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ON THE TRAIL OF THE MIAs : The Pentagon Has Denied It, and the Senate Is About to Investigate It. Two Former U.S. Intelligence Analysts Say That Clues to the MIA Puzzle May Lie in Moscow.

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For 30 years, Jerry Mooney carried around in his head some of America's deepest secrets. His wife, Barbara, followed him to posts in Thailand, Okinawa and Ft. Meade, Md., but never knew exactly what her husband did every day. Mooney had pledged never to reveal anything he worked on or saw, and no one he worked with ever expected the quiet, upright, measured and meticulous Mooney to break that pledge. Ever. * Then in the late '80s, Mooney did an extraordinary thing: He gave secret testimony before a Senate committee and appeared on national television alleging that the U.S. government had abandoned hundreds of American prisoners in Southeast Asia after the Vietnam War. He also claimed that U.S. intelligence officials knew not only that Hanoi had withheld American POWs as "bargaining chips" for future negotiations, but also that the North Vietnamese had handed over scores of American airmen to the Soviets for interrogation; 50 or so POWs, he charged, had disappeared into the hands of the Soviets. * For many families of men "missing in action" in Southeast Asia, Mooney's revelations were the next best thing to a real-life Rambo rescuing an American POW from the jungles of Laos or Vietnam. Since the end of the Vietnam War, MIA activists had been waging their own guerrilla war against the government, convinced that the United States was not telling all it knew about the fate of more than 2,000 men who remained unaccounted for. Jerry Mooney, however, was no Rambo. He had spent most of his 20-year career in the Air Force behind a desk, assigned to the National Security

Agency, the nation’s largest and most secretive intelligence operation. As a code breaker and analyst, he eavesdropped on radio and signals communications around the globe. During the Vietnam War, Mooney culled information about American POWs from literally tons of North Vietnamese communications that America had intercepted with its high-flying, intelligence-gathering planes and ground-based listening posts. * When Mooney went public in 1987, he was the first member of the intelligence community to break his vow of silence and talk about the top-secret POW data that had crossed his desk--and what he had to say amounted to charges of a massive MIA cover-up.

It was startling stuff. But the U.S. government all but ignored Jerry Mooney. The Pentagon quickly and strenuously declared that “the commonly repeated myth that U.S. personnel with specialized technical knowledge were kept in Vietnam or sent to third countries is not supported by any evidence.” After all, officials have pointed out, of the 591 POWs who did return from Vietnam, not one remembered ever having been interrogated by Soviet officers. But the government made no effort to discredit Mooney’s outstanding NSA service record, and it did not dispute that Mooney had been in a position to see POW-related intelligence data. And though, according to Mooney, representatives from the NSA and Justice Department warned him to “shut your mouth,” he was not prosecuted for breaking the law by divulging secrets.

But where were the other Jerry Mooneys? As Mooney says, “I just got a little piece of the rock. People in higher positions saw more.” Even those who wanted to believe this NSA whistle-blower wondered why no one else--from among the hundreds of NSA, CIA and Defense Intelligence Agency workers who could have seen similar data--had emerged to support Mooney’s claims.

During the next four years, Mooney tried to get his side of the story out to official Washington. He talked to lawyers, to state legislators, to congressmen. He talked to MIA families about what he believed had happened to their loved ones and swore out and filed affidavits on their behalf. At the same time, mud was slung in Mooney’s direction. He was “off the wall,” intelligence sources told interested members of Congress, “a flake.” In the end, Mooney had little effect. Presidents Reagan and Bush may have called accounting for the MIAs “the nation’s highest priority,” but Mooney’s allegations, along with the entire MIA issue, slipped back into history as the country accepted the idea that all that could have been done to account for the nation’s MIAs had been done.

Their fate, however, continued to dominate Jerry Mooney’s life. During the past few years, he admits, “I’ve felt pretty alone.”

No longer. A six-month investigation I conducted in the United States and the Soviet Union has turned up intelligence sources who confirm Mooney’s story. Another former NSA analyst, retired air-defense specialist Terrell A. Minarcin, has come forward with his own stories about American POWs held after the war ended and interrogated by the Soviets. And in several interviews in Moscow last winter, Soviet intelligence sources admitted for the first time that the Russians made secret arrangements with Hanoi to interrogate American POWs. “In my time in intelligence,” says retired KGB Maj. Gen. Oleg Kalugin, a former head of Soviet foreign counterespionage, “we did participate in the interrogation of American prisoners.”

Mooney, Minarcin and the Soviet sources do not claim to have evidence of Americans still alive in custody anywhere. But their stories combine to create compelling testimony that Hanoi lied about returning all the American POWs in its custody in 1973 and that the best proof of this may be in the files of a North Vietnamese ally: the Soviet Union.

