

# BEYOND THE KILLING FIELDS

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## Did America Abandon Vietnam War P.O.W.'s?



USAF First Lt.L. Hughes paraded through the streets after being shot down by the North Vietnamese, 1970.(Photo: Hulton Archives/Getty Images)

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It is not conspiracy theory, not paranoid myth, not Rambo fantasy. It is only hard evidence of a national disgrace: American prisoners were left behind at the end of the Vietnam War. They were abandoned because six presidents and official Washington could not admit their guilty secret. They were forgotten because the press and most Americans turned away from all things that reminded them of Vietnam.

In 1973, after the peace accords, Hanoi returned 591 American prisoners and said these were all the prisoners they had. Yet more than 2,200 American military men are still missing and unaccounted for from the Vietnam War. Half or more of those men are known to be dead though their remains have never been recovered.

But then, there are the others. The Defense Intelligence Agency (D.I.A.) has received more than 1,600 firsthand sightings of live American prisoners and nearly 14,000 secondhand reports. After reviewing them all, the D.I.A concluded that they "do not constitute evidence" that men were still alive.

### Prisoners left behind

Here are some stories, many previously untold, about the prisoners who did not come home from Vietnam. All of them are accounts of how Washington, in its deep shame at having forsaken these men in its haste to get out of that draining war, has ignored, withheld, distorted, and destroyed evidence of their existence. These accounts are based on government intelligence documents, on sources closely involved with the material, and on other concrete evidence uncovered during two years of reporting. Sadly for this nation's history, they are but a small sampling of a mountain of evidence.

Only nine prisoners were returned from Laos at the end of the Vietnam War. This startled the experts in U.S. military intelligence, because their closely held lists showed more than 300 men missing in that Hanoi-dominated country. More telling still, their field reports indicated that most of the men were probably still alive.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, years after the war was over, numerous radio messages about American prisoners were intercepted from Laos, a country bordering on and essentially controlled by Vietnam. The messages, which were exchanges between Laotian military units, spoke clearly about American prisoners being transferred from prison to prison or from prison to labor camp inside Laos.

### **Live sightings**

Those transmissions were picked up by the Thai signal personnel and passed to the National Security Agency (N.S.A.) the Central Intelligence Agency (C.I.A.), and the Pentagon's D.I.A. Some of the reports were backed up by HUMINT — human intelligence, meaning live sightings by witnesses on the ground, who reported these same prisoner movements.

Incredibly, all three U.S. intelligence agencies refused to judge these reports as reliable. Their reason: The intercepts were made by a “third party” — namely, Thailand — and under the ground rules laid down by the American intelligence community, third-party information can never be regarded as valid on its own. But this response, a catch-22 if ever one existed, defied common sense, because these Thai signal units had been trained by none other than the N.S.A., the U.S. Intelligence organization responsible for monitoring “signals” transmissions around the world. And the reason the N.S.A. had trained and was using the Thais was that after the fall of Saigon in 1975, the agency largely dismantled its own “collection” network in Southeast Asia.

Here from the files of the C.I.A. is an example of one of those radio intercepts, supported three days later by an independent source on the ground. The radio message, picked up on the morning of December 27, 1980, said: “Refer to the Politburo Ministry of Defense that because U.S. and Thai prisoners have been identified by Thais, Politburo orders they be removed from Attopeu Province (in Southern Laos). Aircraft will pick up POWs at the (Attopeu) airfield on 28 December at 1230 hours”. Then, on December 30, came this message from the C.I.A. station in Bangkok to the C.I.A. director's office in Langley, Virginia: “Met with and taped source from Vientiane. The POWs, half Thais and half European, are now in the valley in permanent location (a prison camp at Nhommarath in Central Laos). They were transferred from Attopeu to work in various places ... POWs were formerly kept in caves and are very thin, dark, and starving.”

Now, consider the insanity of Washington's circular argument. American listening posts were gone, and thus the Thais were essential to monitoring the radio traffic about POWs. Yet, by Washington's definition, the Thai reports were invalid without U.S. corroboration. But the United States no longer had any means of corroboration. The result was unbelievable: With the exception of one botched cross-border foray in 1981, using Lao mercenaries recruited in Thailand, no serious efforts were made to pursue these reports.

