. However, at some point during the long overland trek to Thailand the group ran into a Vietnamese patrol, which recaptured Colonel Shelton.

Donald Sparks, USA: PFC Sparks became separated from his company when they were ambushed on June 17, 1969 near Chu Lai in northern South Vietnam. Sparks was observed to be wounded, but rescue teams were unable to reach him for nearly 12 hours. When a team finally reached his observed location, Sparks was gone. He was initially classified as Killed in Action/Body Not Recovered. Then on April 11, 1970 a Viet Cong soldier was killed in approximately the same area. On his body were letters addressed to Sparks' parents. Handwriting experts subsequently confirmed that the letters were, in fact, written by Sparks. Six months later he was reclassified by the Pentagon as a POW. The government of Vietnam has never provided any information on him.

The **POW-MIA Fact Book** concludes: "It is clear that the governments of Indochina have available to them considerably more information on missing Americans than they have given to the United States." As for the three individual governments, the Fact Book has the following entries on Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam:

The communists in Cambodia recently claimed that they have some knowledge of U.S. personnel missing in that country. It is known that during the War, some U.S. personnel now listed as missing



were captured in Cambodia, mostly in areas which were under Vietnamese control.

The Lao have provided little information on unaccounted for U.S. personnel [T]he Lao should have considerably more knowledge of missing U.S. personnel than they have thus far been willing to provide.

[I]t is known that the South Vietnamese communists captured a number of U.S. personnel whose names have not appeared on any lists provided to the U.S. by either the former [Provisional Revolutionary Government] or present Vietnamese Government.

Laos: A Case Study

Laos was a key to the outcome of the Vietnam War because of the strategic importance of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which ran through that country. Throughout the course of the war, this supply line was never severed, and the Communists were able to move men and supplies southward for the conquest of South Vietnam, and ultimately Cambodia and Laos.

Laos has also played a key role in the development of the issue of live POWs. We have already noted how the status of American soldiers known to have been captured in Laos proved to be a “thorn in the flesh” for Nixon and Kissinger. But the controversy surrounding Americans missing in action in Laos continues to this day.

Altogether, 569 Americans were lost in Laos. Not one of those 569 men ever returned, and 311 remain unaccounted for. Thus, Laos has become known as the “black hole” of Southeast Asia. Despite assurances by U.S. government officials in 1973 and since, there is clear evidence that some of these Americans not only were captured but have survived as POWs to this day.

A November 12, 1973 Air Force intelligence study found that of the 447 men reported to be missing in Laos at the time 138 (30 percent) were known to have survived their “loss incident.” The actual number of casualties in Laos was subsequently revised to 569. If 30 percent of the additional 122 men survived their loss incident as well, the total number would be 175. Yet not one of these men was ever returned.

In 1978, a classified **CIA Intelligence Information Cable** regarding “Enemy Prisons in Laos” was declassified. The cable is dated “1 December 1970.” The report identified 45 “enemy prisons and/or prisoners of war (POW) camps or complexes in Laos.” Furthermore, two of these prisons were specifically cited as housing as many as 68 American POWs (28 in one and 40 in the other). The Cable also noted:

3. American POWs. Until recently the Ban Nakay Neua (VH 1956) prison complex was the only prison facility in Laos known to contain American POWs. Americans captured in northern Laos were escorted to this facility, where they were detained on a semi-permanent basis. Recent reporting indicates, however, that all foreign POWs including the Americans held in this region may have been moved to an undisclosed location north of Ban Nakay Neua. Americans captured in the Lao panhandle are not believed to be permanently detained in Laos, but rather are escorted through the infiltration corridor [i.e., the Ho Chi Minh Trail] to North Vietnam. American POWs are believed



to receive better treatment than that provided to the indigenous prisoners.

