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Exploding the POW Cover-Up

Last October 29th, the Minority Staff of the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, under the direction of Senators Jesse Helms (R-NC) and Charles Grassley (R-IA), released a bombshell: its ***Interim Report on the Southeast Asian POW/MIA Issue***. The result of more than a year of intensive research by the two senators and their staff investigators, the report confirmed what many families of those who were left behind in Vietnam had long feared: In spite of the government's repeated public assurances that it was doing "everything possible" to account for all American POWs and MIAs in Vietnam, for more than 17 years the official U.S. government policy has been to write off all POWs and MIAs as dead, and to ignore, suppress and discredit all evidence to the contrary. (See THE NEW AMERICAN, February 12, 1991, "Official Policy: Abandon POWs")

Some Still Alive?

Finally, after nearly two decades of dealing with government cover-ups, lying, dissembling and stonewalling, the families of the more than 2,000 POWs and MIAs still unaccounted for may at long last take hope that the truth will become known.

On May 23rd, Senator Jesse Helms released the Minority Staffs much-anticipated full report. Entitled ***An Examination of U.S. Policy Toward POW/MIAs***, the 100-page document goes much further than the scorching interim report in indicting the government's policy of abandoning our servicemen imprisoned or missing in Southeast Asia. It also offers hope, based upon evidence contained in the Department of Defense's classified live-sightings files, that some of these Americans may still be alive.

In his introduction to the new report, Helms reminded his colleagues of the "very disturbing" conclusions of last fall's interim report. "After examining hundreds of documents relating to the raw intelligence, and interviewing may families and friends of POW/MIAs," wrote Helms, "the Minority Staff concluded that, despite public pronouncements to the contrary, the real, internal policy of the U.S. government was to act upon the presumption that all MIAs were dead." As a result of this policy, "any evidence that suggested an MIA might be alive was uniformly and arbitrarily rejected, and all efforts were directed towards finding and identifying remains of dead personnel, even though the U.S. government's techniques of identification were inadequate and deeply flawed."

Since April 1973, when 691 POWs were repatriated in Operation Homecoming, the government has maintained that it has "no evidence that there were any more POWs still alive in all of Indochina." Most Americans never believed it. Various polls have continued to show that more than 60 percent of the general public and more than 80 percent of Vietnam veterans believe that American POW/MIAs are still alive in Southeast Asia.

The government's policy of sealing off all POW/MIA evidence under the cloak of "national security" has only added to the public distrust of all official pronouncements on the matter. Until Helms and Grassley gained limited access in 1989, the Defense Department's 11,700 files relating to POW/MIAs, including 1,400 firsthand, live-sighting reports, had remained off-limits to all congressional or other independent examination. After a year of intensive scrutiny of hundreds of files, the senators and their staff investigators concluded that U.S. officials had engaged in a pattern of activities that included: "misleading Congressional inquiries"; "concealing information"; "misinterpreting or manipulating data"; "possible intimidation of witnesses"; "discrediting live-sighting reports"; "dismissal of credible evidence through technicalities"; and "exaggerating or mishandling forensic data."

70 Years of Treachery

The betrayal of American POWs did not begin with Vietnam. Part I of the newly-released report presents a historical perspective on POW/MIAs that will shock most Americans. Based in large measure on the groundbreaking research of Vietnam veterans John M.G. Brown and Thomas Ashworth, the report presents compelling evidence demonstrating that American POWs abandoned in communist regimes, from World War I through Vietnam, number in the tens of thousands. After analyzing the fate of U.S. POW/MIAs in the hands of the Bolshevik regime after World War I, the Soviet regime after World War II, the North Korean regime after the Korean War, and the Vietnamese regime after the Vietnam War, Helms observed:

In each case, the same dismaying scenario appears: On the Communist side, the regimes denied holding U.S. prisoners, contrary to many credible reports, while in fact they were holding the U.S. POW/MIAs as slave laborers and as reserve bargaining chips to get diplomatic recognition and financial assistance. On the U.S. side, our government downplayed or denied the reports of POW/MIAs, and failed to take adequate steps to prove or disprove the reports, while elements in our government pursued policies intended to make diplomatic recognition and financial support of the revolutionary regimes possible.

"The fact is," says the report, "that Soviet and Asian Communist regimes view POW/MIAs, living or dead, not as a problem of humanitarian concern but as leverage for political bargaining, as an involuntary source of technical assistance, and as forced labor."

