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Troubling Evidence on Vietnam POWs

Are the numbers higher than we were told?

By Peter Gary and Fred Coleman

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Late on a crisp Washington afternoon, exactly one week before Veterans Day, an unlikely trio stepped into the carpeted White House office of Anthony Lake, President Clinton's national security adviser. One was Carol Hrdlicka, just in from Kansas, the wife of an Air Force pilot who was shot down over Laos in 1965. Next was Barry Toll, a highly decorated Vietnam veteran and former Army intelligence officer. Last was George Carver. A quintessential Washington insider, the 63-year-old Carver had served three directors of the Central Intelligence Agency from 1966 to 1973 as special assistant for Vietnamese affairs.

The group handed Lake a packet of intelligence documents, then sat down to talk. They had a plan endorsed by several veterans groups, the three told Lake, a plan to heal the 20-year-old wounds of the Vietnam War. The evidence they had was from U.S. intelligence files and Soviet archives. It showed, they said, that Vietnam never returned a large number of American prisoners of war—a fact, they insisted, that both countries knew at the time. In the packet given to Lake was everything he needed to vet the evidence for himself: The U.S. files were identified not just by agency but by room number, file-cabinet serial numbers and drawer numbers. Lake was joined by Kent Wiedemann, the National Security Council officer for Asian affairs. The two made no promises, but they asked good questions. The trio pressed on: The president should appoint a commission to study the evidence from the U.S. and Soviet files and get the Vietnamese to admit to their deeds without recriminations. Only then could there be a final accounting of the prisoners and the missing from the Vietnam conflict. Only then could there be normal relations between the two countries.

Unanswered questions. If Vietnam did hold large numbers of unreturned prisoners, it would be a stunning revelation. The Vietnamese returned 591 American prisoners in Operation Homecoming in the spring of 1973. Since then, U.S. officials have pretty much agreed with the Nixon administration's contention that all the boys had come home. "The U.S. government is confident that the 591 POWs and 30-something bodies of men who died in captivity were all the prisoners held in North Vietnam," says Edward Ross, chief of the Defense Department's office for POW/MIA affairs. Vietnam says the same thing. Separately, the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs concluded that there is "no compelling evidence" of live American POWs in Indochina. The panel suggested that if men had been left behind, the numbers were small. Washington has presented Vietnam with a list of 135 cases of missing American servicemen whose fate the Vietnamese should know. With Vietnam's help, that list has now been reduced to only 80 unresolved cases.

In the past few months, however, an extraordinary body of evidence has emerged to throw into question all previous estimates of unresolved POW cases from the Vietnam War. The evidence is purely circumstantial, but it has created a burning new argument for families of the missing, while stoking their opposition to Clinton's plan for rapprochement with Vietnam. The developments include the following:

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A top-secret document discovered in January in Soviet military archives by Harvard researcher Stephen Morris. The document appears to be a report from a Soviet agent about a 1972 speech before the North Vietnamese Politburo in which a general reveals that North Vietnam is holding 1,205 American prisoners. Since the Vietnamese returned 591 American POWs in 1973—and 109 of them came from South Vietnamese prisons—the document suggests that North Vietnam never returned some 700 American prisoners.

A top-secret report from the Soviet military intelligence agency GRU that was released in September in Russia. In this document, a central committee secretary tells the Vietnam Workers' Party in late 1970 or early 1971 that while "we have published the names of 368" POWs [this was correct], the "total number of American aviator POWs ... is 735."

A U.S. intelligence report from a high-ranking North Vietnamese official named Tranh Minh Duc, who was a spy for the United States. In his report, Tranh says that shortly after the alleged "1,205 POWs" speech in 1972, the North Vietnamese Politburo decided to detain a number of prisoners to use later as bargaining chips with Washington. Recently, a cable surfaced from old State Department files that tends to support the "1,205" document. The cable refers to a British Labor Party leader named Clive Jenkins, who returned from a visit to Hanoi in October 1970. Vietnamese officials gave Jenkins the "impression" that there were about 900 American POWs in Vietnamese prisons, the State Department cable says.

U.S. News has learned that intelligence files contain references to four other cases in which sources in Indochina reported as many as 800 U.S. prisoners not accounted for in other estimates. One of these sources was a Japanese Buddhist monk who said he had shared a cell with three American servicemen in the mid-1980s. "I called them 'America,' they called me 'Jap,'" the monk said. He added that a Vietnamese security official told him there were 700 to 800 more Americans incarcerated.

