



BRIAN F. ALPERT—KEYSTONE

Obsession: Veterans keep the heat on Hanoi

The Rambo Syndrome

Are some MIA's still POW's?

Most of them are Vietnam veterans. They operate out of Thailand for organizations such as Operation Rescue and Sky Hook II. They offer rewards to Laotians who bring in evidence of missing American servicemen—bone fragments, old dog tags or other clues—or who report the sighting of a live MIA. Some claim they have already gone on secret missions; others say they plan to. All of them are would-be Ramboes obsessed by a common goal: to go back into the jungles of Indochina and bring out the handful of comrades they insist are still being held by the communists.

Although the Reagan administration does not rule out the "possibility" that some American POW's are still being held in Indochina, few officials in Washington believe that any MIA's are still alive. Last September, however, two Green Beret veterans—Maj. Mark Smith and Sgt. 1/c Melvin McIntire—filed a class-action suit accusing the administration of covering up evidence of live sightings. As Pentagon officials see it, a case built on "hearsay" has added confusion to the emotion-charged MIA issue. "You've got the U.S. government on one side and all these weird-

os on the other," says Lt. Col. Paul Mather, head of the Bangkok office of the Joint Casualty Resolution Center—the organization that conducts MIA searches. "Now everyone wants to believe the weirdos."

Bone fragments: No clandestine mission so far has come back with an American POW or with proof that any MIA is still living. In 1982 and 1983 James (Bo) Gritz, a former Green Beret officer, led rescue attempts in Laos that returned empty-handed. In November 1984 Jack Bailey, a retired Air Force colonel who heads Operation Rescue, turned over four bags of bone fragments to the Casualty Resolution Center. The National League of POW/MIA Families says the bags contained merely "commingled human and nonhuman bone fragments." Bailey told newsmen in Bangkok last week he has information that 33 Americans are still prisoners in Laos. But he gave no details. "I better not talk about it now," he said.

The Reagan administration considers such free-lancers a threat to resolving the MIA issue. Officials fear that private forays will antagonize the governments of Laos and Vietnam. They complain that unauthorized searchers—often bounty

hunters looking for MIA relics that bring a reward in Bangkok—have "trashed" sites of downed aircraft before experts can examine them. They worry that an AC-130 crash site they hope to excavate with the Laotians may have been damaged by one of Bailey's teams. "These are amateur efforts by unqualified people," says one American official. "Their activities only disrupt our efforts."

Nothing deters would-be rescuers like Vincent Arnone. A short, stocky, former Green Beret from Malden, Mass., Arnone, 39, was a member of Gritz's rescue team. Last year he traveled to Thailand and crossed into Laos three times—once with two ex-Marines—to try to rescue POW's. Arnone believes there are 50 to 75 Americans still in Laos and as many as 200 in Vietnam. He says he has proof: maps of camps, taped testimony from Laotians and Thais—"people I trusted my life to inside Laos." He plans to go back as soon as he can finance another trip. "I know who they are and where they are," he insists. "All we need now is money."

ANGUS DEMING with FRANK GIBNEY JR.
in Bangkok, MARK STARR in Boston
and bureau reports