

## 10 Key Pieces of Evidence That Men Were Left Behind

1. In Paris, where the Vietnam peace treaty was negotiated, the United States asked Hanoi for the list of American prisoners to be returned, fearing that Hanoi would hold some prisoners back. The North Vietnamese refused, saying they would produce the list only after the treaty was signed. Nixon agreed with Kissinger that they had no leverage left, and Kissinger signed the accord on Jan. 27, 1973 without the prisoner list. When Hanoi produced its list of 591 prisoners the next day, U.S. intelligence agencies expressed shock at the low number. Their number was hundreds higher. *The New York Times* published a long, page-one story on Feb. 2, 1973 about the discrepancy, especially raising questions about the number of prisoners held in Laos, only nine of whom were being returned. The headline read, in part, “Laos POW List Shows 9 from U.S.—Document Disappointing to Washington as 311 Were Believed Missing.” And the story, by John Finney, said that other Washington officials “believe the number of prisoners [in Laos] is probably substantially higher.” The paper never followed up with any serious investigative reporting—nor did any other mainstream news organization.

2. Two Defense secretaries who served during the Vietnam War testified to the Senate POW committee in September 1992 that prisoners were not returned. James Schlesinger and Melvin Laird, both speaking at a public session and under oath, said they based their conclusions on strong intelligence data—letters, eyewitness reports, even direct radio contacts. Under questioning, Schlesinger chose his words carefully, understanding clearly the volatility of the issue: “I think that as of now that I can come to no other conclusion ... some were left behind.” This ran counter to what President Nixon told the public in a nationally televised speech on March 29, 1973, when the repatriation of the 591 was in motion: “Tonight,” Nixon said, “the day we have all worked and prayed for has finally come. For the first time in 12 years, no American military forces are in Vietnam. All our American POWs are on their way home.” Documents unearthed since then show that aides had already briefed Nixon about the contrary evidence. Schlesinger was asked by the Senate committee for his explanation of why President Nixon would have made such a statement when he knew Hanoi was still holding prisoners. He replied, “One must assume that we had concluded that the bargaining position of the United States ... was quite weak. We were anxious to get our troops out and we were not going to roil the waters...” This testimony struck me as a bombshell. The New York

Times appropriately reported it on page one but again there was no sustained follow-up by the Times or any other major paper or national news outlet.

**3.** Over the years, the DIA received more than 1,600 first-hand sightings of live American prisoners and nearly 14,000 second-hand reports. Many witnesses interrogated by CIA or Pentagon intelligence agents were deemed “credible” in the agents’ reports. Some of the witnesses were given lie-detector tests and passed. Sources provided me with copies of these witness reports, which are impressive in their detail. A lot of the sightings described a secondary tier of prison camps many miles from Hanoi. Yet the DIA, after reviewing all these reports, concluded that they “do not constitute evidence” that men were alive.

**4.** In the late 1970s and early 1980s, listening stations picked up messages in which Laotian military personnel spoke about moving American prisoners from one labor camp to another. These listening posts were manned by Thai communications officers trained by the National Security Agency (NSA), which monitors signals worldwide. The NSA teams had moved out after the fall of Saigon in 1975 and passed the job to the Thai allies. But when the Thais turned these messages over to Washington, the intelligence community ruled that since the intercepts were made by a “third party”—namely Thailand—they could not be regarded as authentic. That’s some Catch-22: the U.S. trained a third party to take over its role in monitoring signals about POWs, but because that third party did the monitoring, the messages weren’t valid.

Here, from CIA files, is an example that clearly exposes the farce. On Dec. 27, 1980, a Thai military signal team picked up a message saying that prisoners were being moved out of Attopeu (in southern Laos) by aircraft “at 1230 hours.” Three days later a message was sent from the CIA station in Bangkok to the CIA director’s office in Langley. It read, in part: “The prisoners ... are now in the valley in permanent location (a prison camp at Nhommarath in Central Laos). They were transferred from Attopeu to work in various places ... POWs were formerly kept in caves and are very thin, dark and starving.” Apparently the prisoners were real. But the transmission was declared “invalid” by Washington because the information came from a “third party” and thus could not be deemed credible.

