

"The MIA Cover-Up"

by John Corry

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Seeking to normalize relations with Vietnam, President Clinton, along with supine politicians and a feckless press, would like the public to forget the MIA issue. But evidence continues to emerge that far more men were left behind than has been reported--and that some may be alive today.

As shown by the enclosed Casualty Data Summary, a total of 1,303 American personnel remain officially unaccounted-for after the completion of Operation Homecoming.... Of the 1,303 personnel, the debriefs of the returnees contain information that approximately 100 of them are probably dead. ---Defense Intelligence Agency memorandum to Deputy Secretary of Defense William Clements, May 22, 1973

The intelligence indicates that American prisoners of war have been held continuously after Operation Homecoming and remain[ed] in captivity in Vietnam and Laos as late as 1989. ---unpublished report by Senate investigators, April 9, 1992

HANOI, Vietnam (Reuter)--US. Assistant Secretary of State Winston Lord said Tuesday as conclusively as anyone can, that there are no U.S. prisoners of war (POWs) being held in Vietnam "There has never been evidence uncovered of someone being held alive," he told a news conference after talks with Vietnamese officials. --December 14, 1993

A terrible truth is now emerging: Recently declassified documents and other sources show that America's MIA-POW policy has been disfigured by denials, half-truths, and evasions. More important, they also suggest that American prisoners are still crying out in Vietnam. For two decades, a cover-up has been in progress, sustained not so much by conspiracy as by government ineptitude, a bureaucratic unwillingness to draw obvious conclusions from incontrovertible facts, and a failure of national resolve. It is now certain that we left men behind in Southeast Asia-not merely the handful we now unofficially acknowledge in Laos, but in numbers reaching well into the hundreds in Vietnam. It is equally certain that American officials ignored evidence of this at the time.

To understand the moral catastrophe we must go back twenty-one years. Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, a senior member of the Hanoi Politburo, signed the Paris Peace Accords ending the Vietnam war on January 23, 1973. "We have been told that no American prisoners are held in Cambodia," Kissinger told reporters the next day. "American prisoners held in North Vietnam and Laos will be returned to us in Hanoi." One week later, however, President Nixon sent a secret letter to Premier Pham Van Dong of North Vietnam, reflecting an unpublicized understanding reached by Kissinger and Le Duc Tho. Nixon told Pham that the United States would "contribute to postwar reconstruction in North Vietnam," in an amount that would "fall in the range of \$3.25 billion of grant aid over five years." He also said that "other forms of aid ... could fall in the range of I to 1.5 billion dollars."

Sen. John Kerry, the committee chairman, told one of the investigators that if the report ever leaked out, "you'll wish you'd never been born."

None of the aid was ever extended, and even the existence of the letter was not disclosed until years later. If the aid had been extended, however, Vietnam might have returned all its prisoners. The precedent was clear. The Vietminh guerrillas of the 1950s had held back an unknown number of French soldiers after the fall of Dien Bien Phu. France quietly ransomed them back with government aid. Moreover, a 1969 study by the Rand Corporation had said that "a quid pro quo that the DRV [Democratic Republic of Vietnam] is likely to demand-and one that the United States may want to consider accepting-is the payment of reparations to North Vietnam in exchange for US. prisoners."

The study went on to say that the United States could avoid the appearance of paying reparations if it publicly labeled them "part of the U.S. contribution to a postwar recovery program." Nixon's letter, of course, offered just such a contribution. The study concluded as follows:

It would be unduly optimistic to believe that the DRV and the Vietcong will release all US. Prisoners immediately after conclusion of an agreement in the expectation that the United States will meet its military, political or monetary commitments. More likely, they will insist on awaiting concrete evidence of US. concessions before releasing the majority of American prisoners.

But the concessions, or aid programs, were not forthcoming. There was no possibility they ever could be. Nixon would soon be undone by Watergate, and Congress wanted no more of the war. In the delirium of the time, some thirty senators had even called for unilateral withdrawal from Southeast Asia, without the imposition of any conditions on North Vietnam. Hanoi would be trusted to return all its prisoners. When it did release 591 POWs, in Operation Homecoming in March 1973, however, it was apparent that something was wrong. Hundreds of hospital beds had been set aside for the returnees; it had been assumed many would need medical attention. The 591 returnees, though, included no amputees or burn cases; there was no one maimed, disfigured, or blind. It is reasonable to believe that the most afflicted POWs either remained in Vietnam, or were murdered.