The U.S. government also possessed actual live-sightings of American POWs held in Laos. One such sighting is detailed in a confidential report dated "5 March 1973." The report stated:

1. In mid-March 1972 Pathet Lao (PL) Private *****, a member of the telephone installation squad, 1st Company, 10th PL Signal Battalion (BN), was sent to the "Tham (Cave) Keo" located in the vicinity of VH 1857, about one kilometer west of Ban Nakay Neua (VH 1957) in Sam Neua Province, Laos, to replace batteries in a field phone located inside the cave. ***** was in the cave for about 10 minutes and while there he observed three male caucasian prisoners who PL guards said were captured American pilots. ***** heard from PL soldiers that one of the American prisoners was captured on 5 October 1969 by PL-Policemen at Phou (Mountain) Dokami (VH 1145) after he parachuted from an F-4H aircraft which was shot down in the vicinity of Longkou (BH 1958) The other two American prisoners were captured in January 1971 when they parachuted from their damaged F-4H airplane in Kieng Khouang Province, Laos....

2. The three American prisoners were dressed in PL uniforms which were devoid of identification features. Two of the Americans appeared to be in their late thirties, were about 1.80 meters tall, of medium build, had brown hair and long faces with large sharp noses. The third American prisoner was from 38 to 40 years old, about 1.65 meters tall, had blond hair, a flat nose, a fat face and was very stocky with a large stomach. The prisoners all appeared healthy and were not incapacitated by injuries. They all had long hair and beards. When observed by ***** one prisoner was playing a guitar while sitting on his cot. The second man was sleeping and the third was eating a loaf of bread. (Field Comment: ***** reviewed a MACV publication titled "Photographs of Missing and Captured Personnel in Southeast Asia" in an effort to identify the American prisoners he saw. ***** could not positively identify from the photographs any of the prisoners he sighted; however, he said that Captain Gary FORS, Accession Number 0429, somewhat resembled the heavysset prisoner and Captains Thomas B. MITCHELL, Accession Number 0976, and Mervin L. MORRILL, Accession Number 0984, somewhat resembled the other two prisoners.)

This report is based on the account of a Pathet Lao prisoner of war. Thus he may have exaggerated the good treatment accorded the American POWs in hopes of being well treated himself.

The significance of these two declassified documents is profound. Not only did the U.S. government know of prison camps housing American POWs in Laos; it also had live-sightings that it deemed credible, pinpointing the location of American POWs. But not one of these men ever returned. Furthermore, the live-sighting excerpted above was only 13 months old when Dr. Roger Shields, the Pentagon official responsible for POW affairs in 1973, declared, "We have no indication at this time that there are any Americans missing alive in Indochina." Yet three American pilots had been seen in captivity in Laos, alive and healthy, in March 1972. Again, none of these three men has ever returned home.

If the information provided by the U.S. government's own intelligence network in Southeast Asia was not enough to verify the existence of American POWs in Laos, there was also the ample



testimony of high ranking Pathet Lao officials. A 1977 Defense Intelligence Agency internal memorandum on “Pathet Lao Knowledgeability on U.S. PWs [POWs]” outlines past Pathet Lao statements on American POWs.

In September 1968, Soth Petras, who was at that time, the permanent Pathet Lao representative in Vientiane, the capital of Laos, told a U.S. official that “pilots are generally kept near the area in which their plane is downed and therefore may be found throughout Laos from the south to the north.”

In February 1972, Soth made a statement to the effect “that some tens of prisoners are presently being held” by the Pathet Lao.

On April 21, 1972, Soth reportedly stated that “there are many American PWs held in liberated areas of Laos,” but he would not provide specific figures.

Also in April 1972, during an interview with a Swedish correspondent, Prince Souphanouvong, then the chairman of the Lao Patriotic Front (LPF) Central Committee and until recently President of the People’s Democratic Republic of Laos, commented: “The LPF has made public a concrete policy toward enemy soldiers or agents captured or giving themselves up, including GIs. All the American pilots engaged in bombings or toxic chemical sprays of Lao territory are considered criminals and enemies of the Lao people. But once captured, they have been treated in accordance with the humane policy of the LPF.”

Thus, the Pathet Lao acknowledged holding American POWs. The U.S. government knew of prison locations in Laos holding as many as 68 American POWs. It had live-sighting verification of specific POWs held by the Pathet Lao. Yet, during Operation Homecoming in 1973, not one American POW held by the Pathet Lao was released. Instead of acknowledging that fact and pressuring the Communist Lao to release all their prisoners, the U.S. abandoned all remaining POWs as dead. But American POWs were alive in Laos in 1973 and, according to one recent refugee report, as many as 50 American POWs were seen in northern Laos as recently as April 26, 1982.

