

MISSING IN ACTION

Six years after the fall of South Vietnam and eight years after the withdrawal of all U.S. forces, Hanoi has yet to account for almost 2,500 Americans that never came home. Could some still be alive? Yes

'We Can Keep You . . . Forever'

THOMAS D. BOETTCHER and JOSEPH A. REHYANSKY

If the government of North Vietnam has difficulty explaining to you what happened to your brothers, your American POWs who have not yet returned, I can explain this quite clearly on the basis of my own experience in the Gulag Archipelago. There is a law in the Archipelago that those who have been treated the most harshly and who have withstood the most bravely, who are the most honest, the most courageous, the most unbending, never again come out into the world. They are never again shown to the world because they will tell tales that the human mind can barely accept. Some of your returned POWs told you that they were tortured. This means that those who have remained were tortured even more, but did not yield an inch. These are your best people. These are your foremost heroes who, in a solitary combat, have stood the test. And today, unfortunately, they cannot take courage from our applause. They can't hear it from their solitary cells where they may either die or remain for thirty years . . .

—Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn
June 30, 1975

VIRTUALLY EVERYTHING one needs to know about heroism in this low, dishonest century can be summed up by reciting the names of those American prisoners who endured, resisted, and survived, and who lived to see freedom: no Fourth of July declamation could outshine a simple list that begins: Robinson Risner, Jim Stockdale, Jeremiah Denton, Bud Day, Ev Alvarez . . . These men, and nearly six hundred others who were returned to us, survived a captivity so savage as to stagger the imagination of those who contemplate it. And yet, might Solzhenitsyn be—as he so often is—right? Might there now be, at this very moment, other living American prisoners in Southeast Asia who will “never again come out into the world”?

More than eight years ago, direct American military involvement in Southeast Asia ended under the terms of the Paris Peace Accords negotiated by Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, and 591 American prisoners of war were promptly repatriated. The fighting continued in Vietnam for more than two years, but, until the fall of Saigon seemed imminent, it generally did not enjoy the front-page status it had commanded for so many years. Lost in the shuffle were 2,500 missing American servicemen, almost none of whom has been accounted for to this day. Their status has been re-

viewed periodically by their government, which has declared all but 12 of them “killed in action/body not recovered.”

Might any of these men still be alive?

Vaughan Taylor, one of the two civilian attorneys who defended Marine PFC Bobby Garwood, seems to think so. Whenever he discusses this issue, he must put himself in a moral and ethical straitjacket, and the effort shows; not only must he say nothing that might prejudice his client’s case through the appellate process, he must also refrain from revealing anything he has learned, either from his client, or while working on the case, that might fall under the attorney-client privilege. But Taylor, who has served on active duty and is still an Army Reserve Officer, is not unaffected by the shattering emotional impact of this issue. Someone, he says, who devoted himself to trying to determine whether Americans are still there “would not be wasting his time.”

R. Emmett Tyrrell, editor of *The American Spectator*, has some acquaintances in Europe who think so. He wrote not long ago of the jibes he has taken from French journalists during trips to Paris about our do-nothing government’s toleration of this outrage. Tyrrell’s tone implies that it is virtually common knowledge among the French that there are Americans alive there.

The French, of course, have good reason to consider themselves experts on the subject of North Vietnamese intransigence and cruelty when it comes to the return of prisoners or of their remains. One case among many involved a Frenchman about whom the Vietnamese claimed they knew nothing. Eventually, French authorities determined with precision which cemetery he was buried in, and demanded his return. The North Vietnamese allowed as how, yes, he was there after all, but weather problems and difficult terrain would make it impossible for them to comply with French wishes. There is nothing uniquely horrible about this act of cruelty—except that the body was that of the grandson of Charles de Gaulle. Then there is the story of the POW who escaped from a Vietcong dungeon in 1968. He was picked up by American authorities, hospitalized and

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treated, debriefed, and quickly and quietly sent home—to France. He is said to have been a prisoner since 1954.

At least two high-ranking military officers do not dismiss the idea. General Louis T. Seith (USAF, Ret.), who commanded the Military Assistance Command-Thailand during the years 1967 to 1971, says: "I could believe that some are alive." Seith speaks of two possibilities: that some Americans are being held in isolated hamlets, and that others might still be fighting the war as guerrillas. With regard to the latter, Brigadier General Richard F. Abel, Director of Information for the Air Force, says it is "not inconceivable that there are people who are missing who are not even captured, who are alive." He cites the example of Japanese soldiers found on Guam as recently as 1976 still fighting World War II and, like Seith, says it is "possible in my mind that people could be there in some hamlet," though he adds that there is "not much chance of it."