Nonetheless, no questions were publicly raised about this or, indeed, any other substantive matter, and on March 29 President Nixon addressed the nation on television. "For the first time in twelve years, no American military forces are in Vietnam," he declared. "All of our American POWs are on their way home." Few seemed to hear what he said moments later: "There are still some problem areas. The provisions of the agreement all missing in action . . . have not been complied with We shall insist that North Vietnam comply with the agreement."

But we did not insist; for one thing, we had no "leverage" to do so. Congress had walked away from the war. In May, the Senate rejected a Republican amendment that would have allowed continued bombing if Nixon certified that North Vietnam was not trying to account for all the missing in action. Certainly, there already was evidence that men had been left behind. The Casualty Data Summary mentioned in the Defense Intelligence Agency memorandum at the top of this story, for example, notes that, besides the 1,200 or so men whose fate was unknown after Operation Homecoming, 65 were still held as prisoners: 29 in North Vietnam, 27 in South Vietnam, five in Cambodia, and four in Laos. Moreover, there was general agreement that the figure for Laos represented only a fraction of the real total. Several declassified documents suggest the number should have been in the hundreds. A March 1973 memo to the Joint Chiefs of Staff says, "There are approximately 350 U.S. military and civilian POW/MIAs in Laos." An earlier memo to Henry Kissinger says that some 215 of the 350 "were lost under circumstances that the enemy probably has information regarding their fate." No information was ever forthcoming, however, and only twelve prisoners returned from Laos.

Thus, even from the beginning, the POW issue was shrouded in ambiguity. There are, though, some salient facts. The Defense Intelligence Agency memorandum cited above says 1,303 men were still unaccounted for after Operation Homecoming, and that the debriefings of the returned POWs indicated that approximately 100 of them were probably dead. Therefore, some 1,200 might still have been alive. (A later Pentagon document gives a precise number of 1,278.) The possibility that they were alive, however, was ignored, and even misrepresented. A deposition given in 1992 by Dr. Frank Shields, the former head of the Pentagon's POW/MIA Task Force, to the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs is instructive. In the deposition, Shields describes an April 1973 meeting with Deputy Secretary of Defense Clements, who had summoned him to his office to discuss the Pentagon's public posture on men missing in action:

DR. SHIELDS: He [Clements] indicated to me that he believed that there were no Americans alive in Indochina. And I said: I don't believe that you could say that ... I told him that he could not say that. And he said: You didn't hear what I said. And I said: You can't say that. And I thought he was probably going to fire me ...

QUESTION: What did you interpret that to mean, "you didn't hear me"?

DR. SHIELDS: That I was fighting the problem. You remember that there were a lot of people at the time who wanted to declare victory, okay? And I think that maybe at that point in time he believed that we had what we had, and that was all we were going to get, and that there was no one there.

That Colonel Hynds was captured alive seems indisputable; the Pentagon, however, has always listed a Col. Wallace Gurley Hynds as killed in action.

This meant that even though there was no evidence to prove that some 1,200 men-or, to use the exact figure, 1,278 men-were dead, the Pentagon would assume they were. Intentional or not, it was the beginning of the cover-up, and it would have a far-reaching effect. The tacit assumption that the men were dead would harden into official policy. Henceforth, all official figures on POWs and MIAs would be suspect. The grotesque part, though, is that even the figure of 1,200-or 1,278-might have been too low. As an intelligence estimate, it was worthless.

