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Vietnam Veterans Say, “Bring ‘Em Back Alive!”

Unquestionably, the live prisoner of war issue is of greatest concern to Vietnam veterans. As the comrades in arms who fought alongside those still missing, we have a legitimate interest in the subject at hand.

It would be useful to remind America that men who were prisoners were, in fact, abandoned by the government at the conclusion of the war. We need only turn to the **New York Times** for January 29, 1973 to note the following: “The Pentagon lists 6 prisoners and 311 men missing in Laos, but officials believe that the number of prisoners held by the Pathet Lao guerrillas is probably substantially higher.” Not one of those men came home.

According to a recent affidavit by an intelligence professional attached to the National Security Agency in the early 1970s, he compiled from names elicited from intercepts of North Vietnamese communications a list of 300 names. Of those known to be alive on the list, only five percent returned. There is reason to believe that this list was not all-inclusive with respect to Vietnam.

It is not unreasonable, therefore, to state that perhaps one-half of all prisoners of war detained in Indochina in 1973 were not returned. We therefore submit that the burden should be on those who do not believe in the continued existence of live prisoners to prove their case. The presumption should be that a large number of men, subject to actuarial and other mortality factors, are still alive and in captivity.

There is a widespread perception in the Indochinese refugee community that U.S. authorities are not genuinely interested in live POW intelligence. The principal reason for this perception is the insensitivity and degrading harassment to which they are all too frequently subjected by Defense Intelligence Agency personnel.

Refugees providing information are regarded with suspicion and are often asked insulting questions. Frequently heard is the tactless rejoinder, “Aren’t you just doing this to get to the U.S.?” (This even in cases where the refugee has already opted for permanent resident status in another country.) Shouting is not uncommon. Refugees have been isolated for an inordinate period of time.

Refugees providing credible information do not receive any words of appreciation from their interrogators. Further, although many of the refugees have family at risk should the Communists learn of their disclosures, confidentiality is frequently jeopardized. Examples include: correspondence with refugees in the camps using conspicuous U.S. government envelopes, discussion of other refugees by name in front of an informant, and in some cases failure to delete the informant’s name from Freedom of Information requests.

Unfortunately, the “mind-set to debunk” is alive and well. In reviewing declassified refugee reports, we are struck by how often the analysis is devoted to discrediting the sightings. Further,



refugees whose polygraph testing indicates deception in one area of their knowledge will be discredited in their entirety. If their data were retained and cross-checked against other reports, at least part of their information might prove valuable.

The message is being broadcast with increasing frequency that individuals in the private sector with POW information should turn it over to responsible government officials. Ideally, this procedure should be followed. Unfortunately, the real state of affairs demonstrates that government officials are unwilling to receive the intelligence.

A dramatic example came to light in recent weeks. Tom Ashworth, a Vietnam veteran who developed a close relationship with the Hmong refugee community, learned from individual refugees of sightings of American POWs, and also obtained valuable background intelligence on the subject matter. The Defense Intelligence Agency showed little or no interest in the subject, and when Ashworth persisted, he was warned that if he continued his efforts, he would be discredited.

Presumably, we all desire the same thing: to bring our live men home. The walls of distrust must come down.