The late Admiral John C. McCain, Commander-in-Chief of Pacific forces during 1968 to 1972, was more certain. McCain, whose command at that time extended to Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand, told Congress in 1976 that the North Vietnamese had deceived this country concerning MIAs. "I think there is no question about it," he said, "that there are some who are still alive in Southeast Asia."

Ann Mills Griffiths seems to think that some might be alive. Mrs. Griffiths is the Executive Director of the League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia. This organization was founded in 1970 to operate a network for information and contact among the affected families, and to keep the issue before the public. Mrs. Griffiths is one of three full-time employees, whose number may

soon be reduced to two because of funding problems. She is a tall, dark, attractive, intelligent woman in her late thirties who knows so much about the issue that she can barely talk fast enough to tell you everything she wants you to know. Her brother, Lieutenant Commander James Mills, launched his plane off the deck of the *U.S.S. Coral Sea* for a raid against North Vietnam in September 1966, and has been missing ever since.

Why has the issue begun to receive so much publicity?

"Because," replies Mrs. Griffiths firmly, "it can't be denied that there's increasing evidence that prisoners are still there."

What about the Woodcock Commission, formally known as the Presidential Commission on Americans Missing and Unaccounted for in Southeast Asia, which went to Vietnam in 1977?

"The Commission was a success," says Mrs. Griffiths, "only in establishing Leonard Woodcock's credentials so that he could be appointed ambassador to China."

Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Roger Shields agrees; he says that the Commission was intended to make the Vietnamese look cooperative and thus bury the issue. Congressman Robert K. Dornan (R., Calif.) feels even more strongly. "The Vietnamese," he says, "made fools of them." The Commission, which concluded that improved relations between the two countries held out the best hope for a full account, was "a joke." One of the distinguished members "knew nothing about this problem before she left, learned nothing there, and came home to talk about kindergarten and school training. . . . Military men at the second level of the Woodcock Commission who had to stand behind the front-page personalities told me they were ashamed to be Americans."

Why would the Vietnamese continue to hold Americans in captivity? There are a number of possible answers. Ann Griffiths and Carol Bates, the Director of Public Affairs for the League, believe that they never intended to keep them, that it was a ploy that failed. Mrs. Bates reminds us that American negotiators at the peace conferences failed to hold the line on demanding a list of prisoners *before* signing the accords. The North Vietnamese, realizing that they could get an agreement without accounting for our men, deliberately signed the accords and then turned over a partial list, a list which, they were sure, would be deemed inadequate by American authorities. Then, with the specific terms of the peace agreement itself already worked out, the North Vietnamese expected to go back to the bargaining table to negotiate a further release of prisoners in exchange for the \$3.25 billion in reparations they wanted.

Much to their surprise, our representatives accepted the list, flew home, and declared the war over. Now, eight years later, the North Vietnamese have severe economic problems, are tied down by military conflicts in Cambodia and, to a lesser extent, with China, and will not risk the loss of face involved in admitting that they held Americans back—to no avail. Yet (on this theory) they have not killed them, because the prisoners might, somehow, still turn out to be valuable to them in some future negotiations.

Colonel Laird Gutierrez (USAF, Ret.), a former Vietnam

LIFE QUESTIONS FOR A PEACE

543 POWs:
what shape
are they in?

1,271 MIAs:
how many
are alive?

Where does
it leave us?

An Ohio town
talks of
the war



Naval Lt. Raymond Dodge (above) is a negative, but Hanoi denies any knowledge of him.

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POW, suggests another reason may be the personal pique of a captor "with an Eastern mind that has been contaminated by Communism." Gutterson tells of a friend captured in the Korean War who, with other Americans, was kept long after the "final" North Korean prisoner exchange. Until his release, he was unaccounted for and carried as MIA. The man told Gutterson that he was detained because he had refused to confess falsely, in writing, to having engaged in germ warfare. The commander of his POW camp became furious with him and told him that he would remain incarcerated until he signed. The pilot did sign, after his captors showed him a *New York Times* article about the repatriation of most of the 21 American POWs who had initially decided to remain in Korea. Despite the fact that they had denounced their country and defected, they were not punished upon their return. The pilot, understandably, began to doubt the wisdom of rotting away in a Chinese prison as an act of loyalty to a government that dealt so leniently with traitors. Two years after the "final" exchange of prisoners, he signed the confession, and was released through Hong Kong in a matter of days.