That was because in addition to the 1,278 MIAs about whom the Pentagon had no firm information, an almost equal number of MIAs had been declared dead. Most were classified as KIA/BNR, or killed in action/body not recovered. Over the years, however, a growing body of evidence has cast those early KIA/BNR figures in doubt. More men were left alive than we thought. Ironically, much of the evidence about this is now coming from the Vietnamese. In 1991, American investigators from the Joint Casualty Resolution Commission were allowed to visit a Vietnamese military museum in Vinh City in Nghe Tinh province. In their written report, the investigators say they were shown items from the museum's collection, and then given a two-page excerpt from the museum's register. Then they were allowed to examine the register itself. They took notes on information in the register that was "pertinent to significant exhibit items they had been allowed to examine."

Their report continues:

The entire register was then reviewed for entries concerning additional items of interest. During this process, it was noted that a number of items mentioned in the register excerpt did not appear in the register. In addition, there were numerous gaps in the register where items that had been examined by the team were not included. This suggests that the register viewed by the team was not original as claimed by the museum staff, but in fact had been selectively recopied from an original at some time in the past. The team also noted that certain items of high interest that appeared in the register were not available for examination. Museum officials claimed that these items were not available because they had been lost, destroyed or lent to other museums.

Characteristically, the Vietnamese were trying to hide something. The investigators were shown pre-selected items. Then they were shown not the register that listed all the items, but instead an excerpt from the register. Apparently, they insisted then on examining the entire register, and when they did, they discovered it was a fake. Moreover, "certain items of high interest" that were supposed to be in the museum were missing.

The investigators, however, listed in their report the items they were able to see, literally translating the museum's own descriptions. They found, for example, "a flag used to request food used by the American colonel pilot Hynds, Wallace G., and was captured at Ha Tinh," and "bandit pilot identification card number FR 15792 of Hynds, Wallace Gouley and was captured alive in Ha Tinh on 28-5-1965."

That Colonel Hynds was captured alive seems indisputable; the Pentagon, however, has always listed a Col. Wallace Gurley Hynds as killed in action. There are six other men whose names were found in that one provincial museum who were all listed as being captured alive, although the Pentagon had declared them all dead.

The inescapable conclusion is that MIA lists were flawed from the outset. More men were captured alive than anyone thought. Recently declassified transcripts of the conversations of Vietnamese anti-aircraft gunners, monitored by the National Security Agency, reinforce the conclusion. The gunners talk of American planes being brought down, and of their pilots being captured by soldiers or villagers. The National Security Agency has correlated the transcripts with the names of the pilots. Although the Vietnamese themselves talk about the pilots being captured alive, at least some of them were classified by the Pentagon as "presumptive finding of death," or "killed in action/body not recovered."

The indications that a large number of men were left behind after 1973 have become compelling. A North Vietnamese military doctor, who defected to the South in 1971, told American officials that Hanoi was holding hundreds more prisoners than it had acknowledged. In 1979, another Vietnamese Communist defector told the Defense Intelligence Agency that in the mid-1970s **Vietnamese officials had talked about holding 700 American prisoners as "bargaining assets."**

The 700 figure cannot be dismissed; neither can the idea of bargaining assets. Last April, [Stephen J. Morris](#), a Harvard scholar, disclosed that he had found the Russian translation of a 1972 report by Lieut. Gen. Tran Van Quang in Communist Party archives in Moscow. Quang said that **North Vietnam was holding 1,205 American prisoners- 614 more than it released the next year.** Last September, the Pentagon itself released the translation of an account of a Vietnamese Communist Party meeting held in late 1970 or early 1971. It quoted a Vietnamese official as saying that Vietnam held 735 "American aviator POWs," although it had acknowledged holding only 368.

"The total number of American aviators in the SRV [Vietnam] is 735," the official declared. "As I have already said, we have published the names of 368 aviators. This is our diplomatic step. If the Americans agree to the withdrawal of all their troops from South Vietnam, we will, as a start, return these 368 people."

The Defense Department did not try to discredit the Vietnamese document, perhaps because it attracted so little attention in the press. It said only that it could not vouch for the document's authenticity or accuracy, and that it had come "from the files of the GRU-Soviet military intelligence." On the other hand, the Quang report that Morris had found in Moscow attracted a good deal of attention, and the Defense Department reacted accordingly. When extracts from the document were published in the press, the Pentagon attempted to have the full document classified. Eventually it said that "while portions of the document are plausible, evidence in support of its claims to be an accurate summary of the POW situation in 1972 are far outweighed by errors, omissions and propaganda that detract from its credibility."

