

BILL ROSE

INTRA, FL 33615

Dear Mr. Schenberg,

I came across an old newspaper clipping the other day which has jogged my memory and my conscience, and I feel compelled to write. The article is titled 'MIA Story Demands To Be Kept Alive' and appeared under your name in the editorial section of The Tampa Tribune about a year ago. I saved it because the question of American servicemen being held captive in Vietnam has been nagging me for some years.

I was in Vietnam as a volunteer refugee relief worker under a Church World Service program from 1967 until 1974, when I returned to this country with my Vietnamese wife and stepson. Although a civilian and an opponent of the American military adventure in Southeast Asia I acquired a respect for many of the men I met who were caught up in the war effort, and have much sympathy for those who were physically and emotionally traumatized by the Vietnam experience.

Since returning from Vietnam I have come across several stories which support the theory that Americans were still held captive following the cessation of hostilities in 1975.

Item: Article in a veterans' newsletter which I ^{son} while working at the Tampa post office in 1978 or 1979. This article cited an article from a Scandinavian newspaper (I believe it was Danish) according to which a Danish forestry adviser assisting the Hanoi government was on a solitary motorcycle vacation out in the countryside. At one point he saw a distant group of men, appearing to be Canadians but dressed in Vietnamese peasant clothing, in a work crew. They saw him and signaled for him to come closer; but as he did so Vietnamese soldiers guarding

the men intervened, so there was no chance for verbal communication. Shortly after the Danish advisors' return to Hanoi his visa was revoked, and he had to leave the country.

Item: My wife returned to Vinh Long Province in south Vietnam to visit her relatives several years ago. One of her sisters was married to an army officer who served as an aide to a higher-ranking officer. During the course of my wife's visit she accompanied her sister and brother-in-law and the ranking officer and his wife on an automobile excursion to Hanoi. During this trip, she claims that they stopped at a site on the outskirts of Hanoi where Americans were being kept prisoner in what she described as individual huts resembling pig pens. She was able to talk briefly with one inmate, but did not get his name — only his Vietnamese nickname — being unable to converse at any length because of the presence of a guard. After telling this episode upon her return to Florida she said she would be reluctant to come forward with the story because of possible repercussions against her brother-in-law and sister. She also claimed that it was common knowledge that American prisoners were being employed in Hanoi as gatherers of 'night soil' — collecting human excrement in small 55-gallon fuel drums for use as agricultural fertilizer. I have to say that while my wife's descriptions of contacts with American detainees in Vietnam are convincing in their details, she is not always truthful in her statements. Also one wonders why, if it is true that Americans were employed publicly as sanitation workers, this was never apparent to various foreign missions and delegations.

which have visited and resided in Hanoi over the years since the war.

Item. Several years ago we met a newly-arrived Vietnamese immigrant who said that during the war years he had worked in the CIA under Mr. Colby. As an ex-employee of the CIA he was enrolled in the 're-education' program after the North Vietnamese gained control of the government, and he was kept in this capacity at various detention camps for fourteen years before being released. He told us that at one of the camps where he was interned there was an American inmate. The American had been at this particular camp for a long period and, being familiar with local procedures, could discern from the treatment given to the Vietnamese former CIA employee that his release was imminent. The American arranged a secretive conversation with the Vietnamese captive (It gathered that neither could speak the other's language to any extent) in which he implored him to report his presence to U.S. authorities should he ever find his way to the United States. The Vietnamese man was at length able to join his wife in the United States — but felt great chagrin because he had not been able to put the American prisoner's name in writing during their brief moment of contact and was no longer able to remember it.

You may have come across many stories or reports similar to these in your examination of the MIA issue. If word-of-mouth accounts such as these can be considered credible, then there must be

a large amount of anecdotal evidence available from other Vietnamese expatriates as well as from Vietnamese questioned on-the-spot by various foreign investigators in Vietnam. How is such evidence dealt with? Is there any official effort at follow-up? Any offering of cash rewards, political asylum in the U.S. or whatever for information leading to the discovery of live P.O.W.s?

Personally I am glad that economic sanctions against Vietnam have been lifted and at long last we can go about building full relations between the two countries. But the thought of American war prisoners — or any other P.O.W.s be they Korean, Australian, Philippine, Thai, or former ARVN — languishing in Vietnamese jails is appalling, and I wish you success in your efforts to reveal the truth.