Other reasons are more mundane: recent reports indicate that some of our men are being used as English teachers, and as mechanics and maintenance men for the millions of dollars' worth of U.S. equipment abandoned there. Some are paying what might be called a "debt to society" as slave laborers on road gangs—rebuilding the Vietnam they, as the Vietnamese see it, helped to destroy.

THERE is another rationale for keeping these men, one not immediately comprehensible to Western minds, though Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Alexander Dolgun, and Leonid Plyushch, among others, have insight into it. Plyushch, a Ukrainian dissident and the author of *History's Carnival*, has written, echoing a frequent theme of the past century, that where there is no God *nothing* is impermissible. Many of our POWs who did return could understand what he means. John G. Hubbell, in his 1976 book, *P.O.W.*, relates that some of those who endured the most bravely while being tortured were told by their interrogators: "We still have French prisoners. . . . They were not fit to return to their families, so we never released them. Don't you want to see your family again? . . . There are still Frenchmen in our prisons who did not reform their minds. We can keep you . . . forever." Another common method of taunting those who could not be broken, according to Ann Griffiths, was to tell them that if they did not "become sincere" they would be sent to "one of the camps from which no one returns."

That this cruelly bizarre rationale for retaining prisoners might actually be in effect becomes less incredible when one considers this fact: of the 591 Americans who were repatriated, *not one* was maimed. Consider it: men ejecting from flaming, exploding aircraft, under missile fire, parachuting into hostile territory: yet not one of those returned to us was missing an eye, an ear, an arm, or a leg—even a finger—and none was disfigured by burns. Common sense tells us that *some* of those captured had to be disfigured. Yet might not Vietnamese paranoia prevent them from repatriating those who had been maimed—whether during combat or torture?

Much has been made of the virtually Teutonic efficiency of the North Vietnamese in processing prisoners—rewards

were offered for their capture and delivery to collection points, meticulous records were kept, interrogation methods and the prison administration itself were highly bureaucratized. And yet, Colonel Gutterson says:

I know that two of our prisoners were kept in a village and they were right on a truck route, so they could have been taken north to Hanoi anytime. They were kept in a village for a year, primarily as far as they could figure out because the head man of the village apparently had done something nice to somebody and so they gave him as a prize a couple of American POWs to keep in a cage in his village for the people to look at. Because it gave him prestige. So there doesn't have to be a logical Western reason. . . .

Gutterson remains convinced that Americans are still held. He felt compelled, after his own release from captivity in 1973, to try to keep the issue alive. Whenever he was invited to speak in public, he invariably raised the topic of MIAs. When his Air Force superiors ordered him to stop talking about the matter publicly, Gutterson tried an evasive maneuver: his wife, who had been active in POW family organizations and knew much, began accompanying him to his speeches, and he, with a wink, would refer all questions about MIAs to her. This approach did not ease the strain in his relationship with the Air Force, and he was pressured into accepting early retirement.

In thinking about this issue, then, it is necessary to consider, at least, the possibility that we are dealing with people for whom cruelty is fun, people who, purely for revenge and not for any tangible gain, confine men under conditions so barbaric that we can barely imagine them. But once you have made this leap of imagination from the suburbs of Peoria to "The Hanoi Hilton" and "The Plantation," to "Vegas," "The Briar Patch," and "Heartbreak Hotel," it is still necessary to ask: Where is the proof?

We might begin by considering a few of the most obvious examples of North Vietnamese intransigence. According to the late Congressman Tennyson Guyer (R., Ohio), a member of the Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, whose sudden death in April was a great loss to the League of Families, ". . . over half of these [2,500 MIAs] are men who were either known or strongly suspected to be prisoners of the Vietnamese or Laotians. There are 138 Americans whose names, pictures, or even their voices were used by the Vietnamese for propaganda purposes. As many as 750 more were probably in their custody. Yet, we have received virtually no word as to their fate . . ." Lieutenant General Eugene Tighe, U.S. Air Force, who was, until his retirement on August 1 of this year, the director of the Defense Intelligence Agency and one of the men credited by the League of Families with having reinvigorated the government's quest for additional information regarding our prisoners of war and missing in action, has pointed out that the remains of forty Americans who, the North Vietnamese *admit*, died in captivity "have yet to be returned. Other men were known to be alive and in the hands of the enemy and some were even publicly named, yet we have no accounting of these men."

At a recent hearing, General Tighe was asked by Representative Stephen Solarz (D., N.Y.): "You have lived with this problem for a long time. . . . Does the weight of the evidence suggest to you, taking everything into consideration, that American servicemen are still living in Indochina?"