In fact, the errors were not errors; they were really the weakest of quibbles—that the 1,205 prisoners, for example, included both American POWs and South Vietnamese commandos. (Morris replied that Vietnamese Communist documents always drew a distinction between American and South Vietnamese troops.)

In Hanoi, meanwhile, Gen. John Vessey, the presidential emissary to Vietnam on POW-MIA affairs, said he had spoken to General Quang and that Quang denied he had made the report. "I have no reason to disbelieve him," Vessey said, although he had no reason to believe him, either, and indeed one excellent reason to think Quang was lying. Quang could hardly admit that North Vietnam had held more prisoners than it had ever acknowledged. The only way Hanoi could account for them now would be to confess that it had lied in the past.

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Vessey also attempted to discredit the document itself. It said that in 1970, after American forces had raided the prison camp at Son Tay, only twenty-three miles from Hanoi, North Vietnam had dispersed POWs among other camps. Vessey said this could not be correct. After Son Tay, he insisted, POWs were not dispersed among other camps, but instead were concentrated in fewer camps. He also said that North Vietnam could not have held 1,205 prisoners because that would have required it to have a separate prison system; and neither U.S. intelligence nor the POWs who returned from Vietnam, he said, were aware of such a system.

Vessey was making a strange argument. If Hanoi kept a separate prison system for the POWs who were not returned, the POWs who did return would hardly be aware of it. Both sets of POWs would have been held in separate places. It must also be noted now that Admiral James Stockdale, testifying before respectful senators at the POW/MIA hearings in 1992, also dismissed the idea of a separate prison system. Stockdale, who survived seven years as a prisoner, thought that after the Son Tay raid, all POWs were brought into the camps in Hanoi. He also described the "tap code" that POWs used to pass messages from cell to cell; through the tap code and other means, he said, the POWs were able to keep track of one another, thus assuring that none would be lost, murdered, or spirited away without their comrades' knowledge. Stockdale, who suffered severe torture and eventually inflicted a near fatal wound on himself to convince his captors that he would never accede to their propaganda demands, was sure no POW was left behind after Operation Homecoming; he was also sure there was no separate prison system.

Stockdale, though, was wrong. It is a mark of many good men who went to Vietnam and upheld the highest standards of courage, honor, and decency that they are unwilling to believe their country might have abandoned other good men. The empty rhetoric about "healing" the wounds from Vietnam, spoken so shamelessly by press, politicians, and old peace activists, might have some meaning now if it were directed toward Stockdale and those like him.

Reports from Communist defectors and other sources make it clear that the North Vietnamese were aware of the prisoners' tap code and could manipulate it as they chose, excising the names of some POWs and introducing false data about others. Moreover, while Stockdale and the other POWs in Hanoi thought they knew the names and locations of all the American prisoners, it is obvious they did not. Nine men captured in Laos spent years in the Hanoi prison system, separated from other POWs only by the width of stone walls, without the other POWs knowing they were there.

It is on the matter of a separate prison system that government orthodoxy about POWs begins to unravel completely. The boat people who fled Vietnam in the 1980s brought with them information about a prison system that was larger and more complex than we had known. Even before the arrival of the boat people, though, U.S. intelligence agencies suspected that Hanoi had held POWs outside the known prisoner system. The known system consisted of thirteen camps-eight outside of Hanoi and five within the city. One difficulty in tracking information about them is that a camp, or prison, may be referred to one way in a DIA report, say, and another in a POW debriefing. Xom Aplo, or Xom Ap Lo N-5 1, for instance, may be called Bat Bat, after a nearby village, or Briarpatch, or even Tic Tac Toe, which refers to the configuration of some of its buildings.

But some reports are clear enough. A CIA document, only recently declassified, suggests that POWs were held in camps other than the ones identified during the war. The CIA document is handwritten, unsigned, and undated, although the content indicates that it was put together several years after Operation Homecoming in 1973. That it is handwritten is suggestive; it indicates that someone in the CIA wanted to make certain information part of the permanent record, but did not want to attract much attention when he did.

The document begins:

In response to recent human source reporting on American POWs still in North Vietnam, we conducted a photographic study of selected prison/detention facilities in the northern portion of the country. Our study concentrated on comparing known American POW camps with various other detention camps. The purpose of our study was to determine if any signatures of American presence could be found at these other camps.... Our analysis did reveal some irregularities in the North Vietnamese prison system between 1970 and 1973. The irregularities do not provide conclusive evidence of American presence at other camps; however, this possibility cannot be disregarded, and precludes drawing a firm conclusion that all the camps which held American POWs have been identified.

The CIA analyst was only being cautious. He had gone back to look at old photographs to determine how many camps had reacted to the Son Tay raid in 1970 "by constructing new defensive positions such as AAA [anti- aircraft artillery] sites, AW [automatic weapon] positions, trenching and/or foxholes." The Son Tay raiders-Special Forces troopers, Army Rangers, and Air Force volunteers-had swooped in by helicopter on Son Tay, only twenty-three miles from Hanoi, in an attempt to rescue prisoners.

Unfortunately, the prisoners had been moved to another camp, although the raid itself was a victory. Hundreds of North Vietnamese regulars were killed, while not a single raider was lost or injured, and all returned home safely. They had shown that American forces could strike within reach of downtown Hanoi.

The CIA study made the reasonable assumption that camps holding POWs would react to the Son Tay raid by immediately shoring up their defenses against the possibility of a similar helicopter attack-with new anti-aircraft gun positions, trenches, foxholes, and so on. Indeed, the study found that this is exactly what six camps that were known to be holding American prisoners did. More important, it also found that seven camps that were not known to be holding prisoners-Tuyen Quang, Ba Vi, Ban Puoi, Xam Tang, Chorn Lai, Coc Mi, and Xom Giong-reacted the same way.

Judging from this reaction "and the fact that several reports have been received recently stating that Americans are still being held in North Vietnam," the CIA again said cautiously, **"the possibility of a second prison system for the detention of American POWs cannot be disregarded."**

Of course it cannot; the only reasonable explanation of why the Vietnamese would have fortified the camps that way is that they were used to hold prisoners. In fact, the Defense Department had speculated along these same lines before the CIA did. The CIA study was made during the mid- or late 1970s; a Defense Department report, dated July 26, 1971, adds another camp to the list of places where North Vietnam probably held prisoners. Aerial photography revealed that new gun emplacements were also constructed at the Cam Chu prison immediately after the Son Tay raid. **"It is reasoned," the report says, "that Hanoi was taking steps to thwart other possible SAR [search and rescue] efforts to rescue U.S. PWs."**

No American, however, was repatriated from any of these camps during Operation Homecoming.

In the appalling history of POW-MIA policy, though, nothing is more scandalous than the issue of live sightings. Since 1975, the Defense Intelligence Agency has received more than 15,000 live-sighting reports about American prisoners in Southeast Asia. Approximately 1,650 of the reports are first-hand. That means a source says he has actually seen an American held in captivity, or under conditions that cannot be easily explained. The remainder of the reports are hearsay; a source says he has been told by someone else about an American, or many Americans, held in captivity. These live-sighting reports have come from many sources-refugees, defectors, diplomats, and travelers-with the preponderance from refugees. Many of the reports, even the ones that are hearsay, are quite specific, with physical details, exact locations, and an abundance of certifiable facts.

No live-sighting reporting, however, has ever been accepted as proof by the Defense Intelligence Agency that an MIA is still alive, or ever has been alive, in Southeast Asia. This defies the laws of probability. It also moves us into the area of culpable negligence.

It is permissible now to wonder if the Defense Intelligence Agency has ever been seriously interested in uncovering the truth about our missing men, or whether it has always been an instrument in a cover-up.