These revelations come at a time when the MIA issue has leaped back into the headlines. Last spring, Army Col. Millard Peck, chief of the Pentagon’s Special Office for Prisoners of War and Missing in Action, angrily resigned. The government’s MIA efforts were a “travesty” and a “charade,” he charged. “A cover-up may be in progress.” Peck, a highly decorated career intelligence officer, later told members of Congress that there was “a strong possibility” that Americans were still alive in Southeast Asia. Shortly after that, the Republican staff of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee released an updated draft of a 120-page report on the MIA issue confirming Peck’s claims. Within weeks, the Pentagon investigated and offered a rebuttal: “There is no foundation to support” Peck’s charges.

The Pentagon also continues to issue blanket denials of Mooney’s allegations: “For the past few years,” it recently told The Times, “Mr. Mooney has made various claims to possess information on U.S. POWs. U.S. government records have been checked, including all intelligence sources, and there is nothing to support Mr. Mooney’s claims. Further, we have no intelligence to support a belief that U.S. prisoners were taken to the Soviet Union.”

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To try to settle the MIA issue once and for all, the Pentagon has opened an office in Hanoi--the U.S. government’s first official presence in Vietnam since the war--to research the fate of the missing men. And the Senate, at the instigation of Sen. Robert C. Smith (R-N.H.), a Vietnam veteran and a persistent MIA activist in Congress, voted last summer to hold Watergate-style hearings on the issue. The temporary Select Committee, chaired by Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.), also a Vietnam veteran, is likely to begin hearing testimony this week. According to Smith and Kerry, the committee will explore the Russian connection: “Mooney is a critical witness,” said Frances Zwenig in Kerry’s office. Mooney may have company. The committee reportedly has been approached by former and current members of the intelligence community willing to talk about MIAs if the Senate promises them immunity.

Roger Shields, deputy assistant secretary of defense in charge of POW/ MIA affairs from 1971 to 1976, has long been an MIA skeptic. He dismisses nearly all claims by activists as rumor and innuendo. “The smoking gun,” he says, “has not been revealed.” In his years in the Defense Department, Shields says, he never saw anything that suggested that any prisoner was ever interrogated by the Russians. Yet he calls Gen. Kalugin’s statements “a very hot lead.”

“If (he) is willing to talk to us and can give details that will make sense,” Shields says, “if he’s the guy who was involved, that’s the kind of thing I’m talking about when I say ‘smoking gun,’ and definitely grist for the Senate investigation.”

In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson ordered the bombing of North Vietnam, code-named “Operation Rolling Thunder.” The North Vietnamese, with virtually no air force of their own and no anti-aircraft defense system, sought help from their communist ally, the Soviet Union. Moscow trained North Vietnamese pilots to fly MIGs, and the Soviet Union also sent one of its most effective surface-to-air missile systems to Hanoi--the SAM-2. To deploy the SAMs, the government of Leonid I. Brezhnev dispatched a group of “advisers” under civilian cover to Hanoi.

The arrival of the SAMs in Vietnam alarmed American strategists, according to U.S. military historians. It was a SAM that had knocked Francis Gary Powers’ U-2 spy plane out of the sky in 1960. Nikita S. Khrushchev boasted that Soviet airspace was impenetrable. “We didn’t believe that the Americans could successfully interfere with our missiles,” recalled Lt. Gen. Vladimir Abramov, commander of the Soviet Air Defense Forces in Vietnam from 1965 to 1968, in an interview in his Moscow apartment last winter. But when the shoot-downs in Vietnam were totaled at the end of 1965, the SAMs had achieved a pathetic kill rate of 5%.

“By mid-1966, the performance of the SAM was an embarrassment,” says Robert S. Hopkins III, an aviation historian. During one week in 1966, Hopkins has learned from contemporary reports, the Soviets launched 29 missiles and scored only a single hit.

Soviet prestige--not to mention the war effort--depended on finding out how American planes were evading the SAMs. The obvious sources of up-to-date American intelligence were the hundreds of American airmen who were literally falling into the arms of Moscow's loyal allies, the North Vietnamese. Sitting in Okinawa in 1968, Jerry Mooney, an old Russia hand, naturally assumed, as did his superiors, that the Soviets would not leave Vietnam without carrying back as much knowledge about enemy air power as possible, up to and including the interrogation of American prisoners. But Mooney suspected that the North Vietnamese would be secretive about handing over POWs to the Russians. He didn't expect to find evidence of it in the low-level intercepts he was "working."