Vietnam Revisited

The fall of Saigon on April 29, 1975 and the subsequent Communist conquest of Laos and Cambodia later that year opened a new chapter in the saga of Indochina — the age of the refugee. By the end of the decade, more than a million refugees had fled the Communist tyrannies of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Thousands more have left thus far during the 1980s.

With that flood of refugees came a deluge of live-sighting reports of American POWs still being held by the governments of Indochina. The Pentagon’s **POW-MIA Fact Book** reports that the U.S. government has acquired over 5,000 live-sighting reports since the fall of Indochina to the Communists:

Of the total reported, 861 are firsthand live-sighting reports with 542 resolved through a determination that they correlate with individuals since accounted for. Additionally, 191 of the reports are known or suspected to be fabrications by the source while 128 are as yet unverified



and are under continuing investigation in an attempt to confirm the information. The remaining reports pertain to hearsay sightings and to crash site information.

None of the 128 “unverified” live-sighting reports has been released. But in late 1978 and early 1979 the U.S. government did release some 10,000 pages worth of “uncorrelated” reports (meaning that the information could not be linked to any missing person, group, or incident). In addition, a number of other reports have been declassified over the past several years. However, none of these reports relates to live-sightings made since 1979. The following are excerpts from four declassified documents. As usual, the reports have been heavily censored during the declassification process.

Document No. “FIR-317/09153-76” covering the period of September 1975 to January 1976:

1. ***** about seeing a caucasian male who may be an American, in a “New Economic Area” in Dinh Quan District, Long Khanh Province. ***** said that the “American” wore tattered clothes, had no weapon, and was “very miserable.” The “American” obtained his food from a settler in the area....
3. ***** the instructor, (FNU) Ran Y (phonetic), at a reeducation course held ***** in Saigon, told ***** and the ***** attendees that “a number” of Americans were being held in Hanoi pending the settlement of an agreement with the U.S. on American reconstruction aid to Vietnam. The instructor said that the Vietnamese were “not stupid” and would hold these Americans until the three billion dollars in promised aid was received....

Document No. “FIR-317/09155-76” covering the period late-March to July 1976 (only the summary of this heavily-censored document was available):

Summary. As of mid-May 1976 two Americans who were formerly employed at Long Binh Base were living in the International Red Cross compound in Saigon. Their nicknames and physical descriptions are given. In late November 1975, the communists claimed the capture of two Americans and about 20 Vietnamese in Vung Tau and subsequently the communist authorities there held a mock trial to try these prisoners. In May 1976, a North Vietnamese cadre who had been sent to Saigon told a South Vietnamese contact that he had seen “many” American prisoners in Hanoi who were suffering from war wounds or mental disorders. In the first half of 1976 North Vietnamese officers told a Saigon black marketeer that seriously ill American prisoners were still being held in North Vietnam because the communists feared their release would have an unfavorable impact on public opinion. In early July 1976, a North Vietnamese security official processing a group of departing Vietnamese at Tan Son Nhut airport, when purposely provoked by a question on American prisoners still in Vietnam, replied that “they would be handled separately.” End Summary. [It is notable that during Operation Homecoming in 1973 no severely wounded or mentally insane POWs were released.]

Document No. “FIR 317/09161-77” dated “20 May 1977”:

2. In spring 1975 while he was on a work detail, (FNU) ***** a former Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) ***** who was captured by People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) forces in the central



highlands in 1972 and imprisoned in the Hanoi area until May 1975, saw a group of caucasian prisoners being marched down a rural road near Hanoi. ***** said. ***** related this information to him ***** after ***** release from prison in May 1975.

3. An unidentified PAVN Army Captain told a ***** that in August 1976 he saw a truck carrying an undetermined number of American prisoners who were being held in a mountainous area at Ba Vi village. The prison camp was near a tea plantation about 12 kilometers from Son Tay....