Criticism of the DIA, much of it from MIA family members, became so harsh and insistent in the 1980s that the agency assigned a team to investigate itself. This led in 1986 to the Director's POW/MIA Task Force Report, or the Gaines Report, after Air Force Col. Kimball M. Gaines, who was its principal author. Consider the following excerpts, both dealing with live sightings:

When a case is being worked ... it is plainly evident that the emphasis is on the investigative side of the question in most cases, where the focus rests on debunking the source more than it does on the analysis of the information itself. It should be noted with trepidation that there are some 600 hearsay reports of live sightings backlogged ... which have not had any evaluation. And there is no actual proof that this class of report has any less potential for yielding some usable information than do the first-hand sighting reports. The implications of this are obvious to the casual observer, but do not seem to be appreciated by the experts.

And:

There exists a mindset to debunk.... Within POW/MIA Division it has evolved over time as an investigative technique, whereby intense effort is initially focused on veracity of sources with a view toward discrediting them. This penchant has overridden the seeking of the corroborative data necessary to support the sighting. Reinforcing the mindset is the investigative audit trail, which has confirmed an inordinate number of originally promising sources to be fabricators.... In the main, sources who volunteer information have no ulterior motive, especially those relocated to the U.S. Sources were very young when they observed the event; others were in dire straits as a result of the war; and, in many cases, the sighting was a fleeting one. Therefore, sources should not be badgered when they volunteer information they do not recall well ... otherwise word gets around the refugee community and information dries up.

In other words, the DIA bullied those who came forth with information about MIAs; it called an "inordinate" number of them liars; it sought to discredit reports of live sightings. The Pentagon immediately classified the Gaines Report.

Keep in mind now what the report called the "mindset to debunk." It means an unwillingness to believe, and in the eight years since the Gaines Report, it has calcified into official policy. The DIA classifies live-sighting reports by category, ranging from 1A through 9B. The lower categories apply to reports still being evaluated; the upper categories apply to the final evaluations.

Here are the categories for the final evaluations; no others are allowed:

4 - This category represents an unresolved status. The analytical evaluation has been reviewed and approved by senior level management-no correlation or further action is possible.

5 - This category is used only by managerial personnel and indicates difficulties exist in follow-up.

6 - This category shows analytical evaluations reviewed and approved by senior level management which have been correlated to a known individual or incident.

6B - Analytical evaluations reviewed and approved by management which are determined to describe an unidentified individual who is not an American POW-MIA.

7 - This represents camp information only.

8 - This represents no POW-MIA information. At any time, the management can place a case in this category.

9 - This category indicates the analytical evaluation is approved as a fabrication.

9B - This category indicates the analytical findings are approved by management as a possible fabrication.

Obviously, there is a missing category: one that accepts a live-sighting report as accurate.

The DIA is programmed to discredit the possibility that anyone was left behind in Southeast Asia, or that any one remains there now. Its intellectual dishonesty has been stunning, and its investigative process a fraud. On occasion it has seemed criminal.

It is on the matter of a separate prison system that government orthodoxy about POWs begins to unravel completely.

In August 1987, a former South Vietnamese major turned up in Bangkok after being interned in Communist prisons, and was debriefed by the CIA. The major said that in December 1978, five years after Operation Homecoming, he had encountered an American in the Tan Lap prison in northern Vietnam. The American, he said, was lying down in a room near the camp dispensary where injured or sick prisoners were taken to rest. The major described the room and the building in which it was located precisely. He also described the American. According to the CIA report on the debriefing:

Source [the major] and the American were on the first floor. Source saw the American lying down inside this room. The American was alone. He was Caucasian, between 170 and centimeters tall and weighing about 70 kilograms. He had brown hair and a thick beard. He had a wound on his right ankle that was oozing blood and pus.

The American wore some sort of military trousers and a dirty, tattered red and white striped shirt. Source asked the American in English, "What is your name?" The American replied, "Jackson." Jackson then said, "You will stay here a long time." When source saw Jackson's wound, source took six penicillin tablets which were hidden in the cuffs of his trousers and offered them to Jackson. Jackson took only four. Jackson added that "there were 16 of us; 15 have gone out already." . . . A vehicle came to the front of this rest area the same evening and Jackson was taken away.

