



Written by **Barbara Mullen Keenan**

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Our Forgotten Prisoners in Laos

Twenty two years ago this month the first American airman was shot down over North Vietnam and taken prisoner. Twenty years ago my husband, a Marine aviator, was shot down over Laos. In the years that have followed, the American prisoners have been political pawns. During the Vietnam war they were used by the Nixon administration to stir up anti-Communist fervor. In the end, a group of them, secret prisoners taken as a result of our secret war in Laos, were left out of a peace treaty and abandoned by President Nixon and Henry Kissinger.

Thirteen years ago the United States signed a peace accord with North Vietnam. We did not sign a peace treaty with the Laotian Communists, though the Pathet Lao acknowledged holding large numbers of POWs throughout the war. Families of men missing in Laos expected that further negotiations would follow and that the President would demand their return. Instead, both Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger announced that all of the prisoners had been released.

Our aviators flew daily missions over both North Vietnam and Laos. 591 POWs were released from North Vietnam in 1973; not one came home from Laos. And yet families of men captured in Laos were expected to accept this illogical conclusion without protest. Richard Nixon has never admitted publicly that men were left behind in the jungles and caves of Laos.

The perpetuation of this silence throughout the Ford and Carter administrations was all the more bewildering to the families. The POWs once riding a crest of popularity were now considered a liability. Our leaders, both hawks who sent our men into battle and doves who wanted to end the war, distanced themselves from anything having to do with the Vietnam conflict. Vietnam veterans can attest to that. These leftover prisoners were no exception. Though sometimes ignored and other times treated as lunatics, the MIA families have never given up their quest for answers or their struggle to free men still held captive.

I was horrified that my husband and the other prisoners in Laos were so easily forgotten at the end of the war. By 1976 I had run out of ideas. I felt I couldn't write another useless letter to another disinterested public official. In 1977, during President Carter's Administration, the Defense Department legally changed the status of all MIAs to *killed in action* even though their files are still stamped *missing in action*. Though I went on with my life in the best way I could, I couldn't dispel frightening thoughts about those men we deserted in Southeast Asia.

In desperation I decided to write our story in the form of a book, hoping someone would publish it and someone would read it and someone would care. The book tells about my battle to fight for the life of my husband while raising our two young sons; with personal changes, it could be the story of 2,500 other families. The title **Every Effort** is taken from the first telegram I received from the Marine Corps, which assured me that every effort was being made to locate my husband. Now, twenty years later, I know every effort was not and is not being made to free him and others



whose greatest crime was to serve their country without question. I don't know how we can ask future generations to serve in our armed forces if we treat our military personnel with so little dignity and concern. My youngest son, who is much like his father, came home enthused after seeing the movie **Top Gun**. "I'd like to fly one of those planes," he said, and then as an afterthought added, "But I suppose they'd just let me rot in some jungle if I got shot down."

Ronald Reagan was the first President to break "the silent code" on live POWs, albeit in couched terms: "We cannot preclude the possibility of Americans being held." Not long after taking office, Mr. Reagan said the POW issue "is the highest national priority of my administration." We wanted to believe this, but the Reagan rhetoric is not backed up by real action.

Let's look at some examples: In the White House this "highest national priority" is handled by a Lieutenant Colonel Richard Childress. Wouldn't an issue of such high priority demand the attention of our highest ranking officials? Americans know when an issue is of highest national priority. The case for Libyan bombing, Star Wars and Contra aid is presented by cabinet secretaries. The President himself intercedes when a cause moves him personally.

And, if this topic means so much to this President, why then does former UN Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick now say that it was never *once* discussed in any National Security Council or Cabinet meeting she attended during her four and one half years in this administration?

Out in the field the same lack of commitment exists: Opportunities for gaining firsthand information on POWs are lost because there are only two full-time U.S. government personnel assigned to interviewing the thousands of people escaping Laos and Vietnam.

Unfortunately, many of the families no longer view Mr. Reagan as any different from his predecessors. In fact, they feel he has cruelly raised hopes with false promises. They do not accept an enumeration of meetings in Hanoi and the slow return of doubtful remains as proof of progress.

People within the administration privately admit, as did National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane, in a closed meeting last fall, that "there have to be live Americans there." This is not enough for the families. Ronald Reagan has had six years, longer than any other President, to gain the release of these POWs.

The fact is: American POWs were left behind in 1973. In the expert opinion of former Defense Intelligence Agency Director General Eugene Tighe, these men are still being held against their will. Despite this statement and convincing evidence including radio intercepts, photos and refugee statements supported by polygraph tests (which this administration puts such stock in), these men remain in captivity.

Someone should remind the President that he is the Commander-in-Chief of *all* the military, *including* the men still held in Laos and Vietnam. They are truly the last American victims of a tragic war. The President should really make them the "highest national priority" by designating a fresh team of people whose goal is not to disprove testimony and discredit witnesses but instead to act with courage at the highest diplomatic level to bring these brave men home — at last.