Sometimes, documents show, the failure went beyond lack of effort and became just plain cover-up. Documents retrieved from the National Archives show that some of the radio intercepts were simply purged from U.S. government files, presumably to keep the bungling from ever being discovered by outsiders. One of these documents is a paper copy of one of the radio intercepts about prisoners being moved within Laos. On it, the N.S.A. chief in Southeast Asia, John O'Dell, had written, “Purge ... files of any traffic on this subject.”

### **Distress signals**

Over the years, scores of what appear to be distress signals were detected by the C.I.A.'s satellite system. The signals were in the form of markings on the ground in Vietnam and Laos — the very markings that American pilots had been specifically trained to use in their pre-Vietnam survival courses. Some symbols consisted of certain letters, like X or K, drawn in a special way. Other markings were the secret and individual four-digit authenticator numbers given to many of the pilots who flew over Vietnam. And, at times, men have simply carved out their own names.

But time and again, when these numbers or letters or names have shown up on the satellite digital imagery, the Pentagon, backed by the C.I.A., insisted out of hand that humans had not made these markings. What were they, then? Nothing but shadows and vegetation, said the government, and normal contours like rice-paddy walls. Whether the satellite picked up letters or numbers or names, the dismissive answer was always the same. Officials of the Defense Intelligence Agency would say, in what seemed an automatic response, “Shadows and vegetation. Shadows and vegetation.”

After hearing this refrain for months, one Senate investigator, Bob Taylor, a highly regarded intelligence analyst who had examined the photo evidence, finally commented in sardonic dissent, “If grass can spell out people's names and a secret digit code then I have a newfound respect for grass.”

Some striking details of the D.I.A.'s nay-saying posture were contained in the report issued last year by the committee on which Taylor served, the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs. The material got into the report, however, not because of the committee but largely in spite of it — after heavy resistance, editing, and other machinations by the panel's Pentagon-leaning majority.

Sometimes the D.I.A. uses its fancy word for the distress symbols it rejects: anomalies. The D.I.A. men explain with straight faces that a “photo anomaly” is something you see but really isn't there. Independent experts in imagery analysis consider this a bad joke, saying that

when you see something on a photo or on digital imagery, it's usually real.

To date, no MIA family has ever been notified by the Pentagon about any of these ground markings, many of which correlated to the name or distress letters or secret four-letter code of a particular missing man. The Pentagon says that since the markings in its opinion were "anomalies" and not man-made, to inform families about them would only subject them to needless, additional anguish.

But the government's own survival experts are livid over the D.I.A.'s "shadows and vegetation and contour" line. In firm rebuttal, the men at J.S.S.A. (the Air Force's survival training unit, officially titled Joint Services Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape Agency ) kept explaining that using vegetation and natural formations to construct distress markings was exactly what their agency had trained pilots to do in captivity — so as to be less obvious and avoid detection by their jailers.

### **The Committee Was Rather Surprised**

Then there are the distress signals that were never even found. Almost all the signals we know about — roughly 100 or so — were discovered in the last few years, meaning that this can be only a fraction of the likely total. The astonishing reason for this is that, although the United States regularly flew low-level reconnaissance planes and spy satellites over Indochina from the end of the war onward, it was not until the 1990s that the intelligence agencies began to look for distress symbols on the voluminous photos and digital imagery they collected. Incredibly, they had no instructions to do so.

The Senate report said, "The Committee was rather surprised to find that neither D.I.A. or C.I.A. imagery analysts were familiar with Vietnam pilot distress symbols, or had a requirement to look for possible symbols, prior to the Committee's inquiry. This was confirmed under oath by imagery analysts from both agencies."

Further on, the report grew even more damning: "Another indicator that D.I.A. has done little to address the possibility of distress symbols appearing on photography is its inability to account for the Army's, Navy's or Marine Corps' pilot authenticator numbers. J.S.S.A. still preserves those for the Air Force. As recorded in the hearing of October 15 (1992) D.I.A. does not know what happened to the numbers. This is a significant failure ... It supports the theory that D.I.A. has never taken the possibility of symbols seriously... "In theory, therefore, if a POW still living in captivity were to attempt to communicate by ground signal, smuggling out a note or by whatever means possible, and he used his personal authenticator number to confirm his identity, the U.S. government would be unable to provide such confirmation if his number happened to be among those numbers D.I.A. cannot locate."

### **Secrecy and untruths**

These revealing passages, however, belied the true nature of the Senate committee. It was dominated by a faction led by its chairman, the charismatic John Kerry of Massachusetts. This group wanted to appear to be probing the prisoner issue energetically, but in fact, they never rocked official Washington's boat, nor did they lay open the 20 years of secrecy and untruths. Thus, in their final report, issued in January 1993, after more than a year in operation, the conclusions as to men left behind were watered down and muddled to the point of meaninglessness.

