Poisoned Hope: MIAs, Mythmaking, and Trauma in Defeated Nations

By

Patrick Gallagher

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines a postwar phenomenon that it describes as the secret camp myth. That myth arises from uncertainty about the fates of POWs and MIAs, and its advocates argue that the MIAs must survive in secret captivity after the war. This dissertation examines two historical examples of this phenomenon: West Germany following World War II, and the US after the Vietnam War. These two examples have been examined individually, but have not been compared extensively, and prior historiography has only examined each within the context of German and American histories of those wars. This dissertation argues that both cases are national variations of a larger phenomenon, and reactions to the traumas of personal loss and national defeat. The inability to mourn loss in the absence of a corpse drives the creation of the myth, and the political desire to reconceptualize MIAs into nationally redemptive war heroes sustains it. Consequently, such a comparative examination of two secret camp myths necessarily is both an examination of mourning and memorialization, and also the creation of national mythology from morally ambiguous defeats. The two examples differ in that the West German secret camp myth only lasted approximately ten years, while the American version persists in diminished form to this day. The dissertation argues that the main reason for this divergence lies in the politicization of each myth, and how figures on the American right artificially sustained belief in MIA survival and abandonment in a way that has no German equivalent. It comes to this conclusion by examining national casualty statistics, governmental initiatives and hearings, private POW/MIA activist groups, and public sentiments on men who remained unaccounted for following these defeats.
Poisoned Hope - Introduction

Wars breed myths, and each war shapes its attendant mythology through its course and conclusion. One of the biggest determining factors to shape war myths is whether a given nation is among the victors or the vanquished. For the former, wartime mythology often tends toward triumphant validation of whatever national virtues presumably led to victory, while the latter often tell stories and invent myths to explain their defeat, or find some way to cushion its impact. In some cases, defeated nations take this further and create myths centered on prisoners of war and those missing in action to justify the lost struggle, mute national guilt for wartime crimes, and in extreme cases reject the very verdict of defeat itself. Born from POW/MIA activism, such myths hold that some MIAs survive in secret, undisclosed camps during and after the war, kept there by the enemy for various reasons.

Secret camp myths evolve from two parallel needs within defeated nations, each of which serves to reinforce the other. The first is born from the hopes of relatives of the missing, who often find themselves unable to mourn in the absence of a corpse or other conclusive proof of death. Trapped in a no-man’s land of grief, these family members cling to the idea that their missing men cannot be dead, but rather must survive in secret enemy prison camps. Believers in secret camps can become so personally invested that seemingly no amount of evidence against the existence of such camps is sufficient to change their minds, nor is any length of time without the return of the missing. The second is the need many feel to find something redemptive from the larger war experience. In particular, morally ambiguous wars make the celebration of traditional war heroes difficult, and so those searching for substitutes seize upon the figures of POWs and MIAs as acceptable replacements. By so doing, advocates of the alleged secret camps
in which MIAs supposedly survive emphasize the suffering of those missing men as a way to highlight the real or imagined victimization of the nation at large. By so doing, such advocates create a social space in which those who want to imagine themselves as victim-by-proxy of their own wars can do so. This process creates something redemptive for a defeated nation, and also appropriates the suffering of the victims of that nation’s wartime atrocities, while simultaneously downplaying whatever responsibility the nation had for the war to begin with. Therefore, the construction of secret camp myths necessarily involves distorting the truth about the wars that spawn them, and entails a retreat from reality both on a personal and national level.

This dissertation presents two case studies of the secret camp myth: West Germany in the aftermath of the Second World War, and the United States after the Vietnam War. In the former instance the myth was directed specifically at the Eastern Front and men missing in the Soviet Union, rather than those captured by the Western Allies. The American secret camp myth focuses on all US servicemen missing from war in Southeast Asia. Though both are predated by a French secret camp myth from the First World War, these two instances have enough in common to be useful for the student of war and its aftermath. Specifically, both nations suffered extreme trauma by losing their respective wars, and both had a difficult time in finding redemptive elements from their wartime experiences, in particular uncompromised war heroes.¹ Lacking such heroes, both settled upon POWs and MIAs as suitable substitutes, and by focusing on them both West Germany and the United States minimized their own feelings of war guilt, and re-cast themselves as victims of wars they had started.

Though the cases are similar there are also differences, particularly with regard to the longevity of the American myth compared with the relatively short life of the German one. Indeed, German calls to bring the captives home had concluded by the mid-1950s at the latest,

¹ H. Bruce Franklin, *Vietnam and other American Fantasies*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 2000), 188.
while to this day no self-respecting VFW or American Legion post is without its black POW/MIA flag.\textsuperscript{2} The likelihood of American MIA survival was considerably less plausible than in the German instance, particularly because the Soviet Union did in fact retain large numbers of German prisoners following the Second World War, and was at times inconsistent in reporting just how many and which prisoners it still held. Contrarily, there is no credible evidence that Vietnam covertly kept any American prisoners following the end of that war, and yet that version of the myth survives. It is a striking inversion: in the case where it was more plausible to believe in secret camps, such a belief did not last long, whereas in the instance where continued captivity was not all that likely, people adhered to such a belief for decades. This dissimilarity becomes all the more stark when one considers the actual numbers of missing for each nation. Germany's missing and unaccounted for numbered just over two million, the vast majority of whom disappeared somewhere on the Eastern Front.\textsuperscript{3} America's missing in Southeast Asia reach only 2,255 in total. Even this number is a bit misleading, since just under half of these, 1,095, were never truly MIA or POW, but were instead known KIAs whose bodies were never recovered. Official reports on these men “Killed in Action – Bodies not Recovered” sometimes included them alongside actual MIAs, and sometimes not, further muddying waters already made murky by political demands for this or that man's status to be shifted from the KIA to MIA category.\textsuperscript{4} By examining the secret camp myth as a larger phenomenon, rather than as something specific to either Germany or the United States, this dissertation will cast light on why the one concluded, and the other persisted despite these disparities.

Germany fought a particularly atrocious war in all theaters, and especially on the Eastern Front. The US, similarly though not equivalently, compromised its own image by the behavior

\textsuperscript{2} H. Bruce Franklin, \textit{MIA, or, Mythmaking in America}, (New York: Lawrence Hill, 1992), 5-6.
\textsuperscript{3} Rüdiger Overmans, \textit{Deutsche militärische Verluste im Zweiten Weltkrieg}, (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2004), 288-289.
\textsuperscript{4} Franklin, \textit{MIA, or, Mythmaking in America}, 11.
and official policies of its military in Southeast Asia throughout that long conflict. Though never
a planned war of extermination like Germany’s war in Eastern Europe, America’s war in
Southeast Asia included routine atrocity and massacre, despite a sort of collective amnesia which
has since confined memories of such behavior to only well publicized events like My Lai.5 Each
country’s respective civilian populations thus found their returning veterans to be less than ideal
figures for national canonization, albeit not for exactly the same reasons. By the end of America’s
direct involvement in Vietnam in 1973 popular support had turned decisively against the war and
those who had fought it, though never as contemptuously as is still commonly believed.6 German
veterans existed under the pervasive shadow of the Third Reich’s atrocities, despite efforts to
whitewash the actions of the regular army. In both cases, regular veterans served as unpleasant
reminders of things better forgotten. Contrarily, activist groups and concerned individuals
elevated POWs and MIAs to hero status by emphasizing how their heroism lay in their passive
endurance of enemy captivity, the barbarities of which helped to downplay any involvement
those men may have had in war crimes.

Germany’s partition into East and West following the Second World War led to two very
different attitudes toward veterans. In East Germany, Soviet pressure, political ideology, and
anti-fascism as founding state doctrine all contributed to clamp down on any major idolization of
returnees, and impeded the creation of social space in which POWs or MIAs could be recast as
heroes. By contrast, West Germans found POWs in Soviet camps much more appealing since
West Germans could identify with their suffering, and thus reimagine themselves through those
prisoners as fellow victims of the war. When substantial numbers of West German prisoners
continued to suffer in communist hands after the end of regular repatriations, civilians at home

13-14.
6 Franklin, Vietnam and other American Fantasies, 62.
called for their return using language and images that borrowed significantly from Germany’s own wartime camp victims. In East Germany, the official line was that such men were justly convicted war criminals, who did not deserve any such veneration. A result, only West Germany had the political and social space for such a myth to develop, and no countervailing wartime narrative that might impede such development.

However, returning POWs at times proved to be less than ideal figures for such a transformation. They retained first hand knowledge of the realities of both the war and captivity, and could disrupt the careful construction of new national mythology via unwanted contradiction. POW/MIA activists found MIAs to be more compelling figures for national canonization. Conceptually, they were prisoners who never returned and archetypal soldier-victims, sublimely silent heroes-at-a-distance of uncomfortable wars that produced very little else worthy of pride or praise.

Americans and West Germans thus found the idea of secret camps attractive in more than one way. On a personal level, those trapped in the no-man’s land of grief could hold out hope that their missing man was somehow still alive in the secret camps and would come home someday, despite the increasing improbability of that ever occurring. On a larger level, those determined to wrest something useful from painful defeats could point to the alleged suffering of the men in the secret camps as evidence of how the enemy really was the villain of the war, and in some cases even how the aggressor nation was victimized by the war it started. Examining the ways these phenomena came about requires entering into the historiography of wartime suffering and loss, with a particular eye towards the progressing totality of victimization of soldiers through the twentieth century.7

The historiography of the German secret camp myth is bound to the larger story of the

German experience of the Second World War. More specifically, most work done on the subject has been part of larger studies on POWs and prisoner experiences, or just of the war experience generally. The missing do not seem to have warranted much study in their own right, so they often appear as a subordinate part of the prisoner/returning veteran story. Erich Maschke and Kurt W. Böhme's massive fifteen volume *Zur Geschichte der deutschen Kriegsgefangenen des Zweiten Weltkrieges* remains a core work to which virtually all other writings on the subject refer, and it established the pattern of treating MIAs as an adjunct to the more-important POW story, itself a minority aspect of the larger narrative of the war. More recent works have largely adhered to this formula, as in James Diehl's *The Thanks of the Fatherland: German Veterans after the Second World War*, which focuses on how West Germany struggled to incorporate returning POWs. Of specific interest here is how he details the evolution of POW/MIA advocacy groups such as the Verband der Heimkehrer, one of the early voices that called for diplomatic pressure on the Soviets to return their remaining prisoners, both real and suspected.8

Nevertheless, within this qualified context there are some works that examine the German secret camp myth. Frank Biess' *Homecomings: Returning POWs and the Legacies of Defeat in Postwar Germany* explicitly mentions the concept – that hundreds of thousands of German soldiers remained in clandestine captivity following the purported release by the Soviets of all non-convicted POWs – as one of the convenient fictions of the early Cold War. Biess describes how many in West Germany embraced the idea of secret prison camps, bolstered in this belief by discrepancies in Soviet reporting on numbers of prisoners held as well as by opportunistic politicians and advocates who knowingly inflamed hopes for MIA survival. Above and beyond any personal reasons for needing the myth to be true, adherents also found the myth

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easy to accept because of the way it facilitated coming to grips with Germany's catastrophic wartime losses by recasting the narrative into language of German victimization at the hands of its cruel conquerors. By advocating for the return of both real and imagined prisoners in Soviet custody, West Germans were able to transform those men, and by extension themselves, into co-equal victims of the war itself, while simultaneously de-emphasizing their own role in perpetrating that war and its atrocities. Of equal importance, Biess discusses how popular agitation on the POW/MIA issue influenced Chancellor Konrad Adenauer's 1955 trip to Moscow, and how that pressure shaped the policies of his government, particularly in the realm of foreign relations.

More recently, Nicholas Stargardt’s *The German War: A Nation under Arms 1939 – 1945* also includes mention of the German secret camp myth. While Stargardt’s focus is primarily on why German society invested itself as totally as it did in fighting the war, he does also examine the manner in which wartime victimization was convenient for redemptive re-imaginings of the war after it was over. Moreover, he cites first-hand accounts of Germans during the last years of the war openly drawing equivalences between their own suffering and that inflicted by Germans upon their various victims. He also examines the impact of Germans missing in the East on the home front, and how increasing casualty rates coupled with decreasing reliability of official reports led many to speculate about potential MIA survival in Soviet captivity.