At the end of World War II, Stalin followed the example of Lenin and kept thousands of American GIs in the gulag. And our government quietly acquiesced. On June 1, 1945, according to the Senate Minority Staff report, "the U.S. government's public position was that most American GIs taken prisoner have come home and been repatriated, even though the classified cable traffic for the previous fortnight was reporting between 15,000 and 20,000 still held." The U.S. government simply consigned these Americans to the memory hole — and to deprivation and death in Stalin's prisons and slave labor camps. Thousands more were abandoned to the communists after the Korean War.

Exposing the Sham

Sooner or later, someone on the inside was bound to become so revolted by this scandalous betrayal of our fighting men and our national honor that he would come forward to expose the whole rotten mess. It now appears that has happened. On March 28th of this year, Colonel Millard A. Peck, chief of the Defense Intelligence Agency's Special Office for Prisoners of War and Missing in Action, left his job after stapling a startling memorandum to his office door. The colonel charged in his memo that higher-ups "hidden in the shadows" obstructed his efforts, while using his office "as a 'toxic waste dump' to bury the whole 'mess' out of sight and mind." Peck, who had taken over the POW/MIA post eight months earlier, also wrote, "I was not 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."

"That National leaders continue to address the prisoner of war and missing in action issue as the 'highest national priority' is a travesty," Peck declared in his parting missive. "The mindset to 'debunk'" all live sightings pervaded the POW/MIA office "at all levels," he said. "Practically all analysis is directed to finding fault with the source," charged Peck. "Rarely has there been any effective, active follow through on any of the sightings …. "

Peck's command of the POW/MIA Special Office capped an exceptional Army career, including three combat tours in Vietnam, for which he was awarded numerous medals for gallantry, including the nation's second-highest award, the Distinguished Service Cross. He had volunteered for the job, he said, with the intention of "refurbishing the image and honor of DIA" and resolving the POW/MIA issue, which he viewed as a "holy crusade."

On May 30th, Peck testified before the House Foreign Affairs subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, chaired by Representative Stephen Solarz (D-NY). About half of the hearing was public and was shown over C-SPAN. The remaining testimony involved classified information and was taken in closed session. As expected, Representatives Solarz and Robert Lagomarsino (R-CA), both of whom support "fast-track" normalization with Vietnam, immediately began a line of questioning designed to discredit Peck. Soon after the closed session began, Solarz exited the hearing room to tell reporters that Peck had offered nothing to substantiate his earlier charges.

But, according to Senator Robert Smith (R-NH), "That's simply not accurate." Smith, a Vietnam vet who pursued the POW/MIA issue as a member of the House, notes that Solarz attended only "about two-thirds of the open session and was only there for about a half hour of the closed session." Peck did indeed "provide new information and important, strong testimony… and he did name names" of officials who impeded the effort to resolve the POW/MIA issue, Smith told THE NEW AMERICAN. But Solarz and Lagomarsino did not want to hear what Peck had to say, and they didn't want anyone else to hear him either. "They immediately tried to discredit him, as they had earlier done to General Tighe, Captain "Red" McDaniel, Representative Bill Hendon, myself… anyone who challenges the official position," said Smith.

“Very Courageous Officer”

Captain Eugene “Red” McDaniel, a highly decorated Vietnam veteran who flew 81 missions in Indochina and spent six years as a prisoner of the communists, sees Peck as a “very courageous officer” with high credibility, and one who will not be easily dismissed. “His testimony is very credible, and it corroborates that there has been an enormous cover-up,” he told THE NEW AMERICAN. McDaniel, who is founder and president of the American Defense Institute in Alexandria, Virginia, remains “firmly convinced there are live POWs still over there.” He believes that Peck’s revelations will help to set them free. He also believes that passage of Robert Smith’s Senate Resolution 82, to establish a Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs, is critically important to the final resolution of this issue. “The Select Committee will have subpoena powers,” says McDaniel, “which will enable it to require present and former government officials to appear and testify under oath. The Committee will also be able to subpoena government POW/MIA documents.”

Hearings on S. Res. 82 are scheduled for July 25th in the Senate Rules Committee. After decades of cover-up, there is now a glimmer of hope that the truth about our MIAs and POWs will finally prevail.