



POWs in Vietnam in '84, affidavit says

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WASHINGTON -- A retired intelligence officer who monitored intercepted communications from Vietnam for the National Security Agency claims in an affidavit to Congress that he has personal knowledge of more than 400 American prisoners being held there in 1984 and knew of many others transferred as laborers to the former Soviet Union.

Retired Air Force Tech. Sgt. Terrell A. Minarcin, a cryptolinguist and communications specialist for the NSA until July 1984, asserts in his sworn affidavit that between 200 and 300 American prisoners of war were shipped to the Soviet Union in 1983.

The charges contained in Mr. Minarcin's affidavit, obtained yesterday by Newsday, are potentially more explosive than those made by a former senior KGB official, retired Maj. Gen. Oleg Kalugin, that his espionage agency interrogated three American POWs in 1978, five years after both Hanoi and the U.S. government claimed that all living U.S. prisoners had been repatriated. About 2,000 Americans are still listed as missing in action.

General Kalugin, who was the KGB's counterintelligence chief, said that those questioned by his agency included a CIA agent, a Navy officer and an Air Force pilot. He is scheduled to give a deposition next week to a Senate select committee on POWs.

Before leaving Moscow, he told the Associated Press yesterday that the three "were the remnants -- several, a dozen or so -- who stayed in Vietnam long after the war was over. Why

the Vietnamese kept them, I don't know."

But Mr. Minarcin, who is also scheduled to give a deposition to the committee next week, said in his affidavit of November 1991 that from January 1983 until July 1984, "I found 436 live American POWs."

A congressional source, one of fewer than a half-dozen people who have seen the affidavit, said yesterday that Mr. Minarcin's claims are being taken seriously and are generally supported by affidavits submitted to the panel by one of his superiors at the NSA. The NSA, the largest of the U.S. intelligence agencies, intercepts and interprets many forms of communication.

Mr. Minarcin's affidavit gives precise numbers of POWs allegedly held in some prison camps. Asked in a telephone interview yesterday how he was aware of that, Mr. Minarcin said that much of the information had come from intercepted communications from prison guards. He said that they would often complain on radio or telephone. "Why are we here?" Mr. Minarcin said the Vietnamese guards would grouse. "The 19 [or other precise number] POWs should have been shot years ago."

As a cryptolinguist, his job was decoding or translating intercepted communications.

A Pentagon spokeswoman, Air Force Capt. Susan Strednansky, said that the Department of Defense had looked into the claims made by Mr. Minarcin but had found "no intelligence to support his claims."

In the interview, Mr. Minarcin, who now lives in Tacoma, Wash., said he was "not surprised" by the Pentagon's claim that it did not have the intelligence that Mr. Minarcin said was prepared by the NSA. He said that the NSA limited distribution of the intercepted communications and that he had never seen the Defense Intelligence Agency's special office on POWs included in the distribution list. Both the NSA and the DIA are run by the Pentagon.

One of the most troubling of Mr. Minarcin's claims in his affidavit is his assertion that between 200 and 300 American POWs were transferred in the spring of 1983 from Vietnam to the former Soviet Union as "slave laborers."

At the time, he said, he was a communications specialist on intelligence aircraft flying over the region.

He said that members of his flight crew confirmed that as many as 25,000 former South Vietnamese troops were also sent to the Soviet Union at the same time "to be used in various general construction efforts" there.