Biess and Stargardt however are virtually the only authors to address the German secret camp myth directly, and those few others who do mention it tend to refer to Biess’s work. What

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10 Ibid., 194-195.
12 Bettina Greiner’s *Suppressed Terror: History and Perception of Soviet Special Camps in Germany* examines a subject of related interest to this study: those German civilians accused of Nazi crimes who disappeared into Soviet
is more, both authors treat it as a component part of the larger study of West Germany and the
Second World War, rather than a subject worthy of examination in its own right. This dissertation
aims to examine the secret camp myth as an international phenomenon, to better uncover those
common elements in both cases that contribute to its creation.

The American half of the dissertation has a more established historiography for both
POW/MIA issues, and also the secret camp myth itself. H. Bruce Franklin's *MIA, or, Mythmaking in America* and *Vietnam and other American Fantasies* explore how the myth came
into existence during the war in Vietnam and grew to become what he calls a virtual “national
religion.”¹³ Franklin argues that however well intentioned the original proponents of the myth
were, driven by their need for the war dead miraculously to be alive, belief in MIA survival has
ballooned far beyond the boundaries of plausibility, and indeed good taste. He finds less
excusable how opportunists, both in government and elsewhere, took advantage of the emotional
resonance inherent in POW/MIA activism for their own ends.¹⁴ This dissertation argues that the
distinction between true believers in the secret camp myth and opportunists is best understood
via the two mutually reinforcing needs that drive such a belief. In his understandable eagerness
to address the many scoundrels who do exist within secret camp advocacy, Franklin sometimes
downplays those whose belief was painfully genuine, due to being trapped in the no-man’s land
of grief.

More recently, Michael Allen's *Until the Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the
Unending Vietnam War* builds upon Franklin's analysis of the politicization of the myth, arguing
that much of the myth's durability came from the manner in which then-President Richard Nixon

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¹³ Franklin, *MIA, or, Mythmaking in America*, 4-5.
¹⁴ Ibid., 34.
co-opted basic concern over POW return in an effort to channel interest in that issue into support for his administration's policies. Like Franklin, Allen contends that the myth survives in the American popular consciousness due to a mix of politics and genuine popular belief. If anything, he goes further than Franklin in asserting the primacy of politics in keeping POW/MIA issues alive, though unlike Franklin he argues earlier studies have overemphasized President Nixon’s role.15 Both authors examine how cultural objects, like movies and video games, reinforce popular acceptance of the basic validity of the secret camp myth and indeed owe their existence and popularity to the common understanding of the basic structure of the myth. Here, one is unavoidably reminded of the existence of an entire category of action movies produced in the 1980s, the “Vietnam POW rescue” sub-genre such as Rambo: First Blood Pt II starring Sylvester Stallone, and Missing in Action starring Chuck Norris, to which both Franklin and Allen refer.

Franklin’s and Allen’s works exist as part of the larger historiography of the Vietnam War, and both are primarily concerned with telling an American story within the context of America's experience of that war and its aftermath, though Allen does briefly compare American proponents of the American secret camp myth with the earlier German mythmakers.16 As a result, in both cases the myth comes across as a distinctly American episode born in the jungles of Southeast Asia, rather than a variant of an older, international phenomenon. To be sure, Allen and Franklin are both chiefly concerned with writing American histories of that war and its aftermath, and neither is particularly weakened by this lack of focus on non-American examples. However, by focusing only on the American phenomenon they do ignore that those who created and developed the American secret camp myth were not breaking new ground, so much as reacting to similar pressures that drove the creators of the earlier, German myth. The secret camp

16 Allen, 159.
myth is not unique to American cultural history, and should therefore be examined in a broader context, which no author has yet done substantially.

This dissertation will also consider where the larger story of the secret camp myth fits into the existing historiography of warfare, loss, and mourning. Regardless of how cynics have manipulated the two variants of the myth for their own ends, the mainstay proponents of each were for the most part true believers. Their adherence to the myth is rooted in the difficulties they encounter in mourning, a broader subject that historians have examined in a variety of wartime and postwar contexts. Jean-Yves Le Naour examines this problem, which he refers to as a “refusal to mourn,” which so often plagues families of the missing. Indeed, Le Naour also mentions a French precursor to the secret camp myth from 1918, though he does not expand upon it. Going back further, Drew Gilpin Faust's *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* argues that that war was the forerunner of the nightmares of the twentieth century. Of much closer interest to this dissertation, she describes how even in that earlier war, “the unknown fate of missing kin left a 'dread void of uncertainty' that knowledge would never fill.” Jay Winter's *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* similarly examines how Europeans faced loss following the Great War. He argues that the modernist interpretation of mourning following that war fails to consider adequately the traditional means of coping with grief. Like Faust, he does not fail to mention those relatives who were unable to mourn properly, due to the ambiguous status of their missing men. However, these stories remain secondary to his

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18 Ibid., 66.
20 Ibid., 170.
22 Winter, 41.
analysis of those who were, eventually, able to find ways to mourn loss. By focusing more directly on the case of the missing and the secret camp myth their status spawned, this dissertation will delve more deeply into an important and little-explored facet of the larger story of postwar mourning: those who could not find a way to mourn at all.

Chapter 1 examines Germany’s war on the Eastern Front, from the 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union to the fall of Berlin in 1945. It details the frequency and manner by which German soldiers became casualties over time, in particular how casualty rates rose while simultaneously reporting and records on casualty type and status grew increasingly unreliable. Lacking such information, many Germans had no real knowledge of whether their relatives were dead or alive, in captivity or not. This chapter also covers who exactly made up the ranks of Germany’s prisoners and missing, as well as where they came from within German military and society. Finally, it considers how Nazi ideology and indoctrination impeded the flow of what little information did exist concerning German POWs in the east, as well as how the Nazi state’s casualty propaganda actively misled the civilian population and distorted the realities of Eastern Front losses.

Chapter 2 examines the aftermath of defeat in the western occupied zones and subsequently in the Federal German Republic. It covers the slow, inconsistent way prisoners returned from Soviet captivity, and how rumors of MIA survival in so-called “silent camps” appeared in West German media. It also examines how German POW/MIA activism arose following the war, and in particular the use of iconography that borrowed more than a little from the images of the Holocaust to portray German POWs in the USSR as victims of communist barbarity. By casting POWs and MIAs in that light, such efforts thus served as an avenue for all West Germans to reimagine themselves as victims of the war rather than as its perpetrators. This
Chapter also considers why this was so specifically a West German phenomenon, and why nothing equivalent arose in the German Democratic Republic. Most importantly, it details how West German POW/MIA activism peaked and subsided in the mid-1950s, unlike the much longer-lived American equivalent.

Chapter 3 details how US involvement in Vietnam led to its own men going missing, and how these men came from a narrow section of mostly middle class professional officers in the air services, unlike the broader social origins of German POWs. Unlike the draftee masses who fought the ground war in Southeast Asia, the men around whom the American secret camp myth centers were mostly elites. This chapter also examines the loss statistics of the major US air campaigns, as well as how unlikely unaided MIA survival was considering the terrain over which several of those campaigns took place.

Chapter 4 examines how US POW/MIA activism emerged during the war from a constituency of wives of the missing, who organized initially simply to try to obtain reliable information about the status of their men. The chapter then proceeds to show how self-interested parties within the Nixon administration actively worked to fold these activists into their own base of support and by so doing hijacked POW/MIA advocacy and used it in the service of prolonging the war itself. This politicization served to validate activist concerns initially, but the cynical manipulation of officials artificially raised hopes for POW survival far beyond what was plausible or even possible. This all but guaranteed POW/MIA activism would continue after the 1973 repatriation of actual prisoners, since activists believed so many more were still alive, somewhere in Southeast Asia.

Chapter 5 explains how Watergate and the downfall of President Nixon helped to solidify the paranoid streak already present within US POW/MIA activism and led to the radicalization of
those who remained active after 1973. Repatriation led to the departure of more reasonably
minded activists and the ascension of the more militant, who were determined to find live MIAs.
These activists would be satisfied by nothing short of the resurrection of the missing they
believed were still alive in covert Vietnamese captivity, despite all evidence to the contrary.
When a much hoped-for 1970s Congressional Inquiry into the POW/MIA issue failed to validate
these beliefs and hopes, POW/MIA activism entrenched itself and helped set the stage for the
revival of POW/MIA hysteria in the 1980s.

Chapter 6 shows how various elements brought the POW/MIA issue back to the
forefront, most prominently via the popular and redemptive Hollywood retellings of the war in
general and the POW/MIA aspects of it in particular. It also demonstrates how opportunistic
private actors got involved in POW/MIA activism to bilk hundreds of thousands of dollars from
desperate family members, telling false tales of secret prison camps and claiming to search for
live prisoners, not one of whom ever emerged from Southeast Asia. With the not-insubstantial
encouragement of President Ronald Reagan, popular belief in MIA survival grew, led to a second
set of Congressional hearings in the early 1990s, and even played a minor part in the fringe
aspects of the 1992 Presidential election.23 Congress again concluded that there were no live
POWs in Southeast Asia after 1973 and likely never had been. US POW/MIA advocacy survived
this second repudiation and against all odds continues to play a role, albeit diminished, in the
national conversation concerning memories of Vietnam and related veterans affairs.

This study concludes with a final comparison of the two examples of the Secret Camp
phenomenon. Through careful analysis of what they have in common, as well as where they
diverge, it demonstrates how that phenomenon is a logical outcome of the desire to find some
nationally redemptive element of lost, controversial wars. It also shows how such idolization of

23 Franklin, MIA, or, Mythmaking in America, 4-5.
POWs and MIAs masks a refusal to accept the realities of war, and can threaten to distort the honest telling of the history of such wars.
Chapter 1 – Germany’s War on the Eastern Front, and the Origins of Its Secret Camp Myth

Germany suffered staggering casualties in the war it inaugurated in Europe in 1939. Its genocidal war of conquest in the East resulted in millions of dead, wounded, and missing men. Among that latter category, substantial numbers became prisoners of the Soviet Union or simply vanished along the shifting battle lines. The German secret camp myth contended that many of these unaccounted-for missing men were, in reality, covertly retained by the Soviet Union in undisclosed camps. The key factor in transforming this idea from a fringe belief to a more mainstream one was the disparity in POWs returning from captivity versus those expected, which was compounded by the Soviets openly retaining some POWs as war criminals well into the 1950s. Due to a combination of wartime obfuscation by their own government and the collapse of Germany as a state after the war, civilians had a difficult time determining the status of their missing, and often clung to rumors spread by returned POWs and others about the existence of secret camps in which MIAs might still survive.

German civilians found the secret camp myth attractive since it satisfied two interconnected needs. First, for the relatives of the missing trapped in the no-man’s land of grief, the myth gave a plausible reason for hoping their missing man was still alive, despite the lack of information pointing in that direction. Relatives often found the ambiguity of these men’s status maddening, for while they could hope for survival, as there was no definitive proof of death, neither did they have any evidence that their men were still alive. If secret camps existed, in which German prisoners anonymously languished, then family members could believe any missing man might survive so long as there was nothing to prove otherwise. Second, the myth offered a way around the criminal legacy of the Nazi state by creating an alternative war hero archetype from the POWs and MIAs. While Germans could neither fully memorialize their war
dead nor celebrate their veterans, due to wartime atrocities, they could decently venerate live
Germans still suffering the barbarities of secret Soviet prison camps. Moreover, by
overemphasizing that victimization, Germans found ways to appropriate the very suffering their
own camps inflicted, and so recast themselves as victims of the war Germany had started.

However, despite these attractive elements, and despite most MIAs never reappearing
from the East, German secret camp advocacy did not achieve the longevity of its American
counterpart. By the mid-1950s, German activism on the subject had reached its logical
conclusion and subsided, never to revive. Why such a difference? The German argument that
living POWs remained in enemy captivity long past the end of hostilities was upon initial
inspection much more plausible given the nature of the war in the East and that of Stalinist
Russia after the war. Far more Germans went missing in the East than Americans did in
Southeast Asia, and those missing came from a much broader swath of larger German society.
Despite all of this, the German secret camp myth and POW/MIA activism generally never took
on a life of their own, and neither became dominant elements of national mythology related to
that war. To understand the reasons behind the short-lived German secret camp myth, it is
important to understand why Germans fought the war they did on the Eastern Front, and how and
where Germans were captured and went missing on that front. Similarly, POW/MIA activism
after the war was unavoidably shaped by the war itself, and that activism existed in the shadow
of Germany’s war crimes.