The CIA station in Bangkok passed the major's story on to the DIA in Washington in August. Following bureaucratic protocol, it also asked the DIA for permission to polygraph the major. If he passed the polygraph, of course, it would authenticate his story. What happened then is detailed in the cable traffic between the defense attaché in the Bangkok Embassy and the DIA in Washington. Stony Beach is intelligence jargon for the DIA; SIRO refers to the CIA:

Bangkok to Washington, September: *SIRO has transferred this case to Stony Beach, and strongly urges that source be polygraphed as soon as possible.... SIRO is very high on this source. The debriefer involved states source was very forthcoming, open, and seemed completely candid....* ***Bangkok to Washington, October:*** *Source has expressed his willingness to be polygraphed.... If this is unacceptable ... please advise by immediate message, and if possible, provide a rationale for not polygraphing source which can be provided to SIRO.*

Bangkok to Washington, October: *Request your immediate attention to this case. It's possible SIRO may simply conduct the poly without your input.*

Bangkok to Washington, October: *Can someone ...stay on top of this for us?*

Bangkok to Washington, October: *We have been queried several times by SIRO on the status of this case. In each case we have replied we are awaiting guidance from our headquarters. After six weeks, this wearing a bit thin.*

Washington to Bangkok, October: *Regret delay in response.... Liaison obligation ... may have forced our polygraph hand on this source.... Request major provide a complete and detailed description again of how these events ensued....*

Bangkok to Washington, November: *Source answered all questions in a direct manner. His answers were consistent when interviewed over a three-day period.*

Washington to Bangkok, November: *Do not polygraph source ... on his reported live sightings until further notice.*

Bangkok to Washington, February, 1988: Please advise status our request to polygraph source.

Washington to Bangkok, March: ... This source does not sustain the minimum level of plausibility that requires testing by polygraph....

In April, the DIA issued its official evaluation of the major's story; it called it a "fabrication." It said that former South Vietnamese commandos who had been in Tan Lap prison had never seen an American; therefore, the major could not have seen one, either. The DIA also said the man the major described could not have been wearing a red- striped shirt because "red-striped uniforms went out of use circa 1970." Furthermore, the DIA asserted:

A computer-assisted search of all missing personnel reveals only one unaccounted for individual whose first, middle or last name is Jackson; he was lost on 21 September 1969 under unusual circumstances from a medical treatment room within a hospital cantonment area in the 3d Marine Division area of South Vietnam. While we cannot preclude this individual from consideration, based on the above, it is likely that the source has fabricated his story.

Whatever the merits of the rest of the DIA's argument, the assertion that only one Jackson was missing was, if not a careless mistake, then certainly an outright lie. Besides the unfortunate Marine lost under unusual circumstances, three other Jacksons are missing in action. All three are classified as "KIA/body not recovered," and surely one of them is the man the major saw.

Tan Lap, where the major was held, has another distinction as well. It is one of five Vietnamese prisons--the others are Quyet Tien, Yen Bai, Ha Son Binh, and Thanh Hoa--where, according to reports from the boat people and others, POWs were buried in cemeteries in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The reports are credible; some are from former Vietnamese prisoners who say they dug the graves. Not one of the cemeteries, however, has been excavated by any of the teams now looking for MIA remains. Instead, the teams dig up old crash sites. The crash sites yield little or nothing; the cemeteries could yield a great deal--evidence, perhaps, about men who were murdered. It seems, though, that the Defense Department does not want to know.

The DIA's abysmal record led the six staff members on the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs who were charged with investigating intelligence reports to re-examine, in 1992, the 1,650 first-hand live-sighting reports. They dismissed the reports that seemed least plausible; they also dismissed the ones that had been correlated with known individuals, the Marine Robert Garwood, for example, who returned from Vietnam in 1979. Then they dismissed the reports in which the source said he had seen only a single man who might have been a prisoner. They reasoned that a single man, even if he appeared to be a prisoner, might have been a deserter or a straggler and not a POW.

That left the investigators with 929 first-hand live sightings, all involving two or more men allegedly seen in conditions indicating they were prisoners. The investigators then plotted the 929 sightings on a map of Southeast Asia, using pins to mark each one. Cambodia drew no pins; Laos and some areas of Vietnam drew only a few. Other areas of Vietnam, however, drew pins in clumps or clusters. In every place where there was a cluster, there was also a Vietnamese prison.