And although a skilled and tenacious staff of committee investigators had managed to weave into the 1,223-page document sizable chunks of potent data that went a good distance toward exposing the POW story, some of the material never made it into the report. Significantly, the staff made the following finding, using intelligence reports that covered sightings only through 1989: "There can be no doubt that POWs were alive ... as late as 1989." This staff document was never released.

Two senators, Bob Smith and Charles Grassley, refused to go along with the majority finding in the final report that said there was "no compelling evidence that proves that any American remains alive in captivity in Southeast Asia." But their dissent was relegated to a tiny footnote. The footnote said the two could not accept this finding "because they believe that live-sighting reports and other sources of intelligence are evidence that POWs may have survived to the present."

### **'No conspiracy'**

(Asked for comment, Kerry contended, "No evidence of a cover-up has ever been substantiated. And all 12 senators, including Bob Smith, unanimously agreed to the committee's conclusion that there was no conspiracy".) The frustrations faced by those on the committee who were determined to get at the truth are crystallized in the tale of the International Security Affairs documents. The following account is taken from memos, letters and other documents obtained by this reporter.

In July 1992, eight months into its investigation, the Senate committee was granted clearance by a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, Alan Ptak, to examine and copy certain key POW files from a branch of the Defense Secretary's office known as International Security Affairs (I.S.A.). On July 10, committee staffers headed for the Pentagon's Central Documentation Office (C.D.O.) in Clarendon, Virginia, where the files had been shifted, because this was the office designated to process all the committee's requests for information. The stonewalling began instantly upon their arrival at C.D.O.

Chuck Wells, a middle-level Pentagon manager, met the committee aides in the lobby and told them that it was the contention of I.S.A. that the committee had seen all its files. The staffers told him this wasn't true, noting specifically that they had yet to see a single W.A.R. (Weekly Activity Report) or SECDEF Breakfast item. These are pivotal documents. Breakfast items, for example, are minutes of then weekly one-on-one meetings of the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of State, at which the two men would discuss sensitive, top priority foreign-affairs matters in an informal and very candid setting. The committee staffers knew that POW issues had been discussed at some of these meetings and in the Weekly Activity Reports.

Wells kept stalling them, saying he would try to call I.S.A. again. Finally, after three hours, stuck in an out-of-the way room, "He told us flatly there would be no files made available."

### **'Stonewalled'**

Another staffer, in his record of this encounter, wrote: "Our access ... Remains stonewalled."

Returning to Capitol Hill, the staffers kept pushing. They got committee counsel Bill Codinha to call Alan Ptak, who repeated that they had full access, as had been stated in a letter to the committee from the Defense Secretary himself. Ptak said the problem must lie at the Central Documentation Office. To the staffers it sounded as if the finger pointing was a smoke screen for the likelihood that everyone was in on the stonewall, since it made no sense that a lowly Pentagon document office would defy a clearance granted by the Defense Secretary. Also obstructing these staffers was the fact that some of the top committee people — including the committee chairman, Senator Kerry, and his chief counsel and old friend, Bill Codinha — seemed to have an inappropriately cozy relationship with the Defense Department.

For one thing, Codinha and Ptak maintained unusually close ties throughout the investigation. (Staffers noticed that the Pentagon always seemed to know the committee's next move.) But more important, Kerry, in his public remarks over time, had made clear that his interest was in ending the embargo against Vietnam and bringing about improved relations. And he also arranged committee hearings and meetings in a manner that made the Pentagon a virtual partner in the committee's inquiry instead of being a subject of the probe.

As one staffer wrote, in a memo preserved from the period: "Speaking for the other investigators, I can say we are sick and tired of this investigation being controlled by those we are supposedly investigating."

(Kerry disputes all this. When asked to comment for this article, he said his "only interest in lifting the embargo was to improve access" to POW/MIA information. And he says that "the committee was dependent on the Pentagon to obtain much of its information but the relationship was in no way a partnership. The committee fully investigated all allegations of Pentagon cover-up and malfeasance.")