**Sowing the Wind: Hitler’s War of Extermination**

The Second World War laid the foundation for the secret camp myth, and the myth could
not have existed in the form it did had Germany fought that war as it did. Nazi Germany’s
primary motivation was expansion eastward and the establishment of a settler empire in lands
conquered from the Poles and Soviets. German expansionists had long looked in that direction, and Germany’s Nazi rulers’ mad dream of Lebensraum was that “Drang nach Osten” desire taken to its logical extreme.\textsuperscript{24} Adolf Hitler declared as early as 1925 that, “we National Socialists must hold unflinchingly to our aim in foreign policy, namely, \textit{to secure for the German people the land and soil to which they are entitled on this earth}.”\textsuperscript{25} Russia was the ideal target both for practical and racial reasons, in Hitler’s understanding. He argued that the Bolshevik Revolution had robbed the old Russian Empire of the one element that allowed a state populated by an “inferior” Slavic race to exist as a power in Europe: an elite intelligentsia made up of ethnic Germans. With those leadership positions now filled by the sinister-yet-feckless Jewish conspirators Hitler saw lurking behind the Russian Revolution, he could not imagine the Soviet successor state as capable of long surviving on its own. “The giant empire in the east,” he concluded, “is ripe for collapse.”\textsuperscript{26} This decision by the Nazi leadership to plunge headlong into the Soviet Union guaranteed huge amounts of POWs and MIAs, whose ambiguous statuses fed the secret camp myth. Those leaders had not expected such a result, both due to ideological blindness to the Soviet will and capacity to resist, and also because of the deceptively quick and cheap victories German armed force had so far won in Poland, and in the West.

Hitler had planned the invasion of that empire not only as a campaign of conquest, but also one of explicit extermination, which led Germany’s military to fight that war with unprecedented brutality and also caused a ripple effect in prisoner policy and treatment on both sides, albeit far more murderously in the German case than the Soviet. As Supreme High

\textsuperscript{25} Adolf Hitler, \textit{Mein Kampf}, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943), 652.  
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 655.}
Command of the Army (Oberkommando des Heeres, or OKH) Chief of Staff Franz Halder recorded in his private diary,

We must get away from this standpoint of soldierly comradeship. The communist is no comrade, before or after. It is a war of extermination…We do not wage war in order to preserve the enemy…Extermination of the Bolshevik commissars and communist intelligentsia…The leaders must know what is involved. They must lead in this struggle! The troops must defend themselves with the methods with which they are attacked. Commissars and secret service personnel are criminals and must be treated as such. The troops need not get out of their leader’s control. The leader must give his orders in accordance with the feelings of the troops. The leader must make sacrifices and overcome their (sic) scruples.27

While Halder’s sentiments on first inspection seem to promise harshness narrowly focused on those political enemies found in Russia, in practice they came to apply to the bulk of the Red Army and Russian population generally. Commanders throughout the military communicated this message to the common German soldiers in the Guidelines for the Behavior of the Fighting Force in Russia to give only one example, distributed throughout the Wehrmacht in May 1941. It contained the following passage:

The struggle demands ruthless and energetic action against Bolshevik agitators, guerillas, saboteurs, Jews and the complete liquidation of any active or passive resistance.

Extreme reserve and most alert vigilance are called for towards all members of the Red Army – even prisoners – as treacherous methods of fighting are to be expected. The Asiatic soldiers of the Red Army in particular are inscrutable, unpredictable, insidious, and unfeeling.28 (emphasis original)

High Command made the barbaric implications of this guideline even more explicit in the June 1941 “Commissar Decree,” which stated that Soviet political officers were to be shot out of hand whenever captured. Generals passed this decree down to their subordinate units in various subsequent orders, all of which contained euphemisms allowing for an ever-wider latitude and


indeed encouragement for German troops to treat captured Red Army soldiers and the captive
civilian population with murderous harshness. It is therefore hardly surprising that the
Wehrmacht fought its war in the East with savage, indiscriminate violence directed against not
only the Soviet military but also the people of the East, with only a few exceptions.

Such behavior contributed to the development of the German secret camp myth in two
ways. First, the atrocious way the German Army treated the vast number of enemy prisoners it
took reinforced the brutal exterminatory nature of warfare on the Eastern Front, and thus helped
to solidify the Nazi trope that ultimate victory or total destruction were the only two possible
outcomes of that fight. Early on, this encouraged enthusiastic support of the expected imminent
victory, while later in the war it caused Germans to be mortally terrified of the Red Army, and
fear capture at least as much as death, if not more so. As a result, soldiers increasingly preferred
desertion and flight to fighting to the death, or risking capture, which helped contribute to rising
numbers of MIAs as the front collapsed and end approached for the Thousand-Year Reich.29

Second, Germans were in touch with their fighting men in the East despite the best efforts of
official censors and propagandists, and were generally aware of the atrocities being committed in
their names, for all of their claims of innocence and ignorance after the war. Accordingly, their
fears of vengeful Red Army hordes during the war translated to fears of a vindictive Soviet
occupation after that war, with some justification. These fears, combined with widely felt but
seldom-expressed guilt over Germany’s war crimes gave Germans every reason to embrace the
role of war victim in order to avoid facing the root of that guilt.30 In an attempt to deal with
these uncomfortable legacies of the war, many Germans popularized the POW and MIA as

29 Omer Bartov, Hitler’s Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich, (New York: Oxford University Press,
1991), 104.

symbols of Germany’s victimization at communist hands, and what better symbol of such victimization could there be than POWs who remained in Soviet custody after the end of regular repatriations, as well as the unaccounted-for MIAs who might well survive alongside them?

Given Germany’s eastward focus, it should come as no surprise that the overwhelming bulk of Germany’s armed forces fought on the Eastern Front throughout the war, and that it was that front that generated those POWs/MIAs about whom the German secret camp myth eventually concern itself. Since the war they fought was a large-scale, conventional conflict, the majority of Germany’s missing came not from any one, discrete segment of German society but rather from across a much broader social spectrum. Conscription, banned following the First World War but reintroduced in 1935, guaranteed that young men from all ranks and stations would spend time in the military even if they did not go on to make a career of it.\textsuperscript{31} Furthermore, over the course of the war Germany’s increasing desperation for manpower led to a loosening of conscription standards and a lowering of the age of induction, which ensured that men who had been passed over previously and teenagers of ever-younger ages would serve as well.\textsuperscript{32} Similarly, the Volkssturm “people’s militia,” formed in late 1944, incorporated those older men who had avoided conscription thus far, armed them with whatever cast-off weapons remained, and marched east to face the oncoming Soviet tanks.\textsuperscript{33}

Breaking down the statistics further, official accounting efforts following the war confirmed that the majority of POWs and MIAs in particular had come from the German working class, with a survey of the US occupation zone conducted in 1947 revealing that 86.9%

\begin{footnotes}
\end{footnotes}
of POWs and 82.2% of MIAs living in that zone after the war came from such a background.\textsuperscript{34} In terms of age, most fell within 20 to 40 years old (79.1% for POWs, 78.2% for MIAs).\textsuperscript{35} While these men returned, or settled, in parts of Germany occupied by the Western Allies after the war, it is important to remember that the vast majority of the German military fought in the east, and correspondingly the results of this survey are applicable to German POWs and MIAs on the Eastern Front more generally. Throughout the course of the war, about 20 million German men served in one capacity or another and of those 20 million, most were conscripts.\textsuperscript{36}

This was, then, a people’s army, drawn from a society that, by the time of the invasion of Soviet Russia in 1941, had been thoroughly militarized by the Nazi party and state. State-mandated conditioning started early, with mandatory participation in youth organizations such as Hitlerjugend (Hitler Youth), and its female auxiliary, the Bund Deutscher Mädel, (the League of German Girls, or BDM) from 1933 on.\textsuperscript{37} Working adults, whether or not they were Party members or even politically active, soon discovered Nazism had entered the workplace after the banning and assimilation of independent trade unions into the Deutsche Arbeitsfront (German Labor Front, or DAF), membership in which was mandatory for virtually all industrial and commercial work.\textsuperscript{38} These various measures and others like them bound all elements of German society to the Party and through the Party to its scheme of conquest in the East, thus further ensuring that the impact of that attempt at conquest would be felt across virtually every level of

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{34} Among POWs, occupations were 20% agricultural, 44.8% industrial, 16.9% metal workers (which included skilled trades like electricians and chemical workers), and 5.2% were unskilled laborers. For MIAs, it was 20.1\%, 41.7\%, 14.1\%, and 6.3\% respectively. Dr. Pflüger, Ausschuss für KGfFragen in den Ländern der US-Zone 1947, “Die Registrierung der Kriegsgefangenen und Vermissten in den Ländern der US-Zone (stand mitte 1947), p.6-7, in Bundesarchiv-Koblenz, B150 – Bundesministrum für Vertriebene, Flüchtlinge, und Kriegsgeschädigte, 322 – Kriegsgefangene – Registrierung in den Ländern der US-Zone 1947.
  \item \textsuperscript{35} Ibid., p.5.
  \item \textsuperscript{36} Officers and career rankers amounted to, perhaps, 5-10\% overall. Wette, 158.
  \item \textsuperscript{37} Peter Fritzsche, Life and Death in the Third Reich, (London: Belknap Press, 2008), 3-4.
  \item \textsuperscript{38} Shelley Baranowski, Strength through Joy: Consumerism and Mass Tourism in the Third Reich, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 45.
\end{itemize}
that society. The Nazi state had tapped almost every conceivable manpower resource at its disposal, and sent most of those men to fight the Red Army, and so the populations of the alleged secret camps necessarily came from almost every corner of German society.

Admittedly, information on the men in the ranks is harder to come by than that of officers, and especially generals. Individual memoirs do exist, but comparatively little has been done to write a comprehensive “ground-level” social history of the Wehrmacht from the perspective of the common Landser.39 Holes in the historical record aggravate this problem: The Bundesarchiv/Militärarchiv, Germany’s modern national archive of military records, reports that it lost a substantial proportion of its collection during the war, in particular those records from units below the divisional level.40 However, enough remains to sketch at least a rough outline of the makeup of the German military that fought in the East. As an army of conscripts, the Wehrmacht operated under the principle that it was preferable to keep young men from the same conscription district together throughout their term of service. This was organizationally inefficient, but heavily advantageous from the perspective of unit morale, since it kindled a sense of familiarity and family among the men. It also meant that at the platoon- and company-level, Wehrmacht units often took on a geographical flavor due to the relative homogeneity of their recruits.41 This practice would break down due to skyrocketing manpower needs across the Army in early 1941, however.42

With the weakening of regional and personal ties, unit cohesion from 1941 onward was increasingly based on ideology, specifically the virulent Nazi racial ideology that had

39 Stephen Fritz’s excellent Frontsoldaten: The German Soldier in World War II stands as one of the few exceptions to this rule.
41 Bartov, 30-1.
42 Ibid., 38-9.
progressively infested every arm of the German military, and which decreed the war in the East to be a fight to the death against the racial enemies of the German Volk. Under such circumstances, it is unsurprising that, in proclamation at least, Germany’s fighting men mostly held to the Party position that death was preferable to surrender when fighting such a vile, subhuman enemy. This indoctrination only grew more pronounced as the war’s fortunes turned against the Wehrmacht, with a growing emphasis on “political education” from 1943 onward.43

Regardless of the degree to which these men embraced Nazism, the overwhelming percentage of them fought on the Eastern front, and the prisoners and missing men later thought to be in the secret camps came from their ranks. It is necessary therefore to consider how, where, and when those men were captured or went missing. Given the scope of conflict in the East, it is best broken down into four rough chronological categories: from the initiation of Operation Barbarossa on 21 June 1941 to spring 1942; Operation Blue June 1942 to the surrender of the Sixth Army at Stalingrad in February 1943; Operation Citadel of July – August 1943 and its aftermath; finally, the progressive disintegration of the front following the defeat at Kursk in August 1943 to the fall of Berlin. German armed forces progressively suffered ever-greater casualties in the East, culminating in the near-complete collapse of organized resistance in Berlin in the spring of 1945, and not only did this result in ever-rising numbers of men captured, but many men simply vanished during these titanic battles and movements of men across the vast spaces of the East. Equally important to the construction of a secret camp myth was that these casualties increased at the very moment when casualty reporting broke down and news about soldiers’ fates became increasingly unreliable.