"Yes, sir."

"And that there are still—and this is a somewhat different question—American servicemen being held against their will in Indochina?"

"My conviction would be yes in answer to both questions, sir."

Roger Shields points out that even while members of Congressman G. V. "Sonny" Montgomery's (D., Miss.) House Select Committee on MIAs (now defunct) were "receiving assurances from Vietnamese authorities that no Americans . . . were being held captive, at least two Americans, Arlow Gay and Tucker Gouglemann, were in Vietnamese prisons . . ."

When the Woodcock Commission visited Vietnam, they were informed of the existence of Gouglemann's remains. Gay was later released. Representative Montgomery maintains that there are no MIAs still held in Southeast Asia and has delivered himself of a "Dear Colleague" letter to every member of Congress excoriating those—such as ABC News, which recently ran an examination of the issue—who would give the families of these men "false hopes."

"You cannot give us false hopes," Ann Griffiths says emphatically. "We have been at it too long."

With the exodus of the boat people from Southeast Asia the quantity and quality of "live-sighting" reports increased



dramatically. Ann Griffiths dismisses as "the State Department line" the position that the reports come from persons desperate for attention and favors from American authorities, people who therefore cannot be considered reliable. Most of the refugees making these reports, Mrs. Griffiths asserts, have already secured sponsors, jobs, and places to live, and have declined rewards offered for information. "The Americans tried to help us," is, Mrs. Griffiths says, the usual response of the refugees who are offered rewards; "this is the least we can do."

The Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) now investigates each live-sighting report within a matter of days. The individual making the report is interviewed and, if willing, subjected to examination by polygraph. The results of most of the examinations indicate no deception. There are currently 338 first-hand live-sighting reports on file, some placing living Americans in Vietnam as recently as the fall of 1980. Of these 338 reports, about one-third refer to persons known to have been in Vietnam after the fall of Saigon and who have since gotten out of the country.

A refugee relates that a friend of his was on a bus en route to Saigon in September 1979 when it was attacked by a squad of eight "resistance soldiers." The squad boarded the bus; three of the eight were Americans. The Americans requested that any of the passengers with access to the outside world transmit news of their situation to American authorities, saying that originally there had been five Americans in the group but two had died. They also recited their names, but the refugee's friend could not remember them.

Another refugee, who claims to be a former employee of the U.S. Agency for International Development, relates that during 1976, he was imprisoned in a cave near Vienxay, Laos with, among others, five Caucasians who were identified to him as American pilots.

A former second lieutenant in the South Vietnamese army reports that he was imprisoned, through 1975, at a camp in Tan Canh. He said that a group of Americans, led by a major, were kept in a separate compound more than a kilometer from the South Vietnamese. He had opportunities to communicate with the Americans, and did so in English; he says that the major had served in the cavalry brigade assigned to the defense of Dac To and Tan Canh, and had been captured in 1971. There were also two American sergeants and a first lieutenant there. The major was "thin, short for an American. He had a long face, a bald forehead, brown eyes, and long eyebrows. His nose is a little flattened between the eyes, a dimple in the middle of the chin, teeth distant from one another. I used to be ordered by the Communist guards to bring sweet potatoes to the 'American pirates'; they had their hands and legs tied up when they were not working . . . The exact date I saw him for the last time was during February 1975. At that time, the Americans were still building roads."

The Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs has held repeated hearings on this issue. It was before this subcommittee that the "Vietnamese mortician" appeared in June 1980 and testified that the remains of more than four hundred Americans, remains on which he had worked as late as mid-1977, were stored at 17 Ly Nam De Street, Hanoi, known to American POWs confined there as "The Plantation." The mortician also

recounted that he had observed live Americans there "up until 1974." Lieutenant General Tighe preceded the mortician before the committee that day. Concerning DIA's investigation of the report of the four hundred remains and the mortician's anticipated testimony, General Tighe stated: "The technician's personae vita has been crosschecked and independently verified. His polygraph examination conducted by DIA indicated no deception. The allegation that the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is maintaining and withholding four hundred remains of U.S. personnel is judged by the Defense Intelligence Agency to be valid."

Some of the other testimony is just as disturbing, but the strategic deletions from the public record of this subcommittee's proceedings are, in some cases, more intriguing than the statements left in the record.

During a June 1979 exchange between Lieutenant General Tighe and Congressman Dornan, of 15 questions and answers regarding the possibility of live Americans' still being held in Laos, *eight* of the questions and answers were deleted or partially deleted.