4. ***** In October 1976 he had seen about 15 to 20 American prisoners of war (PW's) on a truck near Hai Duong while he was travelling by bus between Hanoi and Haiphong. ***** said he was close enough to observe the men, described them as chained together in pairs, wearing striped PW uniforms, and all appeared either sick or injured. ***** during his years ***** doctor in North Vietnam, he had personally seen many American PW's, which made him feel 100-percent sure that the prisoners on the truck were Americans. ***** in mid-1976 he had seen an official government memorandum that contained a reference to American PW's still being held in Vietnam. ***** an unidentified PAVN officer had once told him that there were still "hundreds" of American prisoners, but most had been dispersed to camps near the border with the People's Republic of China (PRC). ***** said that a PAVN Lieutenant Colonel, had told him that Americans were still being held as prisoners as late as mid-1976....

Document No. "FIR-371/09169-79" dated June 1979:

2. In mid-1976 ***** said that early in that year they had seen about 230 U.S. POW's who were being held at Bat Bat in Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) Ha Son Binh province....

4. In a conversation held sometime in 1978, ***** said that unnamed ***** colleagues had told him that as of August 1977 there were still U.S. POW's held in North Vietnam. However, these colleagues gave ***** no details....

The above excerpts are but a small sampling of the many thousands of live-sighting reports in the files of U.S. government intelligence agencies. While these are all second-hand or "hearsay" reports, there are many more first-hand reports that have not been declassified, including 128 the government has so far not been able to disprove or otherwise substantiate.

However, Representative Robert C. Smith, who has seen some of these highly classified reports, told THE NEW AMERICAN on August 12, 1986: "I've seen dozens, perhaps hundreds of those reports. And I can tell you, based on what I've seen in those reports, there is information in there that should have been pursued that has not been pursued regarding live-sightings."

Later in our conversation he noted, "I'm convinced that there are live Americans over there. I think the evidence is conclusive. I've said a number of times that if the American people could ever see those live-sighting reports sitting classified in the Pentagon, they would be utterly outraged. And God forbid if the families ever saw them."

The Reason Why

By now it should be obvious to the reader that there is substantial evidence that American



prisoners of war were abandoned in Indochina in 1973 and, in all likelihood, are still alive today. But several questions remain to be answered. First is the question of motivation. Why would the governments of Vietnam and Laos hold back American POWs? And why would the Nixon Administration knowingly abandon them?

The Vietnamese motivation can be summed up in one word, “reparations.” Former DIA Director Tighe observed in the fall of 1986: “In my view, Hanoi believes it should get reparations. There is evidence they considered the economic value of the POWs. A pilot is worth so much. They speak of captives in economic terms.” The Communist Vietnamese cite Article 21 of the Paris Peace Accords as justification for their view: “The U.S. will contribute to the healing of war and postwar reconstruction of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and throughout Indochina.”

Nguyen Tien Hung and Jerrold L. Schecter, in their 1986 book ***The Palace File***, a study of secret correspondence between Presidents Nixon and Ford and South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu, report: “In the final session Le Duc Tho [the chief negotiator for the North Vietnamese] had raised the issue of American reparations and Kissinger insisted that they depended on observance of the agreement and congressional approval. Le Duc Tho told Kissinger American planes could fly to Hanoi to pick up the American prisoners of war.” Thus, the release of the POWs and the payment of war reparations was implicitly linked by both the North Vietnamese and the United States government.

On February 1, 1973, President Nixon sent a secret letter to the Hanoi government pledging, “The Government of the United States of America will contribute to postwar reconstruction in North Vietnam without any political conditions.” Nixon estimated that the U.S. government would provide “\$3.25 billion in grant aid over five years.” (The text of this letter was released by the State Department on May 19, 1977.)

However, by mid-February 1973, Congressional opposition to the idea of providing aid to North Vietnam began to build. Remember, Nixon’s letter to Hanoi was still secret at the time.

The ***Washington Post*** reported on February 16, 1973:

Secretary of State William P. Rogers acknowledged yesterday that “we will have a problem with Congress” on voting money for postwar reconstruction of North Vietnam, but said, “we don’t think it is going to fail.”