Then, in 1968, in uncoded "plain text," he saw a transcription of a casual radio conversation between guards worried that a passing F-4 might have photographed a camp for Americans near Cu Loi, northeast of Hanoi. Subsequent radio transmissions among North Vietnamese troops referred to the *my* --Vietnamese for Americans--in trucks being escorted toward an airfield at Bai Thong by the *ban* , the "friends," a term Mooney says the North Vietnamese routinely used to refer to their Soviet allies. Further intercepts confirmed that the airfield was a holding area for American POWs. Bored with tracking the movement of troops and supplies down the Ho Chi Minh trail, Mooney began searching for POW information in his data. He was amazed at how much he found. Sifting through current and past intercepts, he saw what he believed to be references to prisoners being shifted from camp to camp, to the presence of Soviet advisers in the area of the camps, to execution orders, to prisoners being assigned to slave labor.

But Mooney couldn't convince his superiors that scouting for prisoners should be part of intelligence gathering in Vietnam. The NSA was "tasked" only to track materiel and personnel moving up and down the Ho Chi Minh trail and to provide air-defense information to U.S. pilots. In 1970, when he returned to agency headquarters at Ft. Meade, Mooney was still keeping unofficial tabs on the POWs, still dogging his bosses.

Finally, in 1971, he says, he got the go-ahead to report POW information through official channels.

Mooney became a grudging admirer of the North Vietnamese air-defense system. The North Vietnamese had quickly learned to spot the U.S. planes, track them with their own radar, target certain aircraft and "flak-trap" them. Shells from a large gun would force a plane to veer into the sights of smaller guns, increasing the probability that the plane would crash-land in pieces large enough for future examination. Sixty percent of the planes were being knocked down by anti-aircraft cannon, not by the SAMs.

The interceptions showed that the North Vietnamese were sorting American pilots into categories as soon as they hit the ground, Mooney says. Those downed near Hanoi went into the prisoner-of-war complex that came to be known as the Hanoi Hilton, where they were held for propaganda purposes; many captured near supply lines were used for slave labor, and any prisoner unlucky enough to have killed a North Vietnamese officer during a bombing raid might be executed (a bullet in back of the head was the preferred method).

Mooney remembers that he and his colleagues called the American stars falling from the sky "manna from Lenin" for their priceless value to Soviet intelligence. They included alumni of the space program, flyers with technical degrees, officers specializing in electronic warfare and crew members of secret planes.

These "special talents," says Mooney, often ended up in a camp across the border in Laos, near Sam Neua, the stronghold of the Pathet Lao. According to Mooney's analysis of the intercepts, all the evidence pointed to Sam Neua's being "the main Soviet interrogation center." The "friends" were there in high numbers, according to intelligence gleaned from enemy defectors and South Vietnamese spies. NSA intercepts also alerted Mooney to "a high concentration of flights" into the area. The Vietnamese appeared to be transporting POWs by truck from the camp near Cu Loi to Bai Thong, where they were flown by IL-14s--Russian transport planes--to Sam Neua. Mooney concedes that analysts in the DIA thought that the main Soviet center was at Lang Son, northeast of Hanoi, but he never saw what he considered to be adequate confirmation of that.

Among the brightest of the United States' "special talents" in North Vietnam were the crews of the two-seater F-111s, then the Air Force's latest and hottest fighter bomber. Mooney says his orders were to pay special attention to lost F-111 pilots, and he tracked them all via their own before-crash transmissions and intercepted North Vietnamese communications. In 1968, intercepts showed that two F-111s were flak-trapped with all four men surviving. Further intercepts indicated that these men were taken to Sam Neua. The North Vietnamese, Mooney concluded, had handed them over to the Soviets.

In September, 1972, the 361st Division of the North Vietnamese artillery shot down a third F-111 crew. According to the data that Mooney saw, one American died; the other was sent along the route to Cu Loi, Bai Thong and Sam Neua. In October, another one went down and Mooney saw evidence of one survivor (however, after the war, the remains of both members of this crew were returned to the United States). Two more F-111s went down in November. In one case, both crew members survived and ended up with the "friends." In the other, Mooney's information showed no survivors. Then in December, a seventh F-111 went down. According to Mooney, the intercepts showed that the crew did not eject before crashing into the Gulf of Tonkin, off Vinh Linh in North Vietnam. He considered them killed in action.

The crew of only one of the F-111s lost in Vietnam returned home with the POWs in 1973. The fighter--the last F-111 casualty of the war--fell on Dec. 22, 1972, one month before the peace accords were signed. These men were part of another pattern that Mooney noticed in the POW data he saw: Near the end of the war, the intercepts no longer showed "special talent" being moved to Sam Neua. It appeared that Hanoi was saving POWs for a prisoner exchange, rather than turning them over to the Soviets. Mooney says the NSA called it "Operation Warm Body Count."

In late 1972, in preparation for the negotiations he knew were inevitable, Mooney began to compile lists of all the men he had tracked as missing or captured--about 1,000 names in all. When the North Vietnamese eventually turned over 591 POWs in 1973, President Richard Nixon announced exultantly to the nation: "All our brave men are back home again."

To Mooney, Nixon's pronouncement was pure politics. After crossing the names of the released men off his list, and others accounted for by those men, Mooney still had a roster of 290 unaccounted-for Americans he believed to have been captured alive. About 50 of those men he marked "MB"--for Moscow Bound. While he had seen no specific intelligence showing that prisoners had been transported to the Soviet Union, what he had seen made him suspicious. "MB" stood for the "special talents" that he had tracked until they disappeared--in his estimation, into Soviet hands.

Four "special talents" were particularly fresh in Mooney's mind. After the cease-fire, in February, 1973, the North Vietnamese shot down an EC-47Q reconnaissance plane. U.S. intelligence officers on the ground quickly learned that some of the crew had probably survived. According to Mooney, NSA intercepts confirmed that the number was four and that they were headed for Hanoi. Hanoi, however, returned no EC-47Q survivors. To Mooney, the crew members were logical candidates for Soviet interrogation. All of them were experts in electronic surveillance, and at least one--Peter Cressman--had analyzed intelligence on the Soviet Union before his stint in Vietnam. They were among the last names he listed "MB."

Mooney assumed that, behind the scenes, every effort was being made to account for or bring home the men he thought had been captured alive. He insists that according to orders at the NSA, even four years after the war, "the highest national priority, right down to the intercept desk and reporters, was to isolate, identify and recover American POWs, particularly in Laos." (More than 600 men were reported missing there; not one has ever been accounted for.)

In 1977, Mooney, then a master sergeant and the noncommissioned officer in charge of airborne intelligence-gathering operations for the 6970th Air Base Group at NSA headquarters, retired from the Air Force after having served 20 years, two months and two days. According to written reports of his superiors, Mooney's had been an exemplary career in intelligence analysis. "A perfectionist," wrote one of his bosses. "Mooney is one of the most outstanding NCOs I have ever had the pleasure of supervising," wrote another. Mooney's evaluations for his Vietnam service, for example, never fell below the highest rating.

Upon retiring, Mooney went with his wife, Barbara, to her home state of Montana, taking up residence in a town so remote that it didn't receive network TV. Mooney took a job as a grocery store manager and began looking forward to watching his daughters grow up and to "having my piece of the American dream."

Mooney's American idyll ended in 1985, the year cable TV brought national news to the wilds of Montana. Tuned into CNN one night, Mooney saw a report about the first American excavation of a Vietnam War air-crash site in Laos. According to the government, the remains of the entire 13-man crew of an AC-130A Spectre gunship, shot down in 1972, had been found.

Mooney was stunned. He stormed around the room kicking the furniture. "I knew the government was lying," he says. Hours after the gunship had gone down, intelligence had landed on Mooney's desk reporting that five of the plane's crew had bailed out and been captured alive. According to Mooney, an NSA analyst in another office later received confirmation from a different source that the five Americans were indeed in enemy hands.

After a few phone calls to NSA buddies, Mooney found that while he had been enjoying his retirement, the government, beginning in 1977, had reclassified the more than 2,000 MIAs in Laos and Vietnam as "presumed dead," although just a year earlier hundreds of them had been classified as alive. "I was totally shocked--that's the only word for it," recalls Mooney. “You don’t abandon your own guys who are fighting and dying for their country.” He knew there was nothing he could do without breaking his NSA secrecy vows, an unthinkable step.

But his secrets started gnawing at him. He began to suffer severe chest pains. Three stints in the hospital and a heart catheterization revealed a healthy heart. Mooney confided in a friend, a Roman Catholic priest. “Father Jim looked me straight in the eye and said: ‘If you don’t want the cold hand of God’s justice wrapped around your heart, get out and do something about it.’ ”

In January, 1987, Mooney went public in “We Can Keep You Forever: The Story of the MIAs,” a television documentary produced by Ted Landreth and me in association with BBC Documentaries. In the few minutes of television time allotted to him, Mooney told his tale of POWs left for dead and men he had listed as “Moscow Bound.” Then he waited for the story to break wide open. Instead, it died amid blanket government denials.

Mooney decided that the next time around he would tell everything he knew, secrecy and prosecution be damned. He began to prepare himself by ransacking his memory for each bit of MIA data he could recall, eventually piling up 400 pages of fact, analysis and theory, complete with his own rough sketches of the position of anti-aircraft batteries and maps revealing the extent of U.S. airborne intelligence-gathering operations. According to Mooney, during the early 1970s, the United States was flying its most sophisticated intelligence planes over Southeast Asia--U-2s and specially equipped C-130s over Laos and EC-135s over the Gulf of Tonkin --16 hours a day, seven days a week. “For the government to say ‘we have no evidence’ about POWs and MIAs is absurd,” Mooney says.

Mooney challenged the government to prosecute him not only by divulging his secrets but also by swearing out and signing affidavits on specific MIA cases and sending them to mostly unresponsive U.S. senators. At the urging of then-Congressman Robert Smith, Mooney even wrote to the DIA requesting a closed-session meeting. The letter was returned unopened and stamped “N.G.B.”--Not Government Business.

Mooney had been one of the NSA’s prized performers; now he was a Washington pariah. He began to wonder if anyone else privy to similar intelligence data would ever join him out on his limb.

In a jaunty cap--the type a British sports car driver might wear--an American-style beige raincoat, a gray suit and tie, Maj. Gen. Kalugin, one of the KGB’s top officials over two decades, ushered his visitors past the security police and into the Moskva Hotel off Red Square. A member of the now-disbanded Congress of People’s Deputies as well as the Supreme Soviet, Kalugin, who left the KGB in 1990, confirmed in a one-hour interview last March that the Russians had interrogated Americans POWs in Vietnam.

A few days before, in a separate interview in Moscow, the former head of the Soviet Air Defense Forces in Vietnam, Col. Gen. Abramov, said that he’d been disappointed at the results of the North Vietnamese interrogations of American POWs: “They didn’t even know what to ask,” he said. Still, the Soviets hadn’t taken over the interrogation. According to Abramov, there was a strict agreement between Moscow and Hanoi: “The Soviet specialists would not have any contact with the Americans.”

How did Kalugin square Abramov’s denial with his own information? Kalugin smiled and then explained: “You see, the generals may not know.” Kalugin said he himself worked hard to persuade then-KGB chief Yuri Andropov to work out an arrangement with the Ministry of Interior in Hanoi--”not the military,” noted Kalugin--to allow the KGB to go to Vietnam to interrogate Americans. It was all done, Kalugin said, “at a very high level.”

KGB agents were dispatched for stints in Vietnam to interrogate select Americans, Kalugin remembered. “I was not there myself,” he said in idiomatic English, “but I knew people who went to Vietnam to take part in the interrogations, to collect intelligence information.” One “subordinate,” he said in a later telephone conversation, interrogated a Navy pilot. Kalugin recalled that one such conversation took place “in 1976, after the war.” When pressed on the year during two separate interviews, Kalugin stuck to his story: The KGB was interrogating Americans even after the war. He claimed that he personally oversaw from Moscow the interrogation of an American CIA agent in Hanoi. “We were not the chief interrogators,” Kalugin hastened to add. “We were present. We sometimes asked the questions . . . . (The North Vietnamese) were the sole responsible party. Our role was to collect intelligence, but at no time, to my knowledge, were we aware of (the prisoners’) future destinies, whatever happened to them afterward.”

The mystery about what happened to the American POWs deepened when another Soviet source appeared. Yuri Pankov, a reporter for the Moscow newspaper Kommersant, coordinated and collaborated on the Soviet end of the investigation for this story. Through a KGB official, Pankov put out the word that he wanted to speak with officers who had knowledge of KGB interrogation of American prisoners in Vietnam. His contact’s identity as a KGB agent was confirmed by retired KGB Col. Yaroslav Karpovich, who worked in domestic counterespionage and who in 1989 was the first former KGB officer to denounce the agency. Pankov’s contact told him to expect a telephone call.

Within days, the phone rang and the voice at the end of line told Pankov, “I have information about the subject you’re interested in.” The caller told Pankov to meet him at a particular Moscow street corner and to bring a map of Vietnam. At the meeting, the source said he was a KGB officer but refused to give Pankov his name. In 1966, the source told Pankov, he had gone to three locations on the Ho Chi Minh trail in South Vietnam and in Laos, specifically to interrogate American POWs. He pointed to each location on the map Pankov had brought to the interview. In Laos, the source interrogated ground personnel captured near Da Nang, asking them specifically about American air tactics in the area--radar-jamming devices and the flight patterns of the RB-47, a strategic reconnaissance plane. The interrogation lasted two days; the third morning he was told that the nine Americans were dead. Surprised, the source went to see for himself--and said he found the men with their throats slit, the work of the North Vietnamese.

The second group he interrogated consisted of “military personnel” captured in the Pleiku area and one American pilot. The Russian source remembered that the pilot still wore his jumpsuit and carried his helmet. He had no idea what happened to those men.

His final stop was the tunnels of Cu Chi, an underground Viet Cong stronghold in South Vietnam. The source claimed that many prisoners were held there, including pilots. He interrogated the pilots but did not know their destination. The source did not provide information of Americans held after the war ended.

Mooney has a mixed response to the information that Soviets had interrogated American POWs: “I’m happy that I’ve got some support, but it really bothers me that it had to come from the Russians.” Within weeks, however, another source surfaced and went on the record--this time another American.

In September,1987, Terry Minarcin and some channel-grazing friends in Tacoma, Wash., hit upon a showing of the BBC documentary about the MIAs. Minarcin, a retired Air Force master sergeant, saw shots of a familiar, bespectacled face. “That guy was my boss,” he announced to his friends. He didn’t tell them how shocked he was. “Mooney was the last person I thought would be the first person to break silence on the MIA issue,” Minarcin says.

For 18 years in Okinawa, Taiwan, Thailand and at NSA headquarters in Ft. Meade, Minarcin, a Vietnamese linguist, was an air-defense specialist. Like Mooney, he decoded, reported and analyzed communications intercepted by NSA equipment.

Minarcin, now 44, confirmed that gathering POW information was not part of the NSA’s job in Vietnam. But like Mooney, Minarcin began to notice patterns concerning POWs in the intercepted “systems” he was decoding in the late ‘60s. The data indicated that downed American flyers and captured covert operators were ending up at camps in areas where intelligence had placed Russians. Minarcin says he filed routine reports on such information, most of it from relatively low-level communications.

Starting in 1968, the data suddenly got a lot better. NSA analysts, Minarcin says, broke a Vietnamese code that allowed them to interpret high-level political communiques about internal security matters. For the next 18 months, until the enemy upgraded to a more complex radio system, NSA analysts listened in on discussions about "political re-education camps" for South Vietnamese POWs--the *nguy* , or "puppets"--and the American POWs-- *tu binh my* . In some intercepts, the Americans were called *giac lai my* , "bandit American pilots," who were being sent to prison camps south of Hanoi near Thanh Hoa, Thai Binh and Ninh Binh. The communiques also indicated which groups required "white hats"--Vietnamese slang for members of the state security apparatus--who, according to the pattern Minarcin saw in the intercepts, only accompanied American prisoners who were not headed for the Hanoi Hilton.

Minarcin believes that Russians were at the other end of the shipments he began discovering in 1968. He bases his conclusion, as does Mooney, in part on data showing that Soviet "advisers" were based in the locations to which the Vietnamese were sending the POWs.

Then in 1971 and 1972, Minarcin and his colleagues began seeing Vietnamese references to "going to market and needing *qua* "--fruit. "Like a shopping list," Minarcin theorizes. They had already figured out that *qua* referred to rockets--as in "the F-4 is loaded with *qua* "--and that bananas referred to guided rockets, and that other fruits referred to other ordnance. But it took the air-defense analysts two years, according to Minarcin, to see enough fruit references in the coded traffic to surmise that imprisoned airmen in "the market" were designated by the "fruit" their planes delivered.

Minarcin stresses that, unlike Mooney, who returned to Ft. Meade in 1970 and soon received permission to focus on the POW problem, "I had other things to worry about, like Joe Blow sitting on a runway and whether a Vietnamese triple A"--anti-aircraft artillery--"was preparing a flak trap for him." Minarcin says that sometimes a year would go by without his processing a POW reference. Nevertheless, he did see evidence "of a very high validity" that American prisoners were alive, held in special camps, and that the Soviets were invariably nearby. One case in particular sticks in his mind. It involved a fellow intelligence analyst, an EC-47Q crew member, who was shot down just 12 hours after he and Minarcin had had a beer together in a bar in Thailand. The man's name was Peter Cressman. Like Jerry Mooney, Minarcin saw the radio traffic about the EC-47Q and knew that "bandit American pilots" had been captured. Minarcin says that a month later, NSA surveillance picked up a request from a military complex near Vinh for language experts to interrogate "the SIGNINT (signals intelligence) specialist" who had recently been captured. Minarcin reckoned that his friend had fallen into Soviet hands

In 1977, four years after the signing of the Paris peace accords, the Carter Administration began reviewing MIA cases and reclassifying men "presumed dead." But in 1978, Minarcin, then back at Ft. Meade and still working on Vietnam surveillance, continued to run across references to American POWs who, he believed, were alive. In one case, Minarcin says he overheard a radio operator complaining to the man at the other end that bad weather had destroyed their rice and he had been sent to Bai Thong to get rice; there he saw American POWs, who, he griped, were drier and better fed than he was. Mooney had identified Bai Thong as a holding area for American "special talents" in 1968.

In February or March of 1978, Minarcin says, he saw a Vietnamese military communique giving the flight itinerary of a helicopter scheduled to leave the Bai Thong air field with 12 *tu binh my* (American POWs) and transport them to Muong Sen. There, the Americans were to load the chopper with wood that had been cut by other American POWs. "When I told my colleagues of this communique," Minarcin says, "I was told not to report it, as all POWs were considered dead."

Minarcin, unlike Mooney, also claims to have come across specific transportation data that he feels support the idea that American POWs did not simply disappear into the hands of the Soviets, but that they were actually taken to the Soviet Union. In late 1977 and early 1978, while analyzing daily flight schedules listed by Hanoi's civilian aviation control, Minarcin came across references to special flights scheduled from various locations in Vietnam, including, he realized, areas where earlier intelligence had indicated American prisoners were held. "Special flight A," according to his analysis, referred to high-level military passengers, "B" referred to high-level political passengers, "C" was a planeload of international diplomats. "D was the last category," explains Minarcin, who says the radio code used by Hanoi aviation control was easily cracked because the Vietnamese were using captured American coding machines. "The D flights would always originate in a POW area, fly to another POW area or Soviet interrogation center and back, or to Hanoi and out of the country."

Minarcin paid particular attention to the D flights, checking out pilot and air-traffic communications related to them. The intercepts, he says, showed that in the six-week period he monitored, at least once a week men would leave D flights at Gia Lam airport in Hanoi, and Vietnamese security agents would march them into a nearby holding area. "Within a matter of hours," Minarcin says, "a Russian airliner, usually an IL-62, would depart Gia Lam for Moscow." Minarcin says that when analysts checked back through intercepts they found earlier examples of similar flight patterns in and out of Gia Lam.

In 1982, Minarcin heard through NSA associates working on Soviet intelligence that they'd also tracked planes from Hanoi to Moscow during the '70s. The word was that passengers from those planes were then flown to areas of Siberia requiring special clearance and secured by the KGB. It is only a theory, but Minarcin believes that some POWs ended up in Soviet custody.

All this came back to Minarcin when he saw Mooney on TV in 1987. Retired from the Air Force in 1986 and living in Washington state, Minarcin wanted to call Mooney and say that he, too, was bothered about the missing men and what he remembered from the

Vietnam intercepts. But he didn't know how to reach Mooney and ended up keeping what he knew to himself.

Then last Easter, on a trip to Florida, Minarcin ran into his past again. He saw a story in the Tampa Tribune about the efforts of the Cressman family to persuade the government to turn over information about their son Peter. Minarcin was stunned to realize that all the members of the EC-47Q crew were now considered killed in action. He called the Cressmans and told them that he believed their son had been captured and, perhaps, had been turned over to the Soviets. The Cressmans said that they had heard a similar story from Minarcin's old boss, Jerry Mooney.

After making the phone call, Minarcin realized that he had crossed a line. Like Mooney, whom he had not seen since 1974, Minarcin was finally ready to tell all that he knew.

Although the Pentagon still insists that there is no evidence to support a Russian connection to the MIAs, even a skeptic like former deputy assistant secretary of defense Roger Shields grants that the Soviets would have had good reasons to talk to American POWs. The Soviets would have to have been "far more incompetent and far more unaware and far more stupid and lackadaisical about things (than we think they are) not to have talked to an American flier about his aircraft, tactics, anything he knew about strategic plans and so forth," he concedes.

Retired Air Force Lt. Gen. Eugene F. Tighe, chief of intelligence for the Pacific Command in Vietnam and later head of the DIA, agrees. "We professional intelligence officers believed that ('special talents') would be a high priority for the Russians." To Tighe, who headed a panel in the late '80s that examined POW/MIA evidence, the fact that returning POWs denied being questioned by Soviets just didn't make sense. "It was amazing," he says. "Something was missing." In 1981, he told Congress that he was personally convinced that American POWs had been left behind in Southeast Asia. Now he says, "When I testified before (Congress), as I did every six months or so when I was head of the DIA, I said repeatedly that there were three possible explanations as to what happened to the men who did not return: (1) They were held for reparations--the Vietnamese had a tradition of hostage-taking; (2) they were maimed and the Vietnamese were simply embarrassed to give them up, and (3) they were 'special talents' who were held to trade with the Soviets and the Chinese."

Still, neither Tighe nor Shields saw data or analyses such as Mooney and Minarcin describe. Says Shields: "No intelligence I ever saw . . . even raises as a possibility a specific American who was turned over to Russians or interrogated by Russians."

Why wouldn't the reports have made it to Shields or Tighe? Mooney and Minarcin assumed their work went through regular NSA channels to the DIA, CIA and White House. Now Mooney wonders if the internal operations and rivalries of the U.S. intelligence community might have prevented the analysis and data from getting to Shields and others at the top levels of government. "We couldn't send data forward on our own," he says. "The NSA are producers of intelligence, not users. "

Mooney recalls that the first time he referred in a transcription to "the friends," he got a call from a CIA analyst asking, "Who the hell are 'the friends'?" Mooney also notes that neither the DIA nor those preparing for the Paris peace talks ever requested the raw POW intelligence that the NSA informed them they had collected. "I just assumed they had better data," he says. He also says that after the POWs came home in 1973, he called a DIA analyst to remind him about the men they both knew were captured but hadn't been returned, including the EC-47Q crew. The reply, according to Mooney: "Yeah, we know. We're working on it."

"I just can't believe that the NSA had all this material that never went into the system anywhere," Shields says. "I can't believe that my own DIA people who were coordinating the intelligence effort were keeping this from me."

Shields does remember seeing at least some of the same intelligence as Mooney and Minarcin; he also believes that Peter Cressman and other crew members of the EC-47Q were captured alive. He says that the Air Force, over his protests, declared them killed in action. Shields did not see evidence or analysis that led him to believe they ended up in Soviet hands, however. Still, he says, “If you can resolve the EC-47Q case, you will find out a lot about a lot of missing men.” (According to a Pentagon spokesperson, the crew’s change in status was “administrative, so that, for instance, wives could remarry and families could collect insurance. It did not reflect new information.”)

Mooney and Minarcin claim that there are similar cases and much more evidence, perhaps too much. The eavesdropping equipment that the NSA used on the ground and in the air in Southeast Asia generated so much raw intelligence data--literally tons of it--that the DIA and CIA found it hard to digest. And “there was confusion as to who got what,” explains Mooney, who served on a special NSA commission that evaluated the agency’s performance in Vietnam.

And there remains no good access to MIA information. Neither Mooney, Minarcin nor Roger Shields, for example, was aware until recently of Nguyen Cong Hoan, a Vietnamese national assemblyman who defected in 1977 and the next year testified before Congress in closed session. In the political circles he traveled in, he testified, it was “everyday conversation” that Hanoi had held onto Americans as “trump cards.” Hoan also said that he heard that some American prisoners had been sent to the Soviet Union for interrogation.

Mooney and Minarcin feel certain that they are not the only American intelligence analysts who saw the data they describe. What to do about it, they say, has split the intelligence community. Mooney says he has received calls from anonymous analysts still active at NSA who say they’re rooting for him. “They ID’d themselves with an NSA phone number or cipher logs,” Mooney explains. “They all say almost the same words: ‘This is an issue that cannot be won, and we won’t stick our necks out unless there’s a chance of winning it.’ ”

Gen. Tighe says it is unlikely that U.S. intelligence sources "of regard" will ever come forward. "I suspect that you're going to be able to get a lot of access to answers . . . in the Soviet Union--from both the KGB and military sources . . . . They feel an openness in speaking . . . these days . . . that will (benefit) our knowledge of the whole thing."

Indeed, the new openness in the Soviet Union, along with signs of new resolve on the part of American government officials, promises a fresh start in the effort to clear up the MIA issue in Southeast Asia. The Pentagon's Office for Seeking Missing Persons set up shop in Hanoi in July; its efforts--reviewing records, interviewing people and examining crash sites--have as yet yielded no results. And despite the official position of the government that there is no Soviet MIA connection, the State Department has formally requested access to KGB files to check them for references to Americans held from World War II through the Vietnam War. According to Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence S. Eagleburger, the government is cautiously optimistic that the Soviets will cooperate. In a letter to Rep. John Miller (R-Wash.) dated Sept. 5, Eagleburger wrote: "In light of the increasingly reformist bent of the Soviet government--and the appointment of a new minister of the interior--I am hopeful that the Soviet side will see the advantages of acceding to our request. . . ."

Meanwhile, the Senate is mounting its latest investigation. "Some people in the intelligence community say that Mooney is off the wall," says Sen. Smith, the only member of the Senate so far to have talked to the retired NSA analyst. "But they won't let you look at the files to substantiate their claim." In announcing the formation of the Select Committee, Smith said: "The executive branch has resisted giving Congress intelligence data on POWs and MIAs. They will either provide it willingly or we are going to subpoena data and witnesses. It's that simple. We want to see the intelligence as soon as possible."

Roger Shields advises the Senate to lean on Hanoi. "We've just never pressed the Vietnamese hard enough on the MIAs," he says. "There are serious issues to be resolved, and there is that commitment a nation makes to its people" not to abandon those it sends to war.

"I went public precisely because I still believe in that commitment," Mooney says. He is eagerly awaiting his subpoena to prove to the Senate under oath that "I'm not some flake."

Indeed, Mooney, pointing to the manila folder that contains his 20-year service record of achievement and praise, prefers to see himself as a "hornet's nest" for official Washington--"a door they don't want to walk through." With anger rising in his voice, Mooney says, "All this has cost me time and irritation and a little money. It's been pretty lonely." He pauses and then marvels at the irony of Soviet sources admitting that Americans were interrogated by Soviets, and at the appearance of new information from Minarcin. The anger disappears. Mooney laughs and then announces, "I don't feel lonely anymore."

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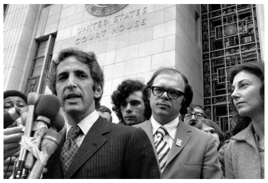

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