### **Sanitizing files**

Tellingly, though, the committee staffers came across transcripts of electronic messages from within the Pentagon that confirmed what they already suspected. The purpose of the stalling was to allow the Pentagon to go through the requested files and sanitize them — that is, take out all the sensitive papers. One such internal message said: "Purpose here is to give Ptak/Ross time to review the roughly 25 percent of ... material [the committee] has not seen." (Edward Ross was Ptak's deputy and ironically, was later promoted to chief of the Pentagon's POW/MIA office.)

The day turned into months and still no documents. On September 8, 1992, Senator Bob Smith of New Hampshire, who has led the fight in Congress against the cover-up, sent off a strong and detailed "eyes-only" letter to Defense Secretary Richard Cheney. In it he cited the document stonewalling by the officials and said, "One can only presume their reason was to gain time to screen the remaining files for certain documents they, apparently, did not wish the committee to see." Smith called it "a serious breach" of Cheney's stated full-access policy and demanded that something be done.

Cheney forwarded the letter to the I.S.A. office, thus giving the job of explaining away the stonewalling to the very office responsible for it. The I.S.A. chief, Assistant Secretary of Defense James Liley, assigned his deputy, Ptak, to draft a response to Smith. According to a confidential source, Ptak consulted his friend, committee counsel Codinha, and a September 28 letter to the senator was produced over Liley's signature. (Codinha denies that his relationship with Ptak was a close one and says there was "nothing untoward" or "inappropriate" about it. He also says that he has no memory of the Liley letter. As for Ptak, at press time he had not responded to request for comment.) The letter said that the whole mess was "the result of a misunderstanding. Committee staff members were notified quickly that the remaining ... policy files were available for review, and committee investigators subsequently reviewed the files in their complete, unaltered state."

### **Agency cleared itself**

All this was patently false. And ridiculous. The I.S.A. had essentially cleared itself. "We never did see that 25 percent of the files", a committee investigator said afterward. "They shoved files at us and said it was everything, but it was stuff we had already seen. It was outrageous. We never did get to see a single Weekly Activity Report or Breakfast item".

He went on: "They were afraid of what we would find in those files, and that's why they cleaned them out. And Cheney's commitment was only on paper. They were obstructing the investigation, pure and simple." (Senator Kerry, in his comment, said: "The Defense POW/MIA office has



documented that it responded fully and accurately to all of the more than 400 requests for documents made by committee members and their staff”).

Then there are the instances when vital documents have not only been withheld, but actually destroyed.

### **Missing airmen, special codes**

One such case involved certain letters that had emerged from Laos in the late 1980s and reached the Department of Defense at about the same time. They were reportedly written by three missing airmen — John Robertson, Larry Stevens, and Albro Lundy.

The letters drew particular attention at the Pentagon because they appeared to be written in code. According to documents, including memoirs written by former POWs, a number of the airmen who flew combat in Vietnam had been trained in special coding methods as a survival technique, should they be captured. The purpose, for example, was to get messages out to the Pentagon through their families by writing letters in language that was coded but would seem harmless to their captors and would therefore be passed on. Documents in the National Archives show that Lundy was one of the airmen trained in this technique. Like all others with this training, one of his missions upon capture was to teach the coding system to as many other prisoners as possible.

Something else was important about those trained in the coding, who numbered perhaps a couple hundred men. The Pentagon kept a separate file on each of them, containing that man’s personal coding details. Each file also held special biographical and personal information that would be known only to that man and those closest to him. These private facts were to be coded into any letters or messages the men sent out, to establish their authenticity.

### **‘Striking correlations’**

When the Robertson, Stevens, and Lundy letters came in, as revealed in archival records, they were given to the special Pentagon unit trained to decipher codes and other “authentication” techniques the missing men might use. Upon examining the letters, the experts in this unit concluded that they contained signs of special coding. They said they had found a number of “striking correlations” consistent with the conclusion that the letters were likely the work of American POWs. But the only way to decode the messages was to have access to those special files — and the files were held by the D.I.A.

The special Pentagon unit requested Lundy’s file, since he was the only one of the three trained in these procedures and could have trained the other two. The answer came back that Lundy’s file had been destroyed. The unit could proceed no further. With this, the D.I.A. not only chose to ignore the unit’s preliminary findings, but arbitrarily decided the letters were fraudulent.

However, according to archival documents, staffers on the Senate POW committee learned of this and began asking questions of the Pentagon. Why, they asked, had Lundy’s file been purged? The Pentagon replied that a number of those folders had been destroyed one by one over the course of the Vietnam War, as airmen periodically were declared K.I.A./B.N.R. — Killed in action/Body not recovered. One reason the Pentagon gave for this action was to clear some space in its overburdened file system.

