

Documents say POWs held in Laos after war

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Newly declassified documents show the United States had information that suggested some downed American pilots being held prisoner in Laos were not released at the end of the Vietnam War, *The Washington Post* reported Sunday.

The Defense Department officially lists 333 Americans as missing in action in Laos. Most of them probably were killed when their aircraft crashed, and others may have been killed by the pro-Communist Pathet Lao forces.

Officially, only two U.S. fliers are known to have been held by the Pathet Lao, and the Pentagon believes both men — Col. Charles Shelton and Lt. Col. David Hrdlicka — died in captivity in the 1960s.

But 500 reels of microfilmed documents — made available at the Library of Congress in recent months — provide some support for those who argue that the number of Americans

held in Laos was as high as 41, *The Post* said.

Although the evidence is inconclusive, the documents from the State Department, CIA and Defense Intelligence Agency lend some support to earlier congressional testimony by senior Nixon administration officials that they feared at the time that U.S. prisoners had been left behind, but they decided there was little they could do about it.

Of the 591 Americans released by North Vietnam in 1973, only nine had been captured in Laos and they were held by the North Vietnamese, not the Pathet Lao.

According to *The Post*, the documents show:

■ In January 1973 the CIA listed "confirmed enemy prisons" in caves in northeastern Laos. Several of the locations carry descriptions of the likely inmates, such as "American pilots (possibly 20)" and "approximately 15 American prisoners."

■ Minutes from a Washington interagency

meeting at about the same time said "We have only six known prisoners in Laos, although we hope there may be 40 or 41. . . . We think they are holding a lot more than six prisoners there."

■ In a 1992 deposition to Senate investigators, Bobby Inman, President Clinton's nominee to be defense secretary and a senior naval intelligence officer in 1973, said "in '73 a large number of us thought there were (prisoners in Laos), simply because we had known people had gotten to the ground, that there were substantial prisoners in Laos that were unaccounted for." He said he later changed his mind when none of them surfaced.

Senate investigators concluded in early 1993 that there was hope but "no compelling evidence" that any Americans remained alive in captivity in Southeast Asia. To the extent it was possible, "the focus is principally on Laos," said Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass.