



Russia provides scant help as U.S. searches for MIAs

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Tarnished bits of metal lay among the rocks in a pass north of Vladivostok, on Russia's far eastern coast. There were .50-caliber machine gun shells, a silver-plated spoon engraved with the letters "USN," a fragment of human bone and what at first glance appeared to be debris from an American naval aircraft.

Lt. Col. Michael O'Hara of the Pentagon's Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office, investigating reports of a crash site in the pass, reached that site in July. He suspected it contained scattered pieces of a missing Navy surveillance aircraft shot down in November 1951. The debris, he hoped, might help answer lingering questions about what had happened to the 10-member crew.

Some Pentagon and intelligence officials have long speculated that a small but significant number of the tens of thousands of Americans missing in action in World War II, the Korean War and the war in Vietnam, or from spy planes shot down by the Soviets during the Cold War, were captured and held in the gulag, the Soviet Union's network of prison camps.

There is "a high probability" that "up to several hundred" American servicemen lived and died as secret prisoners of the Soviet Union, said Norman Kass, executive secretary of the American side of the U.S.-Russia Joint Commission on POWs/MIAs, an organization created in 1992 in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse.

Over the past 14 years, American investigators working for the commission have talked to scores of Russians who recalled meeting or hearing about U.S. servicemen in the gulag.

Russian officials say they can't find evidence to corroborate these reports. Kass and others engaged in the hunt say the Russians have failed to make available critical documents and witnesses.

Most of the American military personnel officially designated as missing in action, in all likelihood, died on the battlefield. But the numbers involved are substantial: During World War II, 78,682 Americans were missing in action; more than 8,100 officially remain missing from the Korean War,

according to the Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office. About 1,800 remain unaccounted for from Vietnam. An additional 77 of the missing were crew members of aircraft shot down by the Soviet Union during the Cold War whose bodies have never been found.

Only one found

Since the Joint Commission was established in March 1992, it has located the remains of one American serviceman lost in Russia - an Annapolis graduate, Capt. John R. Dunham, whose body was pulled from the Sea of Japan after his aircraft was shot down while on a secret surveillance mission on Oct. 7, 1952. His remains were buried in Arlington National Cemetery in 1995.

From the late 1940s to the early 1960s, electronic surveillance planes tested the border defenses of the Soviet Union to map possible routes for American strategic bombers. A number of those surveillance planes were shot down. In up to 10 of those cases, investigators and officials with the American side of the U.S.-Russia Joint Commission say, the Soviets might have rescued survivors.

Since 1992, U.S. investigators working in Russia have pored through archives and visited crash sites, former prison camps and graveyards. Russian officials have opened the files of several military archives to Russians with security clearances, working for the American side of the Joint Commission.

But Russian officials, Kass and others said, have failed to declassify many key intelligence files or make available former officers with the main security services - the KGB, military intelligence and the Border Guards.

Reports of American servicemen in the gulag began circulating early in the Cold War. A 1952 CIA report said "several transports of Korean POWS" had passed through transit camps into the prison system.

In February 1992, two former National Security Agency analysts claimed in testimony before the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs that the North Vietnamese had turned scores of American prisoners over to the Soviets.

Those hearings were followed by the establishment of the Joint Commission. In June 1992, on the eve of a visit to the United States, then-Russian President Boris N. Yeltsin wrote to the same Senate committee that some Americans taken prisoner in Vietnam had been transferred to Soviet prison camps. Intelligence files, he said, also showed that at least 12 crew members of U.S. spy planes were in prisons or hospitals as of 1953, the year that Soviet leader Josef Stalin died.

In his letter, Yeltsin wrote that "the assurances by the former U.S.S.R leadership to the effect that the problem of MIAs in its territory was nonexistent were untrue."

Within a few months, the Kremlin backtracked, repudiating or contradicting these statements. But other circumstantial evidence seemed to support Yeltsin's statements.

Yeltsin's top adviser on the issue, Col. Gen. Dmitri Volkogonov, wrote in memoirs published after his death in 1995 that he had found a document directing the transfer of "knowledgeable" Americans from Vietnam to the U.S.S.R.

In the immediate aftermath of the Soviet collapse, said A. Dennis Clift, chairman of the Joint Commission's Cold War Working Group and president of the Pentagon's Joint Military Intelligence College, witness accounts gathered over the past decade by American investigators in Russia provide "all sorts of corroborating evidence that Americans had been taken prisoner."

The U.S. government has refused some declassification requests involving NSA reports, according to Clift and Kass.

Patricia Lively Dickinson asked the NSA in 2000 for records on the Soviet downing of her brother's Navy P2V Neptune reconnaissance plane. After an initial rejection, the agency in June 2002 released a three-page report dated Nov. 23, 1951 - labeled "Top Secret Suede" - in which all but two paragraphs and some partial sentences were blacked out. "At least one of the fighters fired on and shot down the Neptune at ... " one sentence read.

The NSA's director of policy, Louis F. Giles, wrote in a memo attached to the report that "no additional material may be declassified without the possibility of causing harm to intelligence sources and methods."

Dickinson questioned the sensitivity of material a half-century old. "The sources are very elderly, and probably most of them are deceased," she said in an interview. "And as for the methods, if the methods have not improved in the last 50 years, I think we're in trouble. It's just an extremely frustrating situation."

In 2004, after the re-election of President Vladimir V. Putin, the Kremlin dissolved the Russian side of the Joint Commission. That action, Pentagon officials say, essentially means the United States is now working with little or no official assistance.