The investigators, who, for technical reasons, were using live-sighting reports that extended only through 1989, drew an obvious conclusion: **"that American prisoners of war have been held continuously after Operation Homecoming and remain[ed] in captivity in Vietnam and Laos as late as 1989."**

The conclusion, however, was not welcomed by the DIA, or even by most members of the Senate committee. On the morning the investigators were scheduled to present their report to the senators, one senator's aide let the Pentagon know what the investigators intended to say. A team from the DIA immediately showed up to rebut their presentation. The investigators protested; their briefing was supposed to be closed to outsiders. In a remarkable display of bad judgment, however, the senators voted, 7 to 2, to allow the DIA to attend the briefing.

By all accounts, what followed was contentious. The investigators and the team from DIA shouted at each other. Several senators shouted, too. John Kerry, the committee chairman, told one of the investigators that if the report ever leaked out, "you'll wish you'd never been born." Senator Kerry wants to normalize relations with Vietnam. When the briefing was over, Frances Zwenig, the committee's staff director, ordered that all copies of the investigators' report be destroyed. She also said she wanted their computer files purged. Zwenig, who is now the executive assistant to United Nations Ambassador **Madeleine Albright**, also wants to normalize relations with Vietnam.

In its 1,123-page final report on the hearings, the committee reached an evasive conclusion: **"We acknowledge that there is no proof that U.S. POWs survived, but neither is there proof that all of those who did not return had died. There is evidence, moreover, that indicates the possibility of survival, at least for a small number, after Operation Homecoming."**

The ambiguous language moves the cover-up to a higher plane. Buried in the 1,123 pages-and in thousands more pages of unpublished depositions-are pieces of information that sit like time bombs. Ambiguous language or not, the committee report confirms that satellite imagery has picked up the distress signals, and even the names, of downed American pilots on the ground. The distress signals--combinations of letters and numbers--appear in numerous photographs taken after, not before, Operation Homecoming. Characteristically, though, the Pentagon says they are not distress signals at all. Rather, it insists, they are combinations of lights, shadows, and vegetation that only appear to form **GX2527**, say, or **72TA88**.

(The Pentagon's word is not reassuring. In 1988, the CIA discovered a large "USA" etched in a rice paddy in northern Laos, along with what appeared to be the letter "K," a symbol used by downed pilots. A full four years later, the Defense Department sent a team to investigate. The owner of the rice paddy, it reported, said his son had "made the USA symbol by copying it from an envelope because he liked the shape of the letters.")

The satellite imagery is compelling. The GX in **GX2527**, for instance, are distress letters; 2527 is the secret four-digit number of Air Force Maj. Peter Matthes, who has been missing since 1969. The Pentagon says that the GX2527, which showed up on the ground near Vietnam's Dong Vai prison in a photograph taken in June 1992, was not a man-made distress signal but a photographic anomaly. However, [Larry Burroughs](#), a retired Air Force colonel who once headed the National Photographic Interpretation Center, the government's main imagery laboratory, insists it was man-made. Burroughs, who was brought in by the committee as a consultant, also found other, previously unidentified, distress signals among the satellite images. He also found the letters WRYE. The committee's final report dutifully notes this, but without indicating that WRYE is any more than a random collection of letters. In fact, Capt. Blair C. Wrye of the Air Force, shot down over North Vietnam on August 12, 1966, is an MIA.

Meanwhile, new information about the satellite imagery has come to light. It is now known, for example, that on June 5, 1992, a satellite picked up **S-E-R-E-X**, etched on the ground near Dong Vai prison. Major Henry M. Serex, an Air Force electronic warfare officer, was shot down over Vietnam on April 2, 1972. The Pentagon lists him as dead. The satellite pictures in themselves do not prove that anyone is still alive; some of the distress signals may have been made years ago. On the other hand, some of them may be new, and others perhaps are being carved out or etched into the ground even now. At the very least, they are further proof that a cover-up has been, and still is, in progress. We have broken faith with men who fought for their country, and we are being blighted by an ever-widening moral stain.

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