43 Bartov, 134-5.
The World Will Hold Its Breath: Germany’s Invasion of the USSR

The Wehrmacht general staff had planned Operation Barbarossa as another of the rapid blitzkrieg campaigns by which they had won such stunning successes in Poland and Western Europe. Some of these men were nevertheless apprehensive about their ability to repeat those earlier successes. Hitler did his best to convince his generals. To those who balked at the size of this new opponent, he could rightly point out that they had been outnumbered in France as well, and that was against an army not comprised chiefly of “subhumans.” He also argued that the purges of the 1930s, during which Soviet dictator Josef Stalin had massacred significant numbers of his own senior commanders, had rendered the Red Army a paper tiger, a weakness that the Finnish debacle supposedly confirmed. This, he concluded, was compounded by what he saw as the incoherencies and racial weaknesses inherent in the Soviet system overall, which could never stand against the might of the German master race and was on the brink of collapse in any case. Hitler had declared to the Chief of Operations of the Armed Forced High Command (Oberkommado der Wehrmacht, OKW) Alfred Jodl shortly before the onset of Barbarossa that, “You only have to kick in the door and the whole rotten structure will come crashing down.”

Despite spectacular early victories and German conquest of huge amounts of Soviet territory, the Soviet system did not come crashing down even with the door kicked in. The Führer’s constant interference contributed to Barbarossa’s failure, as did his frequent alteration of plans. Fundamental material inadequacies were more significant than such shortsighted micromanaging, however. Equipped for another blitzkrieg, the Wehrmacht was increasingly unable to replace its losses and sustain its efforts as the fighting wore on. Attrition of its panzers

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in particular, which could not quickly be replaced, led to what historian Omer Bartov has described as the “demodernization” of the front, with Wehrmacht troops increasingly reverting to pre-mechanized forms of warfare. These problems had been surmountable in the earlier Western campaigns due to the speed of German triumph and comparatively smaller spaces to be conquered. However, in Russia the incomplete mechanization of the Wehrmacht and vast distances to be conquered proved fatal to any dreams of another swift victory. This failure and the degradation of Germany’s armed forces that followed not only contributed to the rising casualty count, but also made it increasingly harder for the German military as a whole to keep track of just who had become a casualty, as such logistical strain both deprioritized record keeping and made it more difficult to accomplish generally. As a result, Barbarossa helped lay the groundwork for the later birth of the secret camp myth, by plunging the German military into an extended, bloody conflict it could not win, while simultaneously making it that much harder for the Wehrmacht to account for its missing men.

In total, Germany suffered over 800,000 casualties throughout Barbarossa. Of these, about 120,000 were either POWs or MIAs. This is necessarily an approximation due to the sheer size of forces involved. The remoteness of many of the Soviet POW camps made accounting for individual Germans captured or missing extremely difficult under the best of circumstances. What is more, ideological presumptions about Germany’s fighting men and the war in the East inhibited officialdom from making honest efforts at casualty reporting. The above casualty figures come primarily from Soviet sources, which is less surprising than it might initially appear. The Nazi state constantly projected the need for heroism and sacrifice both domestically

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46 Bartov, 12.
47 Beevor, Stalingrad, 24-5.
and within its armed forces. That state expected its soldiers to triumph or fall defiantly rather than surrender. During earlier campaigns, the speed of German victories muted this enforced fanaticism to a degree, as did the comparative lack of racial animus toward the Western Allies. Against the “subhuman” Russians and their scheming Jewish masters, the Nazi state considered its brave heroes surrendering to be unthinkable, and potentially poisonous to its hero-cult and desired heroic narrative of victory, struggle, and sacrifice. Therefore, the Wehrmacht casualty office (the Wehrmachtsauskunftstelle für Kriegerverluste und Kriegsgefangene, or WASt) actively suppressed the publication of statistics on German POWs and regularly reclassified POWs as MIA, or even KIA. It did so under the guidance of both the Propaganda Ministry and also the Reich Security Main Office (Reichssicherheitshauptamt or RSHA), which acted directly to throttle the what little information emerged from the Soviet camp system by intercepting and withholding what little mail POWs were able to send, without even notifying family members that anything had been received. A subordinate agency within the hierarchy of the SS, the RSHA coordinated the operation of Germany’s various police and internal security agencies, the feared Gestapo in particular, and had broad, almost arbitrary authority over what was or was not permissible behavior within the Reich. Therefore, WASt’s RSHA-influenced obfuscation of casualty statistics, downplaying of actual casualty numbers, and stonewalling family members of the missing contributed to the lack of information that laid the foundation for the secret camp myth after the war.

Civilians had to content with other obstacles as well when it came to discovering the fate of their missing men. First, attempts to lobby for changes in POW policy or even to seek further

49 Bellamy, 22.
50 Bartov, 25.
52 Peter Fritzsche, Life and Death in the Third Reich, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2008), 85.
information on the missing risked accusations of defeatism or anti-State activities. It is not surprising therefore to learn that family members resorted instead to informal, occasionally covert, activities to try to learn more about the fate of the missing. Such actions at-times skirted the boundaries of acceptable behavior, when they did not overstep them entirely, and risked drawing the baleful eye of the Gestapo. After all, the main alternate source of information concerning men missing in the East was the enemy who may have taken them prisoner. Soviet propagandists did from time to time broadcast information on and published flyers about prisoners they had taken but listening to foreign broadcasts was illegal from 1939 on.\textsuperscript{53} Even seeking out informal gossip and rumors concerning one’s missing relatives could be dangerous as such behavior was prohibited on the grounds of encouraging defeatism, and one could never quite be sure that today’s source of conversation might not become tomorrow’s informer.\textsuperscript{54}

On a more pragmatic level, the exterminatory nature of the war in the East inhibited the usual transmission vector for POW/MIA information between belligerents: the International Red Cross. The Soviet Union was not a signatory of the 1929 Geneva Convention and had repudiated any legacy obligations held over from Imperial Russia’s signing of the 1907 Hague Convention, though the Soviets had claimed they would honor that older convention’s provisions despite the illegitimacy of the Tsarist state.\textsuperscript{55} For its part, Germany made virtually no effort to honor its Geneva Convention obligations with regard to Soviet prisoners outside of the occasional propaganda effort staged for the Red Cross.\textsuperscript{56} In practice, neither side observed these conventions regarding treatment of prisoners and notification through neutral bodies of prisoner numbers and status. Overall, the war in the East was fought almost entirely without the

\textsuperscript{53} Biess, 26-7.  
\textsuperscript{54} Fritzsche, 113.  
\textsuperscript{55} Bellamy, 21-2.  
\textsuperscript{56} Bellamy, 21-2.
international oversight that warring powers had come to expect as the norm since the early 20th century, and without any reliable means for those men to communicate back to their families that they had survived capture. Under such circumstance, German record keepers could not necessarily distinguish between a man killed in action and one who had either gone missing or been captured, even had they wished so to do. Such a desire was itself unlikely since they labored under the ideological presupposition that missing men were more likely to have died fighting than to have surrendered. Therefore, German civilians were at a double disadvantage when it came to tracking their missing men and determining whether they were alive, as their own government falsified what information it had on the missing for ideological grounds, and it had only incomplete data to begin with.

German civilians had to contend with more than just legal and ideological restrictions on their search for information on the missing. As the war worsened, the Reich was increasingly under direct attack from its various enemies, and a result civilian life was increasingly disrupted. Allied strategic bombing directly affected civilians, particularly after 1943, and by war’s end these attacks reduced many Germans’ horizon to the most basic, immediate survival concerns. Even if relatives of the missing could muster the courage to risk police censure and arrest, their more immediate concerns necessarily devolved to acquiring food, water, and shelter secure enough to make it through one more night. Even more than just the aerial attacks, they had to contend with the approach of and occupation by foreign armies as the Red Army thundered westward following its great victory at Kursk, as also the Western Allies did following their Normandy landings in 1944. Between invading armies, the relentless destruction of logistics networks and German infrastructure, rail transport in particular, German civilians lacked the

57 Fritzsche, 286.
luxury of time and resources to organize and agitate for information on their missing during the war, even if they had had the political liberty so to do.\textsuperscript{58} 

\textbf{Death of an Army: Stalingrad and the Growing Number of Germany’s Missing}

Despite its substantial losses in men and material during and after Barbarossa, the Wehrmacht was prepared for a new offensive in spring 1942. This new offensive, named Operation Blue, envisioned a two-pronged southern drive across the Caucasus to seize the Soviets’ main oil reserves and capture the city of Stalingrad on the Volga River. The speed of their advance, and refusal of the Red Army to stand and fight, convinced many German commanders that they had finally broken the Red Army’s ability to resist.\textsuperscript{59} In reality, the Soviet leadership, including Stalin himself, had learned at least partial lessons from the mayhem of 1941, and refused to play into the hands of the oncoming Germans. Indeed, the Soviet dictator had at last grasped that his refusal to allow for tactical withdrawals in 1941 had contributed greatly to the destruction of his frontier armies, and for the moment he allowed his commanders the flexibility to fall back whenever German pincers threatened.\textsuperscript{60} Ignorant of this, General Friedrich Paulus’s Sixth Army pushed ever deeper into Soviet territory, towards Stalingrad.

Not only did Germany lose the entire Sixth Army at Stalingrad, it also lost the largest number of prisoners in a single incident so far. While Barbarossa resulted in slightly more POWs and MIAs overall, those casualties occurred over the course of the months-long operation, rather than from a single surrender. Simultaneously, though Barbarossa had failed in its ultimate objective, in early 1942 Germans could plausibly believe that the war was going well for them.

\textsuperscript{59}Halder, 1477.
\textsuperscript{60}Beevor, \textit{Stalingrad}, 75.
Therefore, Stalingrad served not only as one of the war’s turning points, but also important to the creation of the German secret camp myth both by contributing so singularly to the German POW/MIA population and also by shaking German confidence.

Ignorant of the doom waiting for them, elements of Army Group B including the Sixth Army as well as detachments from the Fourth Panzer Army and non-German auxiliaries advanced on Stalingrad, making good progress by late July, 1942. Though the Sixth Army was able to push into the bombed-out city, the battle then devolved into anarchic city fighting as the Germans attempted to crush the remaining Soviet resistance and the Red Army tried to hold on long enough for the massive reinforcements building on the eastern bank of the Volga to assemble for their planned counterattack. To this end, General Georgi Zhukov used the summer and autumn of 1942 to build up massive reinforcements against the flanks of the Sixth Army. The poorly equipped Romanian Army guarded these flanks, and could not long resist the Soviet onslaught. So fast did the two prongs of the Red Army’s attack advance, indeed, that by 22 November, merely three days after the inauguration of Operation Uranus, they had surrounded the Sixth Army.61

This encirclement spelled the beginning of the end for those Axis troops now trapped in the Stalingrad pocket. Hitler forbade them from staging any breakout and retreat, permission for which Paulus had requested in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet encirclement, and so battle casualties, privation, and disease slowly wore down these trapped soldiers.62 Hitler insisted that they fight on to the bitter end, both for the pragmatic reason that, “every day and every hour won in this way the other fronts will become stronger,” and also from ideological conviction.

stemming from the Nazi cult of heroism and sacrifice. This latter apocalyptic belief was epitomized when Hitler promoted the despairing Paulus to Field Marshal in response to Paulus’s 24 January 1943 request to surrender. Paulus understood Hitler’s subtext here, that no German of that rank had ever been taken alive, and Hitler none-too-subtly mentioned that fact to Paulus in the same message. Hitler was shocked when the newly minted Field Marshal capitulated to the Soviets, instead of killing himself as Hitler had expected. Incensed, the Führer angrily proclaimed,

How can one be so cowardly? I don’t understand it…What is life? Life is the Nation. The individual must die anyway. Beyond the life of the individual is the life of the Nation…So many people have to die, and then a man like that besmirches the heroism of so many others at the last minute. He could have freed himself from all sorrow and ascended into eternity and national immortality, but he prefers to go to Moscow.