"We are limited as to what we can do," Yuri Boguslavsky, an American and the former chief of the Joint Commission Support Directorate staff in Moscow, said in an interview last year. "We're guests in this country. We don't have any rights. It's a very sensitive issue."

New members

Russian officials pledged last year to name a slate of new members to the Joint Commission, though these new commissioners would answer to the minister of defense rather than to Putin.

Even this effort has bogged down. Last year, Russia's Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office was told that 60 separate officials at the Finance Ministry had to certify that the new commission would not cost the Russian Federation anything.

"We desperately need to jump-start this," Kass said in an interview in the U.S. Joint Commission offices in Crystal City, Va. The main obstacle, he and others involved in the hunt for missing Americans say, is that - barring more political pressure from Washington - the Russians have no reason to admit that U.S. military personnel were held prisoner in the gulag.

Former Russian members of the Joint Commission in Moscow and a spokesman for the Russian Embassy in Washington did not respond to requests for interviews.

One of the key surviving apparent witnesses to Americans in Soviet prison camps is Benjamin Dodin, an 83-year-old retired construction engineer who survived the gulag. Shortly after emigrating from Russia to Israel in 1993, he went to the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv to say he had information on scores of Americans who been in the gulag.

Dodin's dictated his recollections to embassy officials in Tel Aviv. But a report of his testimony was lost in government files, Kass said. Then, in 1999, Kass went to Tel Aviv and re-interviewed Dodin. That oral history, filled with asides and digressions, became a 22-page memoir.

Dodin confirmed much of what he said in the memoirs when he was interviewed by The Sun last summer.

He said Soviet authorities arrested his parents in 1929 for political crimes and sentenced to them to prison. Dodin said he was arrested in Moscow in 1939, when he was 16, after writing to Stalin to denounce conditions in the orphanage where he lived.

Dodin was convicted of "anti-Soviet agitation," sentenced to five years and dispatched to Siberia. He began to record the names of fellow prisoners in hopes of notifying their families. Camp authorities caught him making lists, and he was sentenced to 10 more years. But he kept making lists.

Released in June 1951 after serving 11 years, Dodin was exiled to the city of Krasnoyarsk in Siberia. He rose to become a ranking official in the Laboratory for Construction in the Arctic, where he worked for 30 years.

During his imprisonment and in the 1950s, Dodin said, he met or heard about many American prisoners. At one point, he said, he met a Russian woman, Marta Rainel, who claimed to have met 22 American servicemen being held in a camp near Kirovsk, in northwest Russia, in the winter of 1951-1952. Rainel later disappeared into a prison camp herself, but her sister later gave the names to Dodin.

According to "The Gulag Study," a February 2005 report by investigators with the Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office, at least 12 of the names Dodin passed along match those of U.S. servicemen missing from Korea.

Dodin said that in the spring of 1954 he spoke with a radio operator who had listened to radio traffic among boats searching for a dozen downed American fliers in the Sea of Japan, in mid-June 1952. The Soviet press reported that all 12 fliers had drowned. The radio operator said he had heard 10 were being held in a prison called Svobodny - "Freedom" - near Blagoveschensk, on the Trans-Siberian rail line.

One of the captives, Dodin said he later learned, had a name that sounded like "Bush." A friend who worked on Far East construction projects later told Dodin all the men were executed.

The dates and details coincide with an intensively scrutinized Cold War incident. On June 13, 1952, an RB-29 reconnaissance aircraft vanished over the Sea of Japan. Among the 12-member crew was Air Force Maj. Samuel N. Busch.

In a June 18, 1952, telegram to the United States, the Kremlin denied any knowledge of the aircraft. But after the Joint Commission convened in 1992, the Russians conceded that the plane had been shot down. The Russians, citing Soviet documents, said that Busch's RB-29 had been hit by gunfire from at least one of two Soviet MiG-15 fighters, burst into flame and crashed into the sea 18 miles off the coast.

But American search planes in June 1952 photographed an empty life raft. Two crew men on search planes told investigators they had seen the plane floating in the water, intact, according to a 1996 report by the U.S. side of the Joint Commission.

In March 2000, Col. Vladimir K. Vinogradov and A.P. Cherepkov, two officials with Russia's Federal Security Service, the successor agency to the KGB, wrote a letter to the U.S. side of the Joint Commission in response to Dodin's memoirs. They did not dispute that he was a gulag inmate and had worked on arctic construction projects, but they questioned whether any inmate could have traveled so widely in the gulag.

Without noting details, they said they had not confirmed his stories. "No information corroborative to the statements of the memoirist has been developed," they wrote.

American officials say, though, that they regard Dodin as a credible witness. "Everything Dodin says is verifiable - except that he met Americans where he says he met them," O'Hara said.

O'Hara's recovery of pieces of wreckage raised the hopes of Patricia Lively Dickinson, the sister of machinist's mate Jack D. Lively, one of the 12 lost crew members aboard the Navy P2V Neptune. She thought the discovery of the plane might lead to her brother's grave.

But Wendy M. Coble, an archaeologist at the Naval Historical Center in Washington, said the artifacts recovered so far are not necessarily those of a Navy Neptune. The Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office plans to dispatch a forensic team to Vladivostok next year, this time prepared for a full-scale excavation.

O'Hara, meanwhile, is trying to tour gulag sites in the Far East in the coming months to retrace Dodin's steps.

"I believe the answers are out there," he said. "Honestly, it may be that they're buried so deep that we're never going to get them. But the way I see it, I want to look for these men, because I'd want someone to look for me."

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