The ***Post*** reported that Senate Democratic Leader Mike Mansfield and Assistant Senate Democratic Leader Robert Byrd both opposed the aid proposals. “I’m against it, period,” Byrd said.

Such statements worried the North Vietnamese. So Secretary of State Rogers, as if to reassure the Hanoi government, threatened to provide reconstruction aid to North Vietnam by presidential order should Congress fail to appropriate the funds. During testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, according to an Associated Press article on February 3, 1974:

Rogers three times called for “restraint” by members of Congress in making adverse comments on the aid issue, at least until American troops are out of Vietnam and all American prisoners are released.



But congressional opposition continued to mount and by early March Secretary Rogers had backed down from his threat to aid North Vietnam by presidential decree. Appearing before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Rogers said, “we will come to Congress to ask for authority for such a program.” Again he asked Congress to keep quiet until all American POWs were out. The Associated Press reported on March 8th:

As he said in a Monday session before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Rogers asked that the controversy over aid be kept to a minimum for the next month or so.

Such a recess in debate would allow the release of American prisoners to be completed and would also provide time for the administration to formulate its proposals.

Yet the controversy did not die down. So the North Vietnamese held back American POWs for use in future negotiating sessions over war reparations. However, reconstruction aid was ultimately rejected by Congress, and thus the POWs remain in captivity until the U.S. government pays the \$3.25 billion President Nixon promised.

The following report provides some clue to the motivation of Laos:

VIENTIANE, Feb. 17 (UPI) — The Communist Pathet Lao said today that they will not free American prisoners of war until there is a cease-fire in Laos. It also said that the release would take place in Laos, rather than in North Vietnam....

Soth Petras, the Pathet Lao permanent representative in Vientiane, would not give any details about American POWs in Laos but said the Pathet Lao had prepared a detailed accounting....

Saying the exchange of prisoners would take place only after a negotiated cease-fire takes effect in Laos, Petras added, “If they were captured in Laos, they will be released in Laos.”

The United States never signed a cease-fire agreement with the Communists in Laos. In fact, the U.S. continued bombing in Laos until Congress specifically cut off funding for the bombing operation on August 15, 1973. Thus, the U.S. government never settled a peace agreement with the Communist Lao, and they in return never released the American POWs they held.

Writing Them Off

Finally, the motivation of the Nixon administration must be considered. As has been shown, the U.S. government knew that more men were being held in North Vietnam and Laos (as well as in Cambodia and South Vietnam). On October 16, 1972, President Nixon promised, “We shall under no circumstance abandon our POWs or MIAs wherever they are. When I use the word abandon, I speak quite deliberately. That means that we cannot leave their fate to the goodwill of the enemy.” Yet “abandon” is just what the Nixon Administration did in April 1973.

Nixon and Kissinger were obsessed with signing a peace agreement with the Hanoi government and getting the Vietnam War behind them. Former South Vietnamese President Thieu told the German newspaper *Der Spiegel* in December 1979, “What he [Kissinger] and the U.S. government exactly wanted was to withdraw as fast as possible, to secure the release of U.S. prisoners. They said they wanted an honorable solution, but really they wanted to wash their



hands of the whole business and scuttle and run.”

Moreover, the Nixon-Kissinger plan to buy the freedom of all U.S. prisoners in Indochina with a massive reconstruction plan was stopped by Congress. According to ***Homecoming II***, a newsletter on live POWs, Robert McFarlane, then an aide to Kissinger, was sent to Hanoi with the offer of \$100 million in emergency medical aid (the maximum amount of discretionary aid Nixon could give without congressional approval). The North Vietnamese told McFarlane, “We want the \$3.25 billion we were promised.” Unable to provide that amount without congressional approval, the Nixon Administration made the decision to write off the remaining American POWs as a lost cause. The only option left was to declare them all dead and suppress any evidence to the contrary.

Finally, within weeks of the release of the last group of American POWs in late March, the Watergate scandal began to unfold. Nixon, with his political future in jeopardy, began to concentrate solely on resolving his own domestic crisis. The American POWs left in Indochina were abandoned.

Is There A Cover-Up?

Has there been an attempt by the U.S. government to cover up evidence of American POWs still being held by the Communist governments of Indochina? A number of factors must be considered in answering this question.