Yours sincerely,

B. D. [Signature]

Jupiter, Florida

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MIA story demands to be kept alive

BY SYDNEY H. SCHANBERG

I've been working on the Vietnam MIA story for about a year and a half now. That's a long time as daily journalism goes, so someone could fairly ask me — in fact, I have asked myself — why I keep going.

The simple answer is that the story isn't finished yet. The pivotal government documents that could explain why American prisoners were left behind when the war ended are still being kept hidden from the public. Some of those documents might also help explain what happened to the unreturned prisoners, some of whom could still be alive.

Washington officials, fearful of letting the lid off this volatile story, continue to insist there is "no credible evidence" that there were any prisoners beyond the 591 who were returned by Hanoi in 1973 after the signing of the peace accords. But this claim has long since been reduced to rubbish.

I have pored over thousands of documents — some of them declassified and others leaked to me — and have interviewed scores of people close to the information. The conclusion is inescapable: The North Vietnamese held back a large bloc of prisoners, possibly several hundred, as negotiating chips to try to exact reparations from Washington.

This disturbing truth has been concealed for 20 years across six presidencies, starting with that of Richard Nixon. One can understand how Nixon and his advisers feared being accused of dishonor had they told us the awful reality: that in 1973 they felt compelled by the circumstances to accept the peace accords even though many of our prisoners were still captive. Perhaps Nixon believed that by some means we could win their freedom later.

But since this never happened, one can also understand how, over time, large segments of the defense and intelligence establishments became equally committed to guarding the shameful secret.

They still guard it even though it is no longer a true secret — because they know that if they can keep stonewalling the families of the missing men and keep denying Freedom of Information requests for documents and keep feeding the bulk of the press corps the government line with astonishing success, they can avoid any sustained ground-swell of headlines that might alert and arouse the

general public. A news story here and there is simply a pinprick to them. In short, the Washington concealers, who have succeeded for 20 years, believe that if they can hold out long enough, the story will simply die by attrition.

I and a handful of other reporters around the country are hanging in, hoping that somehow the result will be different.

Many Americans, I know, find it difficult to believe that our government would leave men behind. Actually, it happens in all wars. The difference is that when you win, these unreturned men are seen as acceptable losses and there is a national consensus not to talk about them. But when you lose, as we did in Vietnam, a fungus begins to grow, especially in a nation that extols winning and does not teach its children how to deal with losing.

Thus, we've had 20 years of malaise about losing the Vietnam War, but so far no wide public outcry for the truth about the missing prisoners. The evidence is all there, but perhaps it's too painful for a society to contemplate. Perhaps the dishonor is felt by more than the men who live in Washington.

Yes, the evidence. Last year, three defense secretaries who served under Nixon — Melvin Laird, Elliot Richardson and James Schlesinger — all testified under oath to a Senate committee that according to the best intelligence at the time, prisoners were still being held by Hanoi after the White House had told the public, in March 1973, that all the prisoners were home.

This story made headlines for one day, and then dropped into oblivion. The press was asleep. The concealers had won again.

That special Senate committee on MIAs heard volumes of similar testimony, but it too chose not to rip the covers off the prisoner secret and shake official Washington. Dozens of witnesses produced evidence that included satellite photos, Washington cable traffic, sightings by local U.S. intelligence sources and intercepted enemy radio messages — all of it about live prisoners in captivity years after the war was over. Some satellite sightings of distress signals are as recent as last year.

All of this was obfuscated in the committee's final report. Neither Nixon nor Ronald Reagan nor George Bush was required to testify. Nixon, further, refused to produce the particular Oval Office tapes from 1973 (yes, that's right, the Watergate tapes), on which he reportedly dis-



KEVIN KRENECK/Fort Worth Star-Telegram illustration

cussed with aides the tactics of how to present the prisoner story to the public. The Washington press, still asleep, wrote nothing.

The Central Intelligence Agency refused — and still refuses — to release or allow access to its key files on the prisoners. And the CIA's counterpart in the Pentagon, the Defense Intelligence Agency, has similarly stonewalled on its files, such as the satellite imagery of prisoner distress signals marked out on the ground.

Bush sought to look good, announcing that he was declassifying most of the MIA files. His successor, Bill Clinton, endorsed Bush's executive order and said declassification would be complete by Veterans Day. The catch: None of the core files came under the executive order. They are still locked away.

I guess these are the reasons why I'm staying with the story.

Sydney H. Schanberg writes for Newsday.