

Subj: garwood

Section: POW/MIA Issues

To: Don C. Steiner, 75601,64

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From: Frank Tansey [SecLd], 71171,2674

#339300

RE: "Would somebody please explain who Garwood is."

Bill

The following story was published in the April issue of Tell the World About Us -- the newsletter of Minnesota Won't Forget and the Minnesota League of Families of POW/MIA.

For Government,
Robert Garwood is the
Ghost Who Won't Go Away

Of all the stories that have surfaced publicly concerning the POWs who were left behind in Vietnam, none is more embarrassing to the United States Government than the story of Pfc Robert Garwood. Despite the considerable lengths the Government has gone to discredit Garwood, his story remains a glaring example of Vietnam's insincerity about the POWs, and also how far Washington is willing to go to suppress public knowledge of the POW story.

Garwood is a controversial figure. To some people, he is exceeded in contempt only by Jane Fonda, as a soldier who went bad. Much of this feeling was encouraged by the U.S. Government, but some of the confusion is the result of inconsistencies from Garwood's own mouth. When he was released by Vietnam 14 years after his capture, he was court martialed on a variety of charges, including desertion.

The most serious charges were dismissed by the judge. The behavior of Garwood while he was a POW will probably always be a subject for argument, but the thing that makes Garwood noteworthy, and the thing which the Government seems determined to shunt aside, is the fact that Garwood exists. The Vietnamese had insisted for years that there were no Americans of any kind in Vietnam, under any circumstances. When Garwood achieved his release, he proved the lie, and embarrassed the U.S. Government which had insisted that no Americans were left behind.

When Jimmy Carter was elected President in 1976, he sent labor leader Leonard Woodcock to Hanoi to determine if the stories of American POWs were true, and to negotiate for their release. He was accompanied by military assistants, armed with some of the more glaring discrepancy cases -- men who were known to have been prisoners of the Vietnamese because they were used for propaganda films and broadcasts.

Woodcock sat across the table from his Vietnamese counterparts and began his presentation by asking a series of blunt questions:

"Are you holding any POWs?", he asked.

"No", they replied.

"Are you holding any American deserters, including men you captured in Saigon when it fell in 1975?"

"NO", they replied (we know there were many deserters living in the

Cholon district of Saigon when it fell).

"Are there any Americans in Vietnam who defected to your side?", he asked.

"No", they replied.

When Woodcock was finished with his questions, he rose and, to the astonishment of his assistants, thanked the Vietnamese negotiators and adjourned. His assistants left the discrepancy case files on the table in disgust. Woodcock returned home and announced that he had determined there were no POWs left behind in Vietnam. Carter initiated an effort to declare all the remaining MIAs KIA (killed in action). Then, two years later, Garwood slipped a note to a Finnish diplomat. Faced with irrefutable proof from a foreign diplomat that an American existed, the U.S. Government confronted the Vietnamese and demanded his release. He was released March 22, 1979.

Garwood had been branded a turncoat and collaborator by the men he had been with in a Vietcong POW camp. (These charges had been detailed by these men in a book published four years before his return, entitled "Survivors") Many men had been accused of such violations of the Code of Conduct, yet, the Government had decided, after the men had been returned from Operation Homecoming, not to charge any of them. Some of them had openly expoused Communism, encouraged others to see the light of their wisdom, and had received favorable treatment for it.

None had been charged.

Garwood, on the other hand was faced with a long list of charges, the most serious of which was desertion --which carried the death penalty. Faced with the very real threat to his future, he was instructed not to talk about other POWs he had seen in Vietnam. It would be five years before he admitted to reporter Bill Paul, of the Wall Street Journal, that there were others who waited to return home.

The charges against Garwood would be defeated in a long court martial. His trial began May 22, 1979. There was a year of pre-trial maneuvering, then two months of testimony.

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He was convicted of serving as an interpreter for the Vietcong, of informing the camp commanders of the feelings and complaints of his fellow prisoners, of interrogating fellow prisoners about military matters -- including escape plans, of indoctrinating fellow prisoners during "political" courses conducted by the VC, that he served as a guard, and that he struck a fellow prisoner with the back of his hand.

He was reduced to the lowest rank, sentenced to forfeiture of pay for one week, and given a dishonorable discharge. The Marines attempted to deny him \$147,000 in back pay, but it was appealed to a civilian court.

Much of Garwood's problems were the result of the fact that he was one

of the earliest POWs. By the time his accusers became POWs as a result of the Tet Offensive, he had been a prisoner for three years. He had learned the rules and had survived. The new men, newly-captured and unaware of what lay ahead, took an immediate dislike and distrust of him. He was obviously a trustee. He was used as an interpreter, because the previous interpreters had been killed during the Tet offensive. This role made him appear to be one of "them" -- the Vietcong guards and staff.

He had learned that there was no escape in the jungle, and he had learned to cooperate to avoid punishment. These attitudes disgusted the newcomers, but before they returned home, they would all learn the same lessons, and they would all cooperate -- even become ardent communists.

The most frivolous charge against Garwood -- desertion-- was dropped. It demonstrates the lengths to which the Marines were willing to go to paint Garwood "Red" in the public eyes.

At his trial, he proved he had not deserted when he disappeared in September, 1965, and his circumstances at the time make the likelihood of such an act remote. He was a short timer -- having enlisted in 1963. He was due for R&R in Bangkok in a few days. He had never seen combat, in fact he had a cushy job as driver in the officers motor pool. On the day he disappeared, he had been sent to a spot south of Danang -- Marble Mountain -- to pick up a Lieutenant from a recon unit which had been newly-established there. Another man in his unit remembered the assignment because he had wanted it himself, but lost out to Garwood. The Lieutenant never showed, and as Garwood sat parked alone in his idling jeep, darkness closed in, and with it, the Vietcong. Marble Mountain, it turns out, had been hollowed out and served as a major Vietcong installation, including a hospital. It remained a secret throughout the war.