The rapid change in the policy of the U.S. government in April 1973 regarding POWs still alive in Indochina has already been noted. On June 8th, a “rallier” named Nguyen Thanh Son from North Vietnam was surfaced by the Saigon government. Son claimed to have recently seen American POWs still in North Vietnam. The Associated Press carried an article about Son, which created quite a stir in Washington. The State Department promptly cabled the embassy in Saigon for an explanation. The embassy replied with the following classified telegram:

NVA rallier/defector Nguyen Thanh Son was surfaced by GVN to press June 8 in Saigon. In follow on interview with AP, UPI and NBC American correspondents, questions elicited information that he had seen six prisoners whom he believed were Americans who had not yet been released. American officer present at interview requested news services to play down details; AP mention was consistent with embargo request, while UPI and NBC after talk with embassy press officer omitted item entirely from their stories.

This example demonstrates that shortly after the release of the last group of POWs the U.S. government adopted a policy of suppressing any information regarding more POWs in North Vietnam.

The same officials handling the POW issue in 1973 are still on the job today. This is highly unusual. The normal rotation of assignments would suggest that some of these people should have moved on by now. Yet the same people handling the issue in 1973 are handling it in 1986. Why, if not to “protect” certain information?

The handling of live-sighting refugee reports and other information by the Defense Intelligence



Agency and the Central Intelligence Agency also implies a cover-up. J. Thomas Burch, national coordinator for the National Vietnam Veterans Coalition, noted in testimony before the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee in 1986:

There is a widespread perception in the Indochinese refugee community that U.S. authorities are not genuinely interested in live POW intelligence. The principal reason for this perception is the insensitivity and degrading harassment all too frequently subjected by DIA personnel.

Refugees providing information are regarded with suspicion and are often asked insulting questions, e.g. "Aren't you just doing this to get into the U.S.?" (even in cases where the refugee has already opted for permanent resident status in another country). Shouting is not uncommon. Refugees have been isolated for an inordinate period of time. We ourselves have been involved in referring several refugees to responsible intelligence officers, only to have them return and state that they never wanted to have anything to do with DIA in the future.

Debunker Mentality

General Tighe, the former director of DIA, has characterized the attitude of DIA analysts responsible for the POW issue as a "mind-set to debunk." On another occasion, Tighe commented: "Some people have been disclaiming good reports [about live POWs] for so long it's become habit forming."

During his August 12, 1986 interview with THE NEW AMERICAN, Representative Robert Smith discussed his experience with the DIA's "mind-set to debunk":

The best way to describe it would be that they are constantly raising the standards. If you say you want a certain amount of evidence to determine something, one refugee report, then you've got to have another one. Then you got to have two. If you've got two, then you've got to have three. If you got three, then you got to have them polygraphed. If they pass the polygraph once, they got to pass it twice. If they pass it twice, they have to pass it three times. If the guy passes it three times, well, he's still not credible, we've got to have someone else. And that's exactly the way these things are handled. They're always pushing the standards of evidence back.

"If it isn't a cover-up," he concluded, "it's the greatest bureaucratic bungling job in the history of mankind."

A number of events have occurred over the past several years that indicate that the cover-up of live POW information continues to the present day. In January 1981, soon after being inaugurated, President Reagan was briefed on the POW issue by Admiral Jerry Tuttle, then Director of Collections for the DIA. Reagan was reportedly supplied with the names of 27 known POWs, along with additional information on another 25.

Within several weeks, Reagan received a highly classified diplomatic communiqué from the Vietnamese government (apparently routed through the Canadian Embassy in Hanoi) offering to free an unspecified number of American POWs for the sum of \$4 billion. Vietnam had allegedly made similar offers to President Ford in 1975 and President Carter in 1978.



This story was further documented by Bill Paul in a ***Wall Street Journal*** article (August 17, 1986):

The proposal was made to Mr. Reagan and his advisers at a general meeting on security matters, according to one person who says he was in the room, and whose story is supported by another attendee.