**5.** A series of what appeared to be distress signals from Vietnam and Laos were captured by the government’s satellite system in the late 1980s and

early '90s. (Before that period, no search for such signals had been put in place.) Not a single one of these markings was ever deemed credible. To the layman's eye, the satellite photos, some of which I've seen, show markings on the ground that are identical to the signals that American pilots had been specifically trained to use in their survival courses—such as certain letters, like X or K, drawn in a special way. Other markings were the secret four-digit authenticator numbers given to individual pilots. But time and again, the Pentagon, backed by the CIA, insisted that humans had not made these markings. What were they, then? “Shadows and vegetation,” the government said, insisting that the markings were merely normal topographical contours like saw-grass or rice-paddy divider walls. It was the automatic response—shadows and vegetation. On one occasion, a Pentagon photo expert refused to go along. It was a missing man's name gouged into a field, he said, not trampled grass or paddy berms. His bosses responded by bringing in an outside contractor who found instead, yes, shadows and vegetation. This refrain led Bob Taylor, a highly regarded investigator on the Senate committee staff who had examined the photographic evidence, to comment to me: “If grass can spell out people's names and secret digit codes, then I have a newfound respect for grass.”

**6.** On Nov. 11, 1992, Dolores Alfond, the sister of missing airman Capt. Victor Apodaca and chair of the National Alliance of Families, an organization of relatives of POW/MIAs, testified at one of the Senate committee's public hearings. She asked for information about data the government had gathered from electronic devices used in a classified program known as PAVE SPIKE.

The devices were motion sensors, dropped by air, designed to pick up enemy troop movements. Shaped on one end like a spike with an electronic pod and antenna on top, they were designed to stick in the ground as they fell. Air Force planes would drop them along the Ho Chi Minh trail and other supply routes. The devices, though primarily sensors, also had rescue capabilities. Someone on the ground—a downed airman or a prisoner on a labor gang—could manually enter data into the sensor. All data were regularly collected electronically by U.S. planes flying overhead. Alfond stated, without any challenge or contradiction by the committee, that in 1974, a year after the supposedly complete return of prisoners, the gathered data showed that a person or people had manually entered into the sensors—as U.S. pilots had been trained to do—no less than 20 authenticator numbers that corresponded exactly to the classified authenticator numbers of 20 U.S. POWs who were lost in Laos. Alfond

added, according to the transcript, “This PAVE SPIKE intelligence is seamless, but the committee has not discussed it or released what it knows about PAVE SPIKE.”

McCain attended that committee hearing specifically to confront Alford because of her criticism of the panel’s work. He bellowed and berated her for quite a while. His face turning anger-pink, he accused her of “denigrating” his “patriotism.” The bullying had its effect—she began to cry. After a pause Alford recovered and tried to respond to his scorching tirade, but McCain simply turned away and stormed out of the room. The PAVE SPIKE file has never been declassified. We still don’t know anything about those 20 POWs.

7. As previously mentioned, in April 1993 in a Moscow archive, a researcher from Harvard, Stephen Morris, unearthed and made public the transcript of a briefing that General Tran Van Quang gave to the Hanoi politburo four months before the signing of the Paris peace accords in 1973.

In the transcript, General Quang told the Hanoi politburo that 1,205 U.S. prisoners were being held. Quang said that many of the prisoners would be held back from Washington after the accords as bargaining chips for war reparations. General Quang’s report added: “This is a big number. Officially, until now, we published a list of only 368 prisoners of war. The rest we have not revealed. The government of the USA knows this well, but it does not know the exact number ... and can only make guesses based on its losses. That is why we are keeping the number of prisoners of war secret, in accordance with the politburo’s instructions.” The report then went on to explain in clear and specific language that a large number would be kept back to ensure reparations.

The reaction to the document was immediate. After two decades of denying it had kept any prisoners, Hanoi responded to the revelation by calling the transcript a fabrication.

Similarly, Washington—which had over the same two decades refused to recant Nixon’s declaration that all the prisoners had been returned—also shifted into denial mode. The Pentagon issued a statement saying the document “is replete with errors, omissions and propaganda that seriously damage its credibility,” and that the numbers were “inconsistent with our own accounting.”

Neither American nor Vietnamese officials offered any rationale for who would plant a forged document in the Soviet archives and why they would do so. Certainly neither Washington nor Moscow—closely allied with

Hanoi—would have any motive, since the contents were embarrassing to all parties, and since both the United States and Vietnam had consistently denied the existence of unreturned prisoners. The Russian archivists simply said the document was “authentic.”

**8.** In his 2002 book, *Inside Delta Force*, retired Command Sgt. Maj. Eric Haney described how in 1981 his special forces unit, after rigorous training for a POW rescue mission, had the mission suddenly aborted, revived a year later, and again abruptly aborted. Haney writes that this abandonment of captured soldiers ate at him for years and left him disillusioned about his government’s vows to leave no men behind. “Years later, I spoke at length with a former highly placed member of the North Vietnamese diplomatic corps, and this person asked me point-blank: ‘Why did the Americans never attempt to recover their remaining POWs after the conclusion of the war?’” Haney writes. He continued, saying that he came to believe senior government officials had called off those missions in 1981 and 1982. (His account is on pages 314 to 321 of my paperback copy of the book.)