### **Destroyed in a day**

The committee staffers, digging deeper, discovered that the files had not been destroyed one by one, but all at the same time. And his purge occurred not during the war but in 1975, two years after the American military role had ended with the Paris peace accords. “It was bullshit. They destroyed them all on one day,” said one source.

The staffers also determined that the Pentagon’s story — that the only files destroyed were those of men who had been declared Killed in action/Body not recovered — did not stand up under examination. A number of men who had been written off in that category were, to the Pentagon’s surprise, among those prisoners returned in 1973. Their files had not only not been destroyed before 1973, but they are still kept by the Pentagon. Also, the files of men who were known definitively to have died in captivity were never destroyed. Their files, too, still exist.

Thus, astonishingly, the only files the Pentagon destroyed were those of men who were still missing in action and unaccounted for after 1973 — and thus could have been some of the men held back by Hanoi, men who could possibly be prisoners to this day.

### **Hiding its dishonor?**

Unless the Pentagon was trying to hide its dishonor over leaving men behind, why would it destroy the files of men still unaccounted for and preserve files of men who have returned? Remember, the sole reason such records were maintained in the first place was to help verify the existence of prisoners and get them back.

“The destruction of those files was devastating,” said a source, “because it wiped out any ability to confirm the authenticity of any coded letters or messages that might have come out since 1973 or might come out in the future.” In short, if a POW tried to signal his existence now, using such coded messages, it would be useless.

### **Nixon and Kissinger**

What could explain this shameful pattern of behavior, spanning six presidencies breaking faith with those who went to battle believing their country would do everything for them if they were taken prisoner?

For the answers one has to go back 21 years, to the days when President Richard Nixon, desperate to get out of Vietnam and besieged by the expanding Watergate scandal, instructed Henry Kissinger, his national security adviser and chief negotiator with North Vietnam at the Paris peace talks, to do whatever was necessary to end the longest war in our history.

Thus, on January 27, 1973, the United States and North Vietnam signed the peace agreement. And, on that day, the North Vietnamese gave the United States their list of American prisoners. It showed only 591 men — a figure far below what U.S. Intelligence had expected. But what could be done? The agreement had been signed, and neither the American public nor Congress, weary to the bone with this war, would countenance a resumption of the conflict. Two months after the signing, Hanoi released the last of the 591 men and Nixon went on national television and said, “All of our American POWs are on their way home.”

It is now unshakably clear, from a mass of evidence, that Nixon knew this was not true. Several of his key appointees — notably, Defense Secretaries Melvin Laird, Elliot Richardson, and James Schlesinger — testified under oath at Senate hearings that they were convinced by the intelligence data before them that a number of men were not returned. That intelligence, and a flood of data since unearthed, shows that the number was in the hundreds.

Schlesinger, when he testified, was asked why Nixon would have accepted this. He replied, “One must assume that we had concluded that the bargaining position of the United States ... was quite weak. We were anxious to get our troops out and we were not going to roll the waters...”

Then he was asked a very simple question: “In your view, did we leave men behind?”

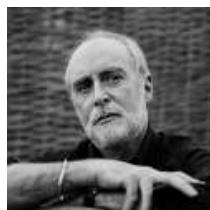
### **‘Some were left behind’**

“I think that, as of now”, replied the former defense secretary and C.I.A. chief. “That I can come to no other conclusion, senator ... Some were left behind.” The intelligence data also makes clear that Hanoi’s motive for holding back prisoners was ransom. The North Vietnamese kept them as pawns to extract from Washington the reparations money they believed they had been promised by Nixon and Kissinger. Indeed, a letter from Nixon to Hanoi’s Prime Minister, Pham Van Dong, pledged \$3.25 billion over five years in “reconstruction” aid plus another “one to 1.5 billion dollars ... on food and other commodity needs.” Though that letter was written on February 1, 1973, just days after the peace accords were concluded, it was kept secret for more than four years.

Both Nixon and Kissinger have since said that the aid was never given because Hanoi consistently violated the peace agreement. Kissinger also said, in his testimony before the Senate POW committee in 1992, that “it had been our constant position that we would never give aid to ransom our prisoners.” Credible reports have surfaced over the years of Vietnamese overtures to Washington through third countries, offering to return live prisoners for that same \$4 billion. The overtures, according to the reports, were either rejected or fell apart in negotiations. Official Washington refuses to provide details.

Part 2 continues [here](#).

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