During the discussion, it was first decided that the offer was indeed genuine. Then, a number of the president's advisers said they opposed paying for POWs on the ground that it would appear as if the U.S. could be blackmailed. Mr. Reagan concurred. At that point, the president's men were prepared to let the matter drop.

To his credit, however, Mr. Reagan told William Casey, director of the Central Intelligence Agency, and Richard Allen, then the national security adviser, to try to find another way to get them home.

Mr. Allen subsequently proposed a reconnaissance mission into Laos which, if successful, would lead to a military rescue of prisoners presumed held at a jungle prison camp. The secret mission failed and word of the failure leaked to the press.

After that, the administration went to work to make sure there would be no more publicized violations of another country's sovereignty. A new POW policy was concocted by the State Department and the Pentagon. It maintained that the U.S. can neither confirm nor deny that POWs remain in Southeast Asia, but operates on the assumption that they are there.

Through this turn of phrase, the U.S. government is now able to appear steadfastly committed to getting the men home — without having to take any decisive action.

On August 12, 1986, THE NEW AMERICAN asked Congressman Smith what he knew about this incident:

I can't comment on that, I just can't. I'm going to have to defer with no comment on that....

I'm going to have to say no comment. I'll get myself in trouble. I hate to do that to you, but in that particular case I'm going to have to say no comment.

Bring Them Home

In September 1985, Major Mark Smith, a former POW, and Sergeant Melvin McIntyre (both U.S. Army-Retired) filed suit in Fayetteville, North Carolina, alleging that U.S. government officials had covered up information on live POWs. The suit also seeks to compel the President to enforce the Hostage Act of 1868, which requires the President to do anything short of declaring war in order to secure the release of U.S. citizens held prisoner in foreign countries.

Major Smith, Sergeant McIntyre, and their former commanding officer from South Korea, Lieutenant Colonel Robert L. Howard, have charged in affidavits filed in connection with their suit that from 1981 to 1984 they uncovered solid evidence that American POWs were being held in Laos. In 1984, Smith claims, he was informed by Thai military officials that three American POWs were available to be taken out of Laos in May 1984. When he reported that information to his superiors, the operation was "declared unauthorized and terminated." Smith, McIntyre and



Howard were promptly transferred out of Southeast Asia — Smith and McIntyre to the U.S., where they retired, and Howard to West Germany, where he is currently commander of VII Special Troops Battalion in Stuttgart.

The men's allegations generated considerable controversy, leading to a series of Senate hearings last year. However, the hearings ended inconclusively, and the court case has yet to be decided.

Finally, a group of Congressmen on a fact-finding mission in Hanoi in February 1986 uncovered further evidence that POWs were still living in Indochina and that the U.S. government was covering up their existence. One of the Congressmen on the trip was Representative Robert Smith who told THE NEW AMERICAN the significance of what he found there:

In one of the classified live sighting reports, there were two separate sources who provided information to the Defense Intelligence Agency about live Americans living in a military compound on Ly Nam De Street in 1982. One of these came from a refugee who indicated that he had been in that compound and had seen live Americans bathing in a cistern there. Another subsequent report came from Robert Garwood, the collaborator who came out in 1979, who said that he saw them there on Ly Nam De Street in a cistern.

So Bill Hendon and I asked for the information on the Ly Nam De Street sightings. It took us weeks to get it. When we finally got it, we had a briefing with the DIA people and they told us that there was no way that anybody could see anybody bathing in a cistern because there wasn't any cistern in the compound on Ly Nam De Street.

So we went to Vietnam. We took with us a map from Garwood, who drew the inside of the compound. He told us, go in the gate, go down this way, there's a barracks here, turn right, go through a little passageway and there's the cistern. So we kind of teased one of the Vietnamese officials at a dinner the night before we left and asked him to take us to Ly Nam De Street where the prisoners are. And he said, "Oh, you mean the plantation on Ly Nam De Street." Well, that's not where we wanted to go, but we knew that four or five blocks from there on the same street was where we wanted to go. So we said, "Yeah, that's where we want to go." So he said, "Alright, on the way out to the airport tomorrow, we'll take you there."