However, this concealment is not always a matter of covering up. Ann Griffiths points out that there has been a change in the attitude of the government, especially since the avalanche of reports from the boat people began. She is grateful and does not want to jeopardize any government efforts in behalf of the men. Mrs. Griffiths, who was recently granted limited access to classified information so that she could take part in official meetings and hearings on the matter, and so that the government might exploit her own considerable institutional memory, is now discouraging private rescue attempts (there have been at least three in various stages of preparation in recent months) because of her fear that they would jeopardize the lives of more men than they might save.

"How high up in the government," we asked her, "does this belief, the belief that there are still Americans alive there, extend? Does the President believe it? The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs? The Secretary of State . . . ?"

"I really couldn't discuss it in specific terms," she replied.

"Now we're getting into your security clearance?"

"That's right."

One story, however, suggests the level of responsibility and authority to which interest in re-evaluating the MIA question extends. Captain John McCain (USN, Ret.), the son of Admiral McCain and himself a survivor of more than five years of captivity in North Vietnam, was until recently the Navy's liaison with the U.S. Senate. He says that during the war a state governor who had become concerned about imprisoned POWs and their waiting families invited some of the families to the state capital and held a news conference with them to demonstrate his support. During the proceedings, the small son of one of the POWs toddled forward and asked the governor to take him to the bathroom. Without hesitation or embarrassment the governor did just that. After the two returned, the press conference resumed with the boy standing near the governor. Then, a second time, the child interrupted him, tugging at his sleeve to ask, "Can you bring my daddy home?"

Longtime aides to Ronald Reagan trace his enduring interest in the matter to that moment. "He's a very sentimental guy," says McCain. "He wore that guy's bracelet [inscribed

with the name of the boy's missing father] . . . from then until after everybody came home." Since the boy's father was not among those repatriated or otherwise accounted for, it is probably safe to assume that President Reagan has not dismissed the issue from his mind, or his heart.

But what does the government plan to do, assuming that the day may soon come when it will be impossible to deny, as a matter of policy, that we believe the North Vietnamese are still detaining Americans? Ann Griffiths would like to know the answer to that question herself, and states that, to her knowledge, there is no plan for that eventuality. The League, for all that its members have suffered these long years, has strenuously opposed ransom.

IN WORKING on this article we encountered the number "2,500" over and over, until it began to swim before our eyes, until—despite the fact that both of us served in Vietnam—it almost began to obscure the men about whom we were writing. As an antidote, let's talk about two of them.

Navy Lieutenant Ron Dodge, a handsome, balding young man, was the only American pilot shot down on May 17, 1967 in Nghe An province, North Vietnam. He ejected safely and told his wingman, "Here they come. I'm destroying my radio." Later that day a Vietnamese broadcast boasted about capturing the "U.S. bandit pilot." To further substantiate his capture, a photograph of Dodge, his face dirty and bruised, his head in bandages, was released and later printed in *Paris Match*. He was also featured in the Communist propaganda film, *Pilots in Pajamas*. The North Vietnamese deny any knowledge of him.

On July 7, 1981, 14 years and 51 days after he was shot down, the body of Ron Dodge, along with the bodies of two other Air Force pilots, was returned by North Vietnam—without explanation, as usual.

Air Force Colonel David Hrdlicka's plane came apart over northern Laos on May 18, 1965. Peking's New China News Agency broadcast a report quoting a Pathet Lao spokesman as announcing the capture of Colonel Hrdlicka. The following year the Pathet Lao broadcast a letter which was attributed to Hrdlicka wherein he discussed the war and his eagerness to see his wife and children. Several months later, in August 1966, *Pravda* ran a photograph of him, still in his flight suit, head bowed and turned slightly away, an armed guard behind him. U.S. intelligence believes he was held in a cave near Sam Neua, Laos, and reports believed to pertain to him were monitored for several years.

Colonel Hrdlicka is an old Air Force flying buddy of Congressman Robert Dornan. "It is just absolutely sickening to think that an American could suffer such a fate," says Dornan. "Think of the mental state of someone existing alive for seven years, compounded on top of his seven . . . years of captivity before the American presence ended. . . . I just can't conceive of what an American must think of his country if he is still alive somewhere in one of those jungle camps. . . ."

Indeed. What must they think of us?

Walter Cronkite mesmerized the country during the hostage crisis by counting all the way up to 444. If by a miracle David Hrdlicka is still alive, he is approaching day six thousand. □