**9.** There is also evidence that in the first months of Ronald Reagan’s presidency in 1981, the White House received a ransom proposal for a number of POWs being held by Hanoi in Indochina. The offer, which was passed to Washington from an official of a third country, was apparently discussed at a meeting in the Roosevelt Room attended by Reagan, Vice President Bush, CIA director William Casey, and National Security Adviser Richard Allen. Allen confirmed the offer in sworn testimony to the Senate POW committee on June 23, 1992.

Allen was allowed to testify behind closed doors and no information was released. But a *San Diego Union-Tribune* reporter, Robert Caldwell, obtained the portion relating to the ransom offer and reported on it. The ransom request was for \$4 billion, Allen testified. He said he told Reagan that “it would be worth the president’s going along and let’s have the negotiation.” When his testimony appeared in the *Union-Tribune*, Allen quickly wrote a letter to the panel, this time not under oath, recanting the ransom story and claiming his memory had played tricks on him. His new version was that some POW activists had asked him about such an offer in a meeting that took place in 1986, when he was no longer in government. “It appears,” he said in the letter, “that there never was a 1981 meeting about the return of POW/MIAs for \$4 billion.”

But the episode didn’t end there. A Treasury agent on Secret Service duty in the White House, John Syphrit, came forward to say he had overheard

part of the ransom conversation in the Roosevelt Room in 1981, when the offer was discussed by Reagan, Bush, Casey, Allen, and other cabinet officials.

Syphrit, a veteran of the Vietnam War, told the committee he was willing to testify, but they would have to subpoena him. Treasury opposed his appearance, arguing that voluntary testimony would violate the trust between the Secret Service and those it protects. It was clear that coming in on his own could cost Syphrit his career. The committee voted 7 to 4 not to subpoena him.

In the committee's final report, dated Jan. 13, 1993 (on page 284), the panel not only chastised Syphrit for his failure to testify without a subpoena ("The committee regrets that the Secret Service agent was unwilling ..."), but noted that since Allen had recanted his testimony about the Roosevelt Room briefing, Syphrit's testimony would have been "at best, uncorroborated by the testimony of any other witness." The committee omitted any mention that it had made a decision not to ask the other two surviving witnesses, Bush and Reagan, to give testimony under oath. (Casey had died.)

**10.** In 1990, Col. Millard Peck, a decorated infantry veteran of Vietnam then working at the DIA as chief of the Asia Division for Current Intelligence, asked for the job of chief of the DIA's Special Office for Prisoners of War and Missing in Action. His reason for seeking the transfer, which was not a promotion, was that he had heard from officials throughout the Pentagon that the POW/MIA office had been turned into a waste-disposal unit for getting rid of unwanted evidence about live prisoners—a "black hole," these officials called it.

Peck explained all this in his telling resignation letter of Feb. 12, 1991, eight months after he had taken the job. He said he viewed it as "sort of a holy crusade" to restore the integrity of the office but was defeated by the Pentagon machine. [The four-page, single-spaced letter](#) was scathing, describing the putative search for missing men as "a cover-up."

Peck charged that, at its top echelons, the Pentagon had embraced a "mind-set to debunk" all evidence of prisoners left behind. "That national leaders continue to address the prisoner of war and missing in action issue as the 'highest national priority,' is a travesty," he wrote. "The entire charade does not appear to be an honest effort, and may never have been. ... Practically all analysis is directed to finding fault with the source. Rarely has there been any effective, active follow through on any of the sightings,

nor is there a responsive 'action arm' to routinely and aggressively pursue leads."

"I became painfully aware," his letter continued, "that I was not really in charge of my own office, but was merely a figurehead or whipping boy for a larger and totally Machiavellian group of players outside of DIA ... I feel strongly that this issue is being manipulated and controlled at a higher level, not with the goal of resolving it, but more to obfuscate the question of live prisoners and give the illusion of progress through hyperactivity." He named no names but said these players are "unscrupulous people in the Government or associated with the Government" who "have maintained their distance and remained hidden in the shadows, while using the [POW] Office as a 'toxic waste dump' to bury the whole 'mess' out of sight." Peck added that "military officers ... who in some manner have 'rocked the boat' [have] quickly come to grief."

Peck concluded, "From what I have witnessed, it appears that any soldier left in Vietnam, even inadvertently, was, in fact, abandoned years ago, and that the farce that is being played is no more than political legerdemain done with 'smoke and mirrors' to stall the issue until it dies a natural death." The disillusioned colonel not only resigned but asked to be retired immediately from active military service. The press never followed up.