When we got there, Hendon, myself, three or four other members of the delegation and a camera crew from ABC's **20/20** literally broke away from everybody else and ran down the street to this compound. We pushed the gate open and got inside. They were totally surprised, had no idea what we were doing there. So we rushed into the compound, followed Garwood's map through the compound, turned right, ran through the opening which Garwood had described, and there was the cistern.

The Pentagon has discounted this incident as "an irrelevant discovery." But to Representative Smith, the "discovery" meant one of two things: "Either the DIA deliberately lied about the existence of the cistern or they didn't take appropriate action to determine if there was a cistern there."



Hope For The Future

The evidence of American servicemen still being held hostage in Southeast Asia is overwhelming. Officials of the U.S. government have engaged in a massive cover-up dating back to 1973. Now, 14 years after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords, we must ask: Is there hope for the future? Will we ever see these men come home?

There is hope. In September, following a six-month review of Defense Intelligence Agency records, General Tighe concluded that there is a “strong possibility” that there are still live POWs in Vietnam and Laos. While the Tighe report remains classified, the mere fact that General Leonard Peroots, the current DIA director, asked Tighe to undertake the review is evidence of a changed attitude on the part of some in the U.S. government. Furthermore, Peroots has established a permanent Senior Review Board to oversee the POW issue.

In November 1986 the leaders of the three resistance movements in Indochina pledged during a Washington press conference to make the rescue of American POWs a high priority. Whether or not the efforts by these freedom fighters are successful, their publicly stated commitment puts pressure on the U.S. government to take further notable action to resolve the live POW issue.

However, this development does have its disadvantages. Some POW activists fear that if POWs are rescued from one location, others imprisoned elsewhere may be moved to less accessible positions or even killed. Captain Eugene B. McDaniel (U.S. Navy-Retired), a POW for six years, told THE NEW AMERICAN, “I admire private efforts, but I think it’s going to take government-to-government efforts to get them. The prisoners are kept in many different places and in small numbers. So if you get one group, think of the impact on others.” McDaniel speaks from experience; as a POW in Vietnam he lived through the abortive Son Tay rescue attempt on November 21, 1970.

In the fall of 1986, President Reagan informally commissioned Texas billionaire H. Ross Perot to investigate the live POW issue. According to Air Force Brigadier General Robert Risner, a former POW who will assist Perot, the goal of the investigation is to produce evidence that will force the government to take action. Perot is a member of the newly established DIA Senior Review Board overseeing the POW issue and a past member of the President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board.

Some of the actions of the Reagan Administration — including the commissioning of Perot — have given hope to the MIA families and others concerned about the plight of our missing men. Nevertheless, many of these same Americans do not believe that the Reagan Administration really is doing everything that it can. The question that must be asked is: Are our leaders making *every effort* to bring our men home, or are they instead creating a smokescreen of half-hearted initiatives designed to placate the MIA families?

Barbara Mullen Keenan, the wife of an MIA, has written a book entitled ***Every Effort***, in which she states that every effort has not been made. In the September 15, 1986 issue of THE NEW AMERICAN, she wrote:



Ronald Reagan was the first President to break “the silent code” on live POWs, albeit in couched terms: “We cannot preclude the possibility of Americans being held.” Not long after taking office, Mr. Reagan said the POW issue “is the highest national priority of my administration.” We wanted to believe this, but the Reagan rhetoric is not backed up by real action....

Unfortunately, many of the families no longer view Mr. Reagan as any different from his predecessors. In fact, they feel he has cruelly raised hopes with false promises.

On the surface at least, the Reagan Administration does seem to be heading in the right direction. But has anything really changed behind the scenes? And in the future, will *every effort* be made to bring home the live POWs?

The answer to the latter question depends on the American people themselves. Had Mrs. Keenan and others not kept this issue alive over the last 14 years, we doubt very seriously that the U.S. government would ever have officially admitted to the “possibility” of live POWs, as it has since 1981. Furthermore, we doubt that Perot would ever have been commissioned by the President to investigate the matter. If there is a massive public outcry about the live POWs, the government would be forced to back up its rhetoric with action. When that day comes, bringing these men home really would be the administration’s “highest national priority.” We hope that day will come soon, before the last of the POWs dies in captivity.