**Inconvenient Survival: POWs, Propaganda, and the Nazi Cult of the Hero**

Paulus’s personal surrender serves as a prominent example of the problem POWs caused for the Nazi state in two specific ways. First, they threatened the Nazi assumption that, with sufficient will, any effort would necessarily succeed regardless of practical considerations. Second, they served as unwanted counterexamples to the Nazi cult of heroic sacrifice. For both reasons, official reports downplayed and misrepresented POW numbers and statistics, which gave the German population further reason to distrust earlier claims after the war. After all, Germans had been told prior to Stalingrad that they were winning the war, and that their armies were everywhere undefeated. Afterward, they learned only that the Sixth Army had died fighting, without reference to the specific casualty count. When they discovered just how baldly

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63 Hitler, in Glantz and House, *Endgame at Stalingrad*, 564.
64 Bellamy, 549.
66 Biess, 25.
their government had concealed the truth from them, many necessarily began to doubt the official account not only of casualty numbers, but also casualty status. Who was to say that every man whom the Nazi state had declared a dead hero of the *Herrenvolk* was not potentially a prisoner somewhere in the Soviet camp system? Knowledge of Germany’s own vast and brutal system of concentration camps likely also contributed to fears for men potentially lost in the Soviet equivalent.

In the end, the combined count of German POWs and MIAs at Stalingrad was greater than anything seen prior to that point. Of the approximately 100,000 captured, only about 6,000 would ever see Germany again. As with most other battles on the Eastern Front, there is a significant discrepancy between German and Soviet records as to casualty numbers, and indeed among Soviet sources themselves. The reports of Paulus and Soviet Field Marshall Konstantin Rokossovsky both place the prisoner count at close to 100,000, but NKVD (*Narodnyy Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del*, or People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs) records estimate as many as 130,000 Germans were captured, though they may well have intentionally inflated their count for propaganda purposes.\(^6\) Regardless of which source is most accurate, that so few eventually returned demonstrated that most had disappeared either en route to or after reaching the Soviet prisoner camps. These POW deaths were not necessarily the result of active mistreatment, but of the weakened health of the men who had survived the horrible conditions long enough to surrender in February 1943. Unsurprisingly, many of the approximately 91,000 who surrendered with Paulus were emaciated, weak, and often already sick and/or suffering from frostbite. Considerable numbers of these men subsequently died on their way to prison camps,

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\(^6\)Glantz and House, *Endgame at Stalingrad*, 581.
which often were many weeks of hard travel from the Stalingrad battle area. The fate of these missing was all the more ambiguous to the German public after the war since many did not appear on official Soviet lists of men known to have died in captivity or indeed to have ever been captured at all. Such incomplete and fragmentary information further fueled the concerns and anxieties of German civilians, many of whom were thus predisposed to believe rumors of secret camps after the war.

Even had the Soviets kept better records, the German home front would still not have known how many men survived Stalingrad as POWs since German propaganda worked furiously to insinuate they had all died rather than surrender. Such an answer might have satisfied Nazi fanatics, but even among Party faithful there was the widespread, understandably understated sentiment that though it was generally better for men fight to the end against the Judeo-Bolshevik barbarians, perhaps it would not be that bad if one’s own husband or son had surrendered and thus retained at least a chance of staying alive. This belief was tempered by fears of what the prisoner experience might be, and contains the beginnings of an important inversion so critical to secret camp myth mentality and attendant re-imagining of the POW/MIA as a war hero. German civilians quite naturally feared the conditions of the Soviet prison camps whose reputation was well known outside the USSR ever since the purges of the 1930s, and the RSHA and Propaganda Ministry preyed upon those fears with its exaggerated reports of possible deportation to Siberia in unheated cattle cars, starvation, torture, and mass shootings. In other words, Germans worried that the Soviets were inflicting upon their missing men those atrocities

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69 Biess, 34-5.
70 The RSHA was a subordinate element of the SS that served initially to coordinate the operation of various police agencies brought under SS purview by Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler, and which during the war years acted with increasing fervor and violence to enforce Party orthodoxy throughout German society. Biess, 34.
that Germany’s armed forces were actively inflicting upon the captive peoples of the east, and especially upon Jews everywhere the Reich now commanded.

There was some justification to such fears, but nothing equal to what Red Army men and others faced in German captivity. While the conditions of imprisonment in the Soviet camp network rarely rose above the level of primitive, and German POWs did frequently suffer and die at alarming rates, Soviet desire for vengeance was tempered to a large degree by the desperate need for war labor, and lacked any equivalent racial hatred. Soviet captivity policy could be harsh and deprived German prisoners of necessities, but lacked the exterminatory extremism of the German concentration camp system. That the Soviets made no conscious or systematic effort to murder them was admittedly scant comfort to those German POWs who suffered from disease, overwork, and lack of food and adequate shelter in Soviet prisons.71 These deprivations resulted instead of overarching, chronic wartime shortages throughout the Soviet Union, making German prisoners authors of their own misfortune.

The catastrophe at Stalingrad was of such a magnitude that even the best German propaganda efforts could not conceal or adequately spin it, though not for lack of trying. Following the surrender there was a news blackout on Stalingrad of over a week, before at last German radio announced, on 3 February 1943, that, “The battle of Stalingrad has ended. True to their oath to fight to the last breath, the Sixth Army under the exemplary leadership of Field-Marshal Paulus has been overcome by the superiority of the enemy and by the unfavorable circumstances confronting our forces.”72 This broadcast made no mention of casualty figures and used further language that heavily implied that the entire Sixth Army had gone down fighting, to

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72 Shirer, 933.
thus further concealing the unpleasant reality of a mass capitulation. Propaganda Minister Josef Goebbels rallied the faithful in reaction to Stalingrad with his memorable 18 February 1943 Sportpalast speech, during which he whipped the crowd into a total war-glorifying frenzy in perhaps the crowning moment of his long career in audience manipulation. Tellingly, when he referred to Stalingrad in that speech he rhetorically folded that disaster into the larger narrative of tragic-yet-noble sacrifice freely made by the Aryan heroes of the Reich, thus reinforcing the heroic narrative that loomed so large within Nazi ideology and which fed into the secret camp myth. The German home front had thus already absorbed the concept of their missing men being dead heroes of the eternal Reich, so after the war they had merely to reconsider the terms of that heroism to reimagine them as living, though absent, heroes of a beaten and victimized Germany.

**Apocalypse: Kursk and the Acceleration of German Casualty Rates**

The Wehrmacht was not yet a beaten force despite the loss of the Sixth Army, and its leadership contemplated returning to the offensive after Stalingrad. Subsequent German successes lent reassurance that they could soldier on and gain victory despite that defeat, and the apparent vulnerability of the new Soviet position tempted their offensive planning with the hopes that the panzers might once more manage one of the massive double-envelopments that had so marked the glory days of Barbarossa. All of this led to the most titanic conflagration of the war in the East, the largest armored clash in military history, and the beginning of the end for German ambitions of living space in the east. So too, the battle of Kursk resulted in casualties

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73 Fritzsche, 280-1.
almost twice those of Stalingrad, albeit with less lopsided a ratio of POWs/MIAs to other categories. Germany’s defeat at Kursk thus contributed to the secret camp myth both by adding to the count of missing men, and also as it signaled the point after which German armies were progressively in retreat, and even less capable of accounting for missing men than previously.

Kursk’s casualty toll was numerically worse than that of Stalingrad, though it may have been psychologically easier to deal with since no entire army capitulated to the enemy. Throughout the Kursk campaign, including Operation Citadel and the two subsequent Soviet counteroffensives, the Wehrmacht suffered 111,132 casualties, of which 20,233 were MIAs.\footnote{Frieser et al, 207.} Taken together, the German thus lost at least 160,000 total casualties throughout the campaign, of whom over 20,000 were unaccounted for. The count grows even higher if one includes ancillary actions and skirmishes. Though the Red Army captured fewer Germans during these battles than at the earlier calamity on the Volga, Germany suffered more casualties overall. Of greater consequence to the Reich was that by failing in this last great attempt to recover the initiative in the East, the German military would thenceforth fight and slowly lose a strictly defensive war against the resurgent Red Army. Of equal importance to casualty numbers was the progressive decline and disintegration of the German military as it fell back toward the boundaries of the Reich following Kursk. As the Wehrmacht retreated westward and unit cohesion grew increasingly frayed, men went missing with greater frequency without there being any official record of whether they had been killed, taken prisoner, or deserted. Accordingly, this period helped to feed the secret camp myth by providing a bulk of missing men who might conceivably still be alive in secret captivity after the war.
That final defeat did not occur overnight of course. Kursk took place in mid-1943, just under two years before Germany’s final surrender. Accordingly, just how and where Germans were taken prisoner or went missing during this final phase of the war in the East is of crucial importance. Determining those particulars is hampered by a new complication to the already-questionable nature of official German casualty records. In addition to the problem of the murky, at times non-existent delineation between POWs and MIAs in Wehrmacht casualty reports, accurate bookkeeping took on a much lower priority for units fighting for their lives in increasingly improvised formations as the situation at the front got worse. The Nazi government compounded this problem by further obfuscating what little information did reach Berlin for the sake of morale. Even worse, those official accounts the regime did make public for propaganda purposes share only a passing resemblance to reality under the most charitable reading. Due to these inaccuracies and official distortions, Germans had conflicting and incomplete information on their missing men before attempting to balance those reports against what they might have learned from Soviet claims.\textsuperscript{77} Soviet sources suffer from a different though related problem, inflation of casualties inflicted and prisoners taken, for propaganda purposes. Red Army and NKVD records almost invariably report having killed and captured more Germans than the Wehrmacht admitted losing. Both sides were likely spinning the numbers in a way calculated to make each look as best as can be, so it is best to treat each set of records provisionally.

\textbf{Disintegration: Collapse of the Unified Front and Subsequent Encirclements}

While it is outside the scope of this study to examine every battle and campaign of the remainder of the war in the east, there are a number of specific situations that help to highlight

\textsuperscript{77}Coldfelter, 515.
the increasingly destabilized position of Germany’s armies in there following Kursk. In particular, there were a number of subsequent encirclements in which tens of thousands of German troops eventually capitulated to the Soviets and went into captivity, specifically at Sevastopol, Minsk, in the Courland pocket, and at Budapest. The German military suffered these defeats at the same time as its record keeping deteriorated, and indeed as German territory shrunk on an almost daily basis. Therefore, it is unsurprising that Germans civilians had progressively worse and worse ideas of the status of men caught in these encirclements. As a result, they cannot but have helped contribute to the growth of the German secret camp myth after the war.

In April 1944, the 4th Ukrainian Front cut Wehrmacht’s Army Group A off in the Crimea. Outnumbered and outmatched, the Germans fell back on Sevastopol to await rescue. Hitler initially forbade any evacuation and only grudgingly authorized a sea lift in late April, after much desperate persuasion. The Red Air Force made repeated attacks on the rescue ships, and sunk several with their full complement, most notably the Totila and Teja, carrying approximately ten thousand German soldiers between them. These two ships in particular are important to later proponents of the secret camp myth, since their escorts only rescues a very few of the soldiers they carried. Germans had no opportunity to recover the bodies of the remainder, which fueled rumors that, perhaps, some of them might have survived and improbably swarm to shore. Overall, of 150,000 men in Crimea, fewer than 40,000 made it out. 61,000 of the rest became POWs, including 26,000 “left on the beach” by the final rescue ships

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78 Glantz and House, When Titans Clashed, 191.
79 Fritz, Ostkrieg, 398.
80 Erich Gröner, Die deutschen Kriegschiffe 1815 - 1945, Band 8/1: Flufahrzeuge, Ujäger, Vorphostenboote, Hilfsminensucher, Küstenschutzverbände (Teil 1), (Bonn: Bernard & Graefe Verlag, 1993), 119.
81 Glantz and House, When Titans Clashed, 191.
after the Red Army broke into Sevastopol itself.⁸² German records estimated that the Soviets captured 29,000 Germans and 7,000 of their Romanian allies, whereas the Soviets claimed a higher total of 61,580 prisoners.⁸³ These losses contributed to the secret camp myth both by adding to Germany’s missing masses, and also as they had gone missing under even more ambiguous circumstances than had been the case previously.

Sevastopol was only prelude to the disasters facing the Wehrmacht in the East throughout the rest of 1944, as in late June of that year the Soviets launched Operation Bagration, a large campaign that contained numerous smaller set pieces offensives and battles. All contributed to the secret camp myth to some degree, but most notable among them was the assault on Minsk. Hitler had declared the city a “Feste Platz,” or fortified point to be held at all costs, as he had most other cities still under Wehrmacht control. As a result, the Red Army was able to encircle the Fourth Army and most of what remained of the Ninth.⁸⁴ The Soviets caught over a hundred thousand Germans in the Minsk pocket, and only 15,000 of those managing to escape. When the Fourth Army surrendered in July 1944, it only had 57,000 men left.⁸⁵ This loss also heralded the collapse of Army Group Center, thought the Wehrmacht did subsequently assign its name to other, smaller formations for morale reasons. The Red Army managed a second mass encirclement at Vilnius shortly after Minsk, capturing approximately five thousand men from the 3rd Panzer Army. This haul of prisoners included much of the Fourth Army remnant that had only just escaped from the Minsk pocket.⁸⁶

⁸³ Clodfelter, 510.
⁸⁴ Freisler et al, 552.
⁸⁵ Clodfelter, 511.
⁸⁶ Bellamy, 614-5.
Bagration was a stunning defeat of the already-reeling German forces in the East. The Soviets claimed to have inflicted over half a million losses, including taking just under 160,000 prisoners.\(^7\) German estimates put the total number lower at approximately 300,000 losses, of whom 262,929 were unaccounted-for in one way or another. Though this latter account is lower than the Soviet claim overall, it does report a higher proportion of missing men, and was far more than the flagging Wehrmacht could easily bear in any case.\(^8\) Barring the discovery of new records, the exact number of German casualties will likely remain uncertain, as will the percentage of those casualties who were POWs. This uncertainty helps to illustrate the emotionally corrosive effect such losses had on family members back home. The problem of not knowing left many trapped in the no-man’s land of grief on which the secret camp myth depended.

Though the Wehrmacht did reestablish a defensive front following Bagration, it was fragile and nowhere near capable of withstanding subsequent Soviet offensives for any length of time. In September 1944, a Soviet autumn offensive against Army Group North drove between it and the shattered remnants of Army Group Center to the south, reestablishing Soviet rule over the Baltic States and pinning Army Group North in Latvia’s Courland Peninsula.\(^9\) The Red Army trapped over 200,000 Germans, primarily from the 16\(^{th}\) and 18\(^{th}\) Armies, in that isthmus.\(^9\) Despite being thus cut off Army Group Courland, as Hitler had renamed Army Group North, held out until two days after the general German surrender in 1945 due to communications


\(^9\) Fritz, Ostkrieg, 355.

\(^9\) Clodfelter, 512-13.
difficulties. According to Soviet official sources, fewer than 190,000 members of Army Group Courland survived to go into Soviet captivity after that final surrender.91

By cutting Army Group Courland off in its namesake peninsula, the Red Army had removed the last major obstacle to its drive westward into East Prussia and Germany proper. This is important to the creation of the secret camp myth since these territories contained considerable numbers of German civilians and naval personnel. Dönitz ordered the evacuation of these Germans by sealift in January 1945, which included use of the massive ocean liner and Nazi Party showpiece Wilhelm Gustloff. Soviet submarine S-13 sank that ship on 30 January 1945 in what is generally considered the worst loss of life of any single maritime disaster, with perhaps as many as 9,400 passengers disappearing in the frigid Baltic Sea. There is a major problem with accounting for the missing of the Gustloff: the panicked nature of the evacuations in question. Civilian refugees fleeing the Red Army poured into any port that offered a chance of escape, and it is certain many more passengers were on board than were listed on her official manifest. Total crew and passengers of the Gustloff, then, may have been as high as 10,000, but as with so much else this remains an approximation.92 The Gustloff passengers therefore added to the total number of Germans missing under unconfirmable circumstances in the east, potentially alive in the secret camps. The German Navy collectively named the sealifts from the east “Operation Hannibal,” and experienced similar tragedies to that of the Gustloff such as the sinking of the Goya, from whose complement of approximately 7,000 only 175 survived.93 Of more specific importance to the developing German secret camp myth was that these lives were lost in such a way no recovery of most of the bodies was possible. Coupled with the incomplete

91 “May 13rd, 1945 From the Soviet Information Bureau,” viewed 31 May 2015, at http://eng.9may.ru/09.05.1945/eng_inform/m9004263.
92 Mazower, 541-2.
93 Clodfelter, 513.
knowledge of who exactly was on board these ships, the victims of the *Gustloff* and *Goya* sinking belong in the category of the ambiguous lost.

**Endkampf und Untergang: Germany’s Losses and Impending Defeat**

Elsewhere through late 1944 into 1945 the ragged line established after the conclusion of Bagration frayed and disintegrated. The last active formations participated in the climactic Battle of Berlin, but by that time they much more “paper” forces than anything else. By 1945, German units rarely had the actual numbers of men and equipment that official German records report. As an example, General Walther Wenck’s Twelfth Army, which was among the last operational forces in the Berlin area, was significantly understrength and comprised largely of scratch formations of Volkssturm militia and other irregulars grafted onto what remained of the withered original Wehrmacht divisions. It should come as no surprise that these units only infrequently and incompletely kept track of their actual strength, adding to the difficulty in tracking POWs and MIAs during the war’s final act.

Outside of Berlin, the Soviets managed further mass encirclements of German forces, particularly those attempting to hold back the red flood in Germany’s satellite allies. In Budapest, the Soviets trapped some 33,000 German and 37,000 Hungarian members of the city’s garrison, as well as well over 80,000 civilians. Three joint German-Hungarian break-in attempts failed in January 1945 and only 700 or so Germans soldiers managed to escape the encirclement. The remaining 60,000 Germans and Hungarians surrendered on 13 February.

The fall of Budapest heralded the accelerating collapse of any sort of organized German defensive front. Though German armies fought on in the East, they increasingly did so as

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95 Frieser et al, 922.
96 Mazower, 526.
disorganized, independent forces more concerned with holding the Red Army at bay long enough for civilians to flee westward, or to buy themselves enough time to surrender to the Anglo-Americans. Many German soldiers felt considerably less stigma in surrendering to the Western Allies, whom Nazi propaganda had not labeled as racial enemies per se. More practically, Germans rightly feared Soviet retaliation for Nazi war crimes, and thus had every practical reason to prefer to surrender to the Western Allies. Finally, soldiers were not alone in the East as the Red Army pressed ever closer. By continuing to fight on, they consciously bought time for the flood of civilian refugees to flee westward toward a hoped-for refuge behind British and American lines.97 This hectic, uncoordinated mass movement of both military and civilian groups guaranteed that many among vanished from any official accounting, disappearing somewhere in the confusion of collapsing fronts, evacuation attempts, and the oncoming Red Army. The problem of records once more complicates determining exactly how many soldiers and civilians vanished in this fashion. The Nazi state was no longer even nominally in control of the territory of Germany itself by early 1945, and unable to properly keep track of the hundreds of thousands of Germans, military and civilian, in movement across Central and Eastern Europe as the end approached. In some regions communities even reverted to traditional authorities and entirely ignored scattered, unrealistic last-ditch orders, despite the risk of retaliation by roving SS drumhead tribunals and other Nazi fanatics.98 As a result of this breakdown, German civilians had even less opportunity to keep in touch with those outside their immediate communities, to say nothing of finding information about their missing relatives.

Finally, there was Berlin. British and American strategic bombing had already pummeled much of the city into rubble by spring 1945, as the Red Army closed in on the doomed Nazi

97 Beevor, The Fall of Berlin, 193.
98 Fritz, Endkampf, 116-7.
capital. German troops within the ring consisted of a motley mix of about 45,000 Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS troops, which were supplemented by some 40,000 members of the Volkssturm militia, as well as substantial numbers of armed police and Hitler Youths. Their levels of quality varied considerably for while many of the Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS regulars were battle-hardened veterans, few others had much if any combat experience, save those members of the Volkssturm old enough to have served in the trenches of the First World War. What they all did have in common, however, was a lack of adequate equipment and ammunition. So too, they rarely if ever bothered to keep accurate record of their unit strength or casualty figures, which made later accounting for losses all but impossible outside of very broad strokes, feeding the uncertainty at the heart of the secret camp myth.

Opposing them were over a million and a half Red Army veterans, many of them with considerable urban warfare experience gained at Stalingrad and the other city fights of the long march westward. The sole hope the city’s defenders had was that Wenck’s Twelfth Army, one of the last operational Wehrmacht formation operating outside the Berlin encirclement, might yet achieve a break-in. This last, ragged hope died unfulfilled for though the Twelfth managed to fight its way into the suburb of Potsdam, it there ran up against Soviet resistance against which its exhausted, outnumbered, and underequipped men were incapable of fighting further. Oblivious to the macabre melodrama playing out in the Führer bunker, the Red Army pushed on towards the Reichstag, and Generals Helmuth Weidling and Hans Krebs opened surrender negotiations with Soviet General Vasily Chuikov on 1 May, delaying the actual capitulation until

\[99\] Clodfelter, 514.
\[100\] Beevor, The Fall of Berlin, 378.
the next day to allow a breakout attempt by the strongest elements of what remained of Berlin’s garrison.\textsuperscript{101}

Dönitz, Hitler’s nominal successor, initially stalled for time from his headquarters at Flensburg but on 7 May bowed to undeniable reality and accepted the unconditional surrender terms being offered by the Allies.\textsuperscript{102} Though remnants of Army Group Center refused to capitulate for an additional few days, 8 May was the effective end of the war in Europe and has been recognized as VE Day ever since. All across the shattered continent, defeated Germans began to slowly filter back into a Germany now divided into occupation zones. In the east, the Soviets began to expel German populations from places they had lived for centuries in accordance with terms set at the Yalta Conference in 1944. These displaced persons joined the masses of other refugees and expellees trying to find their way home, or to a new home, and it is hardly surprising that any number of them went missing in the confusion. This displacement contributed to the secret camp myth in two ways. First, it added to the overall number of missing people who might survive in the secret camps. More importantly, Germans felt the forced migration was deliberately punitive, and unwarranted Soviet aggression against its defeated enemy.\textsuperscript{103} This sense of victimization laid the foundation for the second aspect of the secret camp myth, by predisposing Germans to see themselves as victims of the war.

The end of hostilities brought any number of new priorities for both conquerors and conquered, among them the identification and return of those millions of POWs and civilian internees in Soviet captivity. The quantity of prisoners and missing men alone was intimidating, and as with so much else official accounts differ. German estimates range from as low as

\begin{footnotes}
\item[101] Beevor, The Fall of Berlin, 386-7.
\item[102] Ibid., 404-5.
\item[103] Stargardt, 549.
\end{footnotes}
541,505 men unaccounted for to just under 1.3 million, while the Soviets claim to have taken about 3.4 million German prisoners.104 The problem of resolving just whom the Soviets held or could confirm were dead, was staggering in its magnitude. In addition to the problem of records, Germans lacked any mechanism by which they could compel or induce the Soviets to share their own POW/MIA information. The nation lay devastated, occupied, and faced division at its conquerors’ hands. Moreover, those conquerors were not inclined to do Germans all that many favors, especially once they discovered just how black really were Germany’s crimes. How then were Germans to discover the fate of men who never returned from the Eastern Front? The methods they devised, and activism in which they engaged, helps illustrate both key aspects of secret camp mythology. Those trapped in the no-man’s land of grief found the concept of secret camps a lifeline to which they could cling, while those who wanted to construct something useful from the war discovered that POWs and MIAs could be recast as a new type of war hero. Interestingly, the rise and fall of the German secret camp myth also demonstrates how despite having far more missing people to account under circumstances that made secret captivity much more believable, Germans did managed to resolve satisfactorily their trauma over the missing in a way concerned Americans still have not.

104 Clodfelter, 515.
Chapter 2 – The Short-Lived German Secret Camp Myth

World War II left in its aftermath two key elements that led Germans to articulate the secret camp myth. First, that so many Germans had disappeared under ambiguous circumstances all but guaranteed a substantial number of civilians found themselves in the no-man’s land of grief. Unable to mourn losses they could not confirm, such individuals were often eager believers in the existence of rumored undocumented Soviet prison camps in which the missing might yet survive. Second, Germans found it difficult to salvage anything nationally useful from the war experience, both due to their devastating defeat and also Germany’s many war crimes. Those who sought to at least dilute such opprobrium used the suffering of German POWs in Soviet captivity as symbols of the larger victimization of conquered Germany itself, and as a way to symbolically place their own nation on the list of the war’s victims. The Soviet decision to retain substantial numbers of POWs as convicted war criminals following the end of regular prisoner repatriation made such a reconceptualization that much more appealing, as did continuing confusion about just who was still alive in their custody.

Germany lay shattered following the formal surrender in May 1945. All across the devastated map of Europe, people of virtually all nationalities were on the move. Not just former POWs, but also displaced civilians of all sorts attempted to make their way home, and to find families with whom they had had little if any recent contact. Against this backdrop, German POWs returned from Allied captivity, and family members tried to ascertain the fate of those who remained missing following repatriation. Prisoners returning from Anglo-American detention generally found that process be a straightforward one, in part since Germany had observed international POW conventions with regard to the Western Allies and received similar consideration in turn. Such was emphatically not the case between the belligerents on the Eastern
Front, and while Soviet treatment of German POWs was not as explicitly and avowedly murderous as the Nazi equivalent, nevertheless the non-observance of various convention rights, most importantly camp inspection by the International Red Cross, left many in Germany in the dark concerning whether or not their missing man was even alive, let alone what prison camp he might be in. What is more, repatriation from the USSR did not include a substantial minority of Germans whom the Soviets held as convicted war criminals sentenced to various terms of imprisonment. This all created the social environment where West Germans found it plausible to argue that other MIAs might still be alive in secret camps and advocate for the return of these presumed survivors from their ongoing Soviet captivity.

However, although the West German political establishment engaged with this constituency, the German secret camp myth did not long survive, and was functionally dead a mere decade after war’s end. With so many missing, why was German POW/MIA activism not a long-term affair? Importantly, though that activism did for a time become part of the national political conversation in West Germany after the Second World War, it was able to reach a satisfactory conclusion after which secret camp advocates were for the most part willing to cease their agitation, and admit that any remaining MIAs were almost certainly dead. Specifically, German social and political actors were able to satisfy this constituency by connecting that activism to larger redemptive themes of heroism and victimization and also by effecting the return of substantial numbers of live prisoners in the 1950s.

**Not Knowing: The German Home Front and lack of POW/MIA Information**

The nature of Germany’s defeat made it that much more difficult to ascertain just what had happened to the MIAs. Civilians no longer had to worry about their own government’s restrictions on asking questions, nor deal with the physical dangers of wartime, but peacetime
brought similar complications. The occupying powers discouraged POW/MIA activism, as they believed it was a reincarnation of the militarism that enabled Nazism in the first place, and that had so destabilized Germany following the First World War.

Having marched home in 1918 “undefeated on the battlefield,” veterans of the Western Front contributed greatly to the instability of the early Weimar government.\(^\text{105}\) Subsequently, veterans’ organizations like the Stahlhelm and Reichsbanner were active participants in the rowdy street brawls that became part and parcel of parliamentary politics during the troubled life of the Weimar Republic, to the point where they took on the mantle of “political combat leagues” (politische Kampfbünde).\(^\text{106}\) The brownshirited stormtroopers of the Nazi SA (Sturmabteilung) represented this blending of militaristic violence with politics taken to its logical extreme, and following the Second World War the Allies were determined to not let that particular part of the recent past repeat itself.

From the Allied perspective, militarism and Nazism were inescapably linked, and the latter would surely resurface were the former not suppressed.\(^\text{107}\) Given their role in destabilizing the only previous German attempt at democracy, the Western powers were suspicious of any thematically-similar organizations that arose in the aftermath of 1945, and saw to it that those that did limited themselves to domestic concerns such as arguing for the restoration of military pensions and similar issues. The occupation and partition of Germany’s into separate zones initially with a direct Allied military presence also contributed to keeping membership in such


\(^{107}\) Diehl, *Paramilitary Politics in Weimar Germany*, 55.
groups smaller than it might otherwise have been, as did the lack of a postwar narrative by which veterans could recast themselves as anything other than unequivocally defeated.\footnote{James Diehl, \textit{Thanks of the Fatherland: German Veterans after the Second World War}, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 1993), 232.}

In the Soviet zone, ideology continued to play a role in suppressing POW/MIA activism, though from a new direction. The Soviets quite understandably viewed German POWs as criminal invaders of the USSR, and supported the German Communist line that the only “good” Germans had been the comparatively small number of anti-fascist partisans.\footnote{Nicholas Stargardt, \textit{The German War: A Nation Under Arms 1939 – 1945}, (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 565.} This emphasis did not mesh with the reconceptualization of POWs and MIAs as redemptive hero-victims inherent in secret camp mythology.

German POW/MIA activism was slow to coalesce immediately following the war, as a consequence of these limitations, as was the secret camp myth itself. Individual family members of the missing instead acted independently. Some tried to contact Soviet authorities directly in an attempt to gain information about the missing, though they rarely met with much success. During the removal of the surviving remnants of Field Marshal Ferdinand Schörner’s army group in May 1945, German prisoners noticed women of attempting to reach their train when it was passing through Romania. They learned that these women were also German, and they were ostensibly trying to pass on food and supplies to the POWs despite the hostility of Soviet guards. This, those prisoners learned, was subterfuge as the women’s real motive was just to speak with as many prisoners en route to Soviet prison camps as possible. By so doing, these women both sought to pass messages along, and also learn what they could about their own missing relatives from these men. They then promulgated what little they had learned outward through a growing ad-hoc web of contacts among families of the missing. This informal network of personal...
relationships and word-of-mouth communications became the first conduit for information on
the missing within the German civilian population. However, much of the information
available was incomplete, and at times barely rose above the level of gossip and rumor, little of
which dissuaded the hopes of those trapped in the no-man’s land of grief. Undeterred, they
continued to expect joyous reunions when the POWs came home.

Heimkehrer: The Incomplete Return of German POWs from the USSR

From internment camps as distant as North America and the reaches of Siberia,
Germany’s POWs straggled their way back to the Fatherland. This mass movement was hindered
by Europe’s devastated transportation infrastructure and further complicated and slowed by
ongoing efforts to locate alleged war criminals among the service arms. This included both those
uniformed men who had participated in wartime atrocities as well as others who attempted to
hide from the Nazi hunters among the anonymous masses of men in bedraggled field grey
uniforms, of whom Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler was only the most notorious example. German family members of MIAs held out hope that their man would be among those slowly
returning, particularly from the Eastern Front where information about who was a POW versus
being truly unaccounted-for was even more fragmentary than elsewhere. On balance, the
Western Allies were fairly quick in returning their prisoners, though the French temporarily
retained considerable numbers of POWS for reconstruction labor purposes. Despite this
complication and others, German POWs from the west were more or less all home again by
1948, at the latest.

112 Diehl, Thanks of the Fatherland, 66.
By contrast, German prisoners were still returning from the Soviet Union in early 1949, which unlike the West included substantial numbers of civilian internees. Indeed, such were their numbers that in 1948 the emerging administration of West Germany established the Office for Displaced Persons (Amt für Heimatvertriebene) to centralize information and resources for issues pertaining to the missing and displaced. This office in turn became the Federal Ministry of Displaced Persons, Refugees, and War Victims (Bundesministerium für Vertriebene, Flüchtlinge, und Kriegsgeschädigte, or BMVT) following the parliamentary elections of 1949.

In both incarnations, this agency faced a considerable initial difficulty: finding out just how many POWs the Soviets even held, and who those men actually were. The BMVT determined that by late 1947, the Soviets had consolidated the majority of German POWs in five major clusters of POW camps, located near the cities of Chelyabinsk, Leningrad, Ufa, Moscow, and Riga. What they did not know was how many camps specifically existed, nor how many prisoners were in each camp, or even specifically whom the known POWs all were. Such uncertainties fed German anxieties and stoked fears about Soviet treatment of German POWs.

In an effort to cut through the wartime obfuscation of whom among all the men unaccounted for were known prisoners, the BMVT turned to the German population at large for assistance. Specifically, family members of the missing were asked to fill out registration cards.

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113 Reporting on the sluggish nature of POW repatriation in 1950, the BMVT reported that of their original estimate of 2 million POWs and 1.7 million MIAs, 1.76 million Germans in total had returned from the USSR, with at least 290,000 known POWs remaining, and 1.5 million MIAs still unaccounted-for. Bundesministerium für Angelegenheiten der Vertriebenen to Dr. Reichling, 26 January 1950, in Bundesarchiv-Koblenz, B150 – Bundesministerium für Vertriebene, Flüchtlinge, und Kriegsgeschädigte, 286A Arbeitsgemeinschaft der westdeutschen Länder für Kriegsgefangenen- und Heimkehrerfragen- Errichtung, Organisation, sitzung protokolle, Finanzierung.

114 Lothar Wieland, Das Bundesministerium für Vertriebenen, Flüchtlinge und Kriegsgeschädigte, (Frankfurt: Athenäum Verlag, 1968), 19.

115 Wieland, 22.

with information that could help identify their missing man, such as his last known location and battle or date when he had gone missing. This process had already worked with some success for POWs in the west, where mail contact mediated by the Red Cross between prisoners and their families had by and large been the rule. Understandably, the same process resulted in far less useful information when applied to missing Germans on the Eastern Front, where there was no comparable arrangement.\textsuperscript{117}

Given the comparative lack of concrete information about men missing in the east, Germans speculated widely about their missing men in first years after the war. They worked with information from many different, mostly informal sources. Many considered the testimony of POWs who had returned to be the most compelling, though it was not always particularly accurate. In particular, many POW returnees claimed to have heard of special “silent camps,” (\textit{Schweigelager}) which held unknown additional numbers of German prisoners. Supposedly, the Soviets maintained these silent camps separate from their conventional prison camps, to conceal prisoners whom they did not intend to return. Such rumors led to the first explicit articulation of the German secret camp myth when the \textit{Stuttgarter Zeitung} published the following in July 1949:

> Former members of the German-Romanian army, who arrived on Tuesday and Wednesday in Russian transports at a Hessian returnee camp, stated that former German soldiers of the Romanian Army were detained in huge "silent camp" in Donets at Kharkov and at Dnjepropetowsk. None of the occupants of these camps have been allowed to write.

> The camps were constructed by the Soviets using special lists of an estimated four million missing Germans since war's end and in addition to POWs, civilians, mostly women and children from the former German eastern territories are reported among the returnees still retained in the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{118}


This story was hardly alone in playing up the “silent” part of these camps. Once established, the West German government intentionally played up the enforced silence of prisoners as a way to rationalize their unreasonably high estimates of how many POWs might still be alive in Soviet prison camps.\footnote{Robert Moeller, War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany, (Los Angeles: University of California, 2001), 40.} After all, if there were at least some known prisoners who had been prevented by the Soviets from contacting their families prior to their repatriation, then who could say how many more men listed as MIA might still survive in these silent camps? This rationale appeared all the more reasonable given the official casualty narrative that hugely inflated the numbers of potentially surviving POWs in the east. So too, the very uncertainty of the entire situation encouraged West Germans to expect survival in the absence of positive proof of death rather than vice versa, given the presumed masses of unidentified men in these silent camps.

While West Germans believed that the overwhelming majority of their remaining missing men were in Soviet silent camps, they had a difficult time getting information about their missing men from other Eastern European nations as well, in particular Yugoslavia. Interestingly, despite being a non-Soviet aligned communist nation, Yugoslavia was similarly reticent in providing information about the German POWs they also retained much longer than the Western Allies. As late at July 1949, according to Der Tagesspeigel:

On Thursday the West German Chancellor - for the first time as "the Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany"- sent a telegram addressed to the western military governors to the 20 June Conference of Foreign Ministers in Paris as a protest note on the POW question. This step was taken as the German authorities had not received any answer to their appeal to the foreign ministers. They asked the military governors to transmit the text of that note to the foreign ministers. The Chancellor, we are also informed, also appealed to the occupation forces to encourage the governments of Yugoslavia and Albania to release their detained POWs and "ethnic Germans." According to investigation Yugoslavia has repatriated a total of 74,354 of the 85,453...
prisoners so far. Approximately 3900 have been sentenced to forced labor and more than 1300 are believed still in pre-trial custody. The rest have reportedly died in captivity without any official news from Yugoslavia.120

These men were admittedly incidental when compared to the much-larger number Germans believed potentially still be alive in Soviet custody, but they do help demonstrate how the international politics of POWs loomed large for West Germans and West Germany years after the end of the Second World War.