Still more evidence tends to suggest that the number of American prisoners was higher than has been acknowledged. Two Vietnamese defectors well known to the U.S intelligence community spoke of large numbers of POWs. One of the defectors, a North Vietnamese army doctor named Dang Tan, was trotted out by the CIA in 1971 to talk of torture of American prisoners. In passing, he mentioned that he believed there were about 800 prisoners held by North Vietnam as long ago as 1967. In 1979, a second defector, a man named Le Dinh, told the U.S. government officials in Paris that while he worked for Vietnamese intelligence he heard at staff meetings that 700 Americans remained incarcerated in Vietnam after the war. Last week, a former North Vietnamese intelligence officer confirmed that number in an interview with U.S. News. He said the prisoners were separated into four groups. There was a large group of disabled prisoners and others approved for release, 11 U.S. intelligence operatives who were to be held for eventual trades for Soviet spies, an undetermined number of men who were to be ransomed for money or used to exert political influence and 33 "progressives," some of whom were given training to operate in the United States as double agents. Six actually undertook such missions, the former intelligence officer says.

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Numbers game. Could such stories be true? The answer may lie partly in the Pentagon's counting of the missing. After Vietnam returned the 591 American servicemen in Operation Homecoming, the Pentagon continued to list 2,421 men missing in Indochina. Of those, 1,118 had been declared killed in action during the war. That left 1,303 unaccounted for. About these men, the Pentagon said, it "had no information to show conclusively they are alive or dead." Some believe the survival rate of those 1,303 could have been as high as 50 percent. If the estimate is roughly accurate, it could mean that as many as 650 American servicemen survived the war but remain unaccounted for. The Pentagon's Ed Ross contends that every single case of the missing has been re-examined. That there were large numbers of POWs, he says, is impossible.

Air Force Lt. Gen. Eugene Tighe, who ran the Defense Intelligence Agency after the Vietnam War, is not dismissive. The DIA is the lead government agency on the POW issue. In an interview, Tighe said that many servicemen were listed as killed in action on the flimsiest of evidence. If the evidence was wrong, Tighe said, "you can go through the total number of missing through the whole war and come up with some fairly large numbers" of survivors.

Why might the Vietnamese have detained so many more Americans? Le Quang Khai is an 11-year veteran of Vietnam's foreign ministry who defected to the United States last year. During the Paris peace talks in 1973, Khai says, political opinion was split in Vietnam on what to do with American prisoners of war. Hard-liners wanted to hold them all until their demands for war reparations were satisfied; liberals wanted to release them to improve Vietnam's image. A compromise was reached to release some POWs—591 turned out to be the number, Khai says. The rest were detained, Khai says, because Vietnam believed that the Paris peace talks marked the beginning—not the end—of negotiations with Washington.

The negotiations went nowhere. President Nixon resigned in 1974, his administration stating that it had "no indication at this moment that there are any Americans alive in Indochina." Concludes Khai: "With no negotiations, there was no framework to return the POWs." Some, Khai says, were given to Hanoi's allies: "It is a fact that some [Americans] were sent to Russia, China and other countries." Some intelligence analysts question Khai's bona fides, but they say his story could be accurate. Says General Tighe: "The Vietnamese, the Russians and Chinese ... were intensely interested in getting hold of American prisoners."

The evidence that would support such a theory remains elusive. Barry Toll says that from 1973 to 1975 he had access to top-secret messages concerning POWs. Toll says he saw cables concerning the transfer by diplomatic aircraft of 10 to 20 American POWs to the Soviet Union from Hanoi. He says another message that was "seared in his memory" reported on 290 to 340 American servicemen the Pentagon had identified as prisoners in Laos. This cable, Toll says, concluded that the men had to be abandoned: Washington could not admit to their existence because the Nixon administration had conducted a secret and illegal war there. Toll says he resigned from his Pentagon post in 1975 to protest this abandonment. Investigators on the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs say they confirmed Barry Toll's military record and duties as an intelligence officer but were unable to corroborate the specific message traffic.

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Proving the case. Others insist the evidence exists. George Carver, who accompanied Toll to the White House meeting with Anthony Lake earlier this month, says that while he was at the CIA, he saw evidence that led him to believe the Vietnamese and Laotians were holding more U.S. prisoners than they admitted. Carver believes the document obtained from the Soviet archives mentioning 1,205 prisoners is authentic. Based on other intelligence Carver has seen, however, he believes there were only about 300 unreturned American prisoners. "I think the case for 300," Carver says, "is almost presentable to a jury."

To prove that case, however, solid evidence is needed to show that the unreturned POWs were held separately from the 591 who were returned. Critics of this "theory of a separate prison system" argue that no one has furnished such proof. John McCain is one skeptic. Now a Republican senator from Arizona, he was a prisoner in Vietnam for 5 1/2 years and heard nothing about separate prison systems. Former Rep. William "Billy" Hendon disagrees. A POW activist, Hendon has maps and satellite photos that he says prove several Vietnamese prison camps held large numbers of Americans. No men came back from those camps. Sen. Bob Smith, a New Hampshire Republican who has visited Vietnamese prisons where intelligence reports say Americans were held, agrees with Hendon. "I don't know if anyone is alive today, but I do know that we don't have all the facts." Concludes George Carver: "I want to hope and pray that there are some left alive, that's what my heart tells me. But my head tells me to be cautious. For [the Vietnamese], it might be far better to dispose of the evidence."

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