

THE FRENCH EXPERIENCE

In the 28 years since the end of the French Indochina War, the French Government has never received a true accounting for its missing servicemen.

By September 9, 1954, the deadline for release of all prisoners of war in Vietnam, the Vietnamese communists had returned about one-third of the prisoners claimed by the French Command. By May 1955, when the last French forces pulled out of North Vietnam, excluding 12,380 indigenous troops, the number of men from the French Expeditionary Corps listed as "missing or failed to return from captivity" totaled 8,746 -- of whom 2,995 were French nationals.

Since 1954, when accused of withholding prisoners, the Hanoi government invariably asserted that it released all prisoners of war in accordance with the terms of the Geneva Agreement, and that any missing personnel whom they had not listed as having "rallied" to their side should be considered as killed in action or dead as a result of combat wounds. After 1954 the Vietnamese officially released some of the "ralliers." During 1954-1956 the North Vietnamese released a total of 380 alleged ralliers to the French Command. Also in 1955-1956, under the supervision of the International Control Commission (ICC), they released a total of 450 non-French members of the Foreign Legion across the China border for repatriation to Central and Eastern Europe. Reliable Western observers in Vietnam during this period said that hundreds more Legionnaires were released via China without the required notice to the ICC or the French Command. Later, during the 1960's and early 1970's, the Hanoi Government repatriated hundreds of non-French personnel to their native countries as a result of actions taken by their embassies, and without officially informing the French authorities or the ICC. Some of the Foreign Legionnaires and Africans released in the 1960's reportedly had undergone political training in North Vietnam, and many had been listed by the Vietnamese as "unknown" and by the French as missing. There are indications that some of these persons may not have "rallied" or volunteered to remain in Vietnam.

It is important to note that most of the persons who had not been repatriated prior to the September 1954 deadline were not French nationals from Metropolitan France but rather were Eastern Europeans, North Africans, and other nationalities who served in the French Expeditionary Corps. The only French nationals who are known to have been belatedly returned to French authorities, were 40 enlisted men released in 1962 and flown to France with their Vietnamese families. Some if not all reportedly were tried as deserters in France.

In June 1971, responding to a question in the National Assembly, the French Foreign Minister asserted that to the Government's knowledge no French prisoners of war were held in North Vietnam after the execution of the Geneva Accords in 1954, and that no members of the French Far East Expeditionary Corps were being held "against their will in North Vietnam."

While the French Government apparently is satisfied that all French prisoners were released at the end of the Indochina War, it is clear that the Hanoi

Government did not honor the terms of the Geneva Agreement to account for all French troops who were alive under Vietnamese control after the end of the war.

A review of how the Vietnamese have dealt with the French on the recovery of remains over the past 28 years dispels any illusion that they hold any humanitarian motivation towards the families of the deceased.

Left in Vietnam were the remains of over 22,000 French nationals and Legionnaires who had fallen in the service of France. On 1 February 1955, the High Command of the French Union Forces and the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) signed a graves agreement to establish protocols for regroupment and repatriation of the remains of men who had fallen on both sides in the conflict. They were to take "all necessary measures" to complete the task by July 1, 1956 -- 17 months after signature of the agreement. In the following 21 years, as of February 1976, the Vietnamese returned to France less than 1,500 remains of deceased French servicemen.

It is important to note that all of the remains released by the Hanoi Government had been buried, long ago, by the French, in military cemeteries in North Vietnam. Also important to note is that Hanoi has not returned the remains of any of the men listed by the French as missing in action or as having died in captivity.

In contrast, in South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, where the host governments cooperated with the French, by the end of 1959 the French Graves Service had assembled, and reinterred in the French cemetery at Tan Son Nhut, Saigon, the remains of all except two French military personnel who had died in those countries, and that had not been claimed by the next of kin. The two exceptions were men whose remains had been buried in a region of Laos controlled by the Pathet Lao and the PAVN. The cemetery at Tan Son Nhat then contained 5300 graves.

In the initial stages the Hanoi Government used the graves agreement as a cover to permit its political and intelligence cadre to circulate in South Vietnam. American officials who visited the largest of these cemeteries on 1973 reported that it was overgrown with weeds and many of the headstones had fallen down.

An article published in a French news magazine in July 1982, illustrates Hanoi's lack of humanitarian motivation and its insatiable appetite to obtain financial gain from its control of French remains. According to the article, the Vietnamese Government is urging the French authorities to repatriate these remains--asserting that French remains will not be tolerated indefinitely on Vietnamese soil. The French Veterans Ministry estimated the cost of returning the remains to France at 1,575 francs per set of remains--a total of 63 million francs. But, according to the news article, this estimate does not include the costs demanded by Hanoi for exhumation and transportation within Vietnam, which would bring the cost of the entire operation to several billion francs. The article went on to note that the Vietnamese have constructed buildings on one old cemetery.

Despite the substantial political and economic concessions the French have made to Hanoi since 1954, France has never received a full accounting for its missing and

dead. The Vietnamese Communist government has consistently circumvented and violated the terms of the 1954 Geneva Agreement concerning the accounting for France's missing servicemen. Hanoi's actions clearly demonstrate that its only interest in the French military graves in Vietnam and the requests for remains by the families of the deceased is in the economic and political benefits that the Vietnamese Government can derive from control of these remains.

We should keep this record in mind in dealing with Hanoi. We can anticipate that Hanoi's objective is to obtain increasingly large economic and political concessions in exchange for piecemeal releases of remains and information about our missing servicemen.