An important and complementary aspect of the larger POW question was experience of those men who returned to Germany from the USSR shortly after the war, versus that minority of POWs who languished in the so-called silent camps well into the 1950s. Regardless of which set of prison camps they had come from, the early returnees universally encountered little in the way of official reception or assistance in reintegration. This is hardly surprising, for two interconnected reasons: first, Germany was under foreign occupation immediately following the war and had no official government that might enact such policies. Second, even had that not been the case, Germany was economically and physically devastated, and dependent on its conquerors for the majority of its basic resources. As a consequence, early returnees received only a minimum of support following their formal processing out of service compared with later returnees who West Germany was more than able and willing to assist in reintegration by the prosperous 1950s.121

Reintegration of early returnees would have been difficult enough had their only problem been the economic and physical devastation of their homeland. However, they also experienced considerable social upheaval. German men returning from POW camps often found startling

120 “Erneute deutsche Protestnote in der Kriegsgefangenenfrage,” Der Tagesspiegel, 1 July 1949, 2.
changes in domestic gender relations and a considerable blurring of formerly distinct male and female spheres of activity. Wartime manpower and labor demands were the two primary drivers behind this upheaval, as Germany had had to call upon its female population increasingly as the conflict went against it. Even if wartime labor needs had not pushed women workers into Germany’s arms factories and elsewhere, the simple absence of men away at the fronts was more than sufficient to cause no small amount of social re-ordering as women assumed domestic responsibilities traditionally held by fathers and husbands. For men who had often sustained themselves in Soviet prison camps with dreams of a return to a settled home life, the shock of these changes could be as profound as anything else they experienced upon their return.\textsuperscript{122}

It is important to note that such potential difficulties with shifting gender relations was not a trivial matter, and have ramifications specific to those worries and fears that motivated the West German POW/MIA activism behind the German secret camp myth. Many Germans feared that time spent behind the wire had led not merely to degradation of the physical health of the POWs, but also of their very masculinity and sexuality. Germans feared that prolonged confinement in Soviet camps led to “dystrophy,” and pointed to the perceived derangement of sexual impulses and urges of many returnees as proof of its danger. Germans believed such afflicted individuals suffered from a, “retardation of the sexual constitution, which may pervert the undirected sexual impulse.”\textsuperscript{123} As time passed and men continued to languish in Soviet camps, both real and imagined, Germans increasingly worried about what sort of men might finally come home. After all, if the early returnees potentially suffered from physical and

\textsuperscript{122} Diehl, The Thanks of the Fatherland, 70.
sexually disorders, how much worse would it be for those who still lingered in secret Soviet camps?

Germans also feared their men would suffer from political contamination at the hands of their sinister Bolshevik captors. Though most of these fears were baseless, there was some small justification for such concerns since the Soviets had attempted to recruit German POWs into anti-fascist organizations during the war, albeit inconsistently. Indeed, several prominent captive generals, most notably the former commander of the doomed 6th Army, Field Marshal Friedrich Paulus, had joined the Soviet-sponsored National Committee for a Free Germany (Nationalkomitee Freies Deutschland, or NKFD) in late 1944, into which the Soviets had merged the earlier collaborationist League of German Officers (Bund Deutscher Offiziere, or BDO). Germans worried that the mere existence of these Soviet-sponsored organizations demonstrated communist contamination of German POWs, and knowledge that those groups actively propagandized not only to the masses of German POWs in Soviet prison camps, but also via radio only made such fears worse.

It is not surprising therefore that West German civilians feared that their returning POWs might be infected with the political ideology they had spent the war years despising and which, as embodied by the Red Army, most directly represented the utter devastation of their homeland. To be sure, those POWs who had collaborated with the Soviets represented a tiny minority of the overall prisoner population, but German civilians nevertheless feared imprisonment led to collaboration. One of the West German government’s first acts was to create a new category of civil and criminal law for those suspected of such improper behavior. West Germany held a few hundred of these “Kameradenschinder” (“torturers of their comrades”) trials in the late 1940s, on

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124 Biess, Homecomings, 23-4.
the strength of POW accusations of perceived disloyalty by their comrades. Such accusations invariably included some collaborationist element and focused almost exclusively on German POWs from the Eastern Front, demonstrating the persistence of anti-Soviet ideology even after the downfall of the Nazi regime.125

Despite these trials, there was no great turmoil in accepting the overwhelming majority of POWs back with open arms. Kameradenschinder trials invariably portrayed the accused as exceptions to the POW norm of passive-yet-noble resistance, a standard that helped add to the growing secret camp myth. In any case, Germans reserved the bulk of their loathing for those collaborators in high places such as Paulus and General Walter von Seydlitz.126 It was not in West Germans’ best interests to find too many of that sort of traitor anyway, or to dwell too deeply on what, exactly, they had done that was so reprehensible. They were after all not eager to discover any wartime complicity of the Wehrmacht with the various atrocities of the Nazi state, particularly if returning POWs were to be successfully reimagined in something approaching a heroic light.

**Kriegsverurteilte: German Prisoners in the USSR After Repatriation’s End**

1949 marked a major turning point for the German secret camp myth, for early that year the Soviets announced the end of regular repatriations, having by then released approximately 1.9 million German POWs. However, the end of repatriations did not mean the Soviets had returned all of their German prisoners. Shortly after announcing the end of repatriations, Radio Moscow (TASS) stated that the Soviet Union would retain some 13,536 other prisoners, both military and civilian. TASS declared that Soviet courts had convicted these prisoners of war

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125 Biess, Homecomings, 154.
126 Moeller, War Stories, 114.
crimes, and sentenced them to terms as long as twenty-five years in some cases.¹²⁷ Crucially for the emerging German secret camp myth, the mathematics of the missing did not add up. By German estimates, there were 2.7 million German POWs and MIAs on the eastern front at war’s end. Even allowing for the substantial number of POWs who had died in captivity, this left tens if not hundreds of thousands of Germans unaccounted-for on the Eastern Front. What is more, the official Soviet claim of how many war criminals they planned to retain significantly understated the actual number of such prisoners. More recent examinations of Soviet court records place that number closer to 34,000.¹²⁸ Though West Germans did not know how many exactly survived, and generally were not willing to take the Soviets at their word, they did know that there were live prisoners in the USSR. Here then was the German secret camp myth defined: live MIAs survived alongside those convicted POWs whom the Soviets admitted to holding, and did so in undisclosed silent camps, somewhere in the Soviet Union.

The way West Germans thought and spoke about these remaining prisoners, and the MIAs they hoped might survive alongside them in the silent camps, is illustrative of a key aspect of the secret camp phenomenon: that of postwar reconceptualization of the wartime hero-figure. West Germans found it difficult to salvage much that was symbolically useful from those who had served under the swastika, and what little the did find was unavoidably tainted. However, unlike other veterans, the heroic suffering of German POWs washed away at least some of national guilt via their victimization at the hands of the “barbarous” enemy. West Germans considered the prisoners who remained in Soviet custody after 1949 were even more useful in this regard since those men stood as persistent symbols of German victimization. Tellingly, West

Germans much more frequently used the term “Kriegsverurteilte” to refer to German POWs convicted of war crimes by Soviet courts. That they preferred that word, which translates best as “war convicted” or “war condemned,” as opposed “Kriegsverbrecher,” (“war criminal”), reflects a broadly felt if perhaps not widely stated public opinion.\textsuperscript{129} West Germans could well reason that while these prisoner might have been convicted of some charge, were they actually criminals, given the circumstances of those convictions? Even when the West German press used the phrase “war criminal,” by the 1950s it almost invariably qualified that term with “alleged” or “so-called,” thus to heavily imply that such allegations were suspect, save when a genuine Nazi bigwig was the subject of discussion.\textsuperscript{130}

This larger sentiment is itself a key element of why the German secret camp myth was explicitly a West German phenomenon rather than a more broadly German one. In the Soviet Occupation Zone, the German Communist (Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands, or KPD) predecessors of what became East Germany’s ruling Socialist Unity Party (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, or SED) were initially quite suspicious of returnees from the Soviet Union. Karl Lewke reported to the Party that those men constituted, One million anti-Bolsheviks heading our way…Every day, between 1,000 and 2,000 prisoners of war pass through the camp gates of Frankfurt/Oder to freedom. Tired, broken, and ragged, they disperse across Germany. Each one an agitator, each one an instigator against “communist” conditions. Each one, on account of his external appearance, a living demonstration of these very “communist” conditions. All things are twisted, appear in a bad light – if civilians and released prisoners of war meet.

What about acknowledging the shared responsibility of the German people – what about an objective, political discussion? Who in these chance group meeting speaks of reconstruction, collaboration, and the like? No, there is never any talk of that. Here, the consequences of a total war, the effects of a total defeat are merely the evil intentions of the even more evil Bolshevism. Forgotten is Hitler, forgotten Nazism. Indeed, even the

\textsuperscript{129}Biess, Homecomings, 219.
\textsuperscript{130}Norbert Frei, Adenauer’s Germany and the Nazi Past: The Politics of Amnesty and Integration, (New York: Columbia University, 2002), 177-8.
awful terrors of the battlefield, the fears, the horror of the thundering bombing nights of biting smoke – all this seems pushed into the distant past. They see only today, all their anger, their hatred is directed against this. They eagerly indulge in the hope of an imminent military confrontation between Russia and England-America. All Nazi insinuations fall on willing ears. The German legion set up by the English is already marching in the English zone. In fact, people know precisely: for four weeks the starved men are first nursed back, six weeks of home vacation makes them ready for new military training.\footnote{Karl Lewke to KPD, 2 December 1945, viewed 5 January 2016, at http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage_id=5679.}

In Lewke’s opinion, returning POWs were by definition suspect to Party plans to establish a new state built explicitly on an anti-fascist foundation.\footnote{Frank Biess, “Pioneers of a New Germany: Returning POWs from the Soviet Union and the making of East German Citizens, 1945 – 50,” \textit{Central European History}, Vol. 32, No. 2 (1999), 144.} While the SED initially shared this sentiment, in practice it tended towards pragmatism with regard to the early returnees. While not discounting that these men were politically suspect, the Party prioritized the need for their labor and economic contributions in rebuilding, and for the most part ignored low-level complicity in war crimes in the East.\footnote{Christina Morina, “Instructed Silence, Constructed Memory: the SED and return of German Prisoners of War as ‘War Criminals’ from the Soviet Union to East Germany, 1950-56,” \textit{Contemporary European History}, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Aug., 2004), 324.} After the end of Soviet repatriations, however, the SED hardened its line against the war convicts, whose sentences it held were legitimate.\footnote{Ibid., 325.} This official stance helped undercut the possibility of there being any sort of equivalent secret camp myth in East Germany, since not only were those men considered politically unreliable, the SED also rejected any state sanction for their conversion into convenient hero-victims of unwarranted Soviet barbarity.

West Germans reacted to the official end of repatriations with almost universal disbelief and outrage. Chancellor Konrad Adenauer interrupted debate on the floor of the Bundestag in May to proclaim that TASS’s statement had “left unclear the fate of 1.5 million POWs.”\footnote{Biess, \textit{Homecomings}, 180.} He was hardly alone in expressing such sentiments. That same month, \textit{Die Zeit}, ran a front-page

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[\footnote{Ibid., 325.}] Ibid., 325.
\item[\footnote{Biess, \textit{Homecomings}, 180.}] Biess, \textit{Homecomings}, 180.
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article on the subject, proclaiming that the Soviets’ proclamation was effectively a, “death
sentence for half a million German POWs.” ¹³⁶ Just over a month later, the Information Service
for POW Questions of the Länderrat of the American Occupation Zone published a declaration
on POWs, which was picked up by the United Press. That agency claimed, “The Soviet
Government continues to hold over 100,000 POWs. By some German estimates, they could
event amount to 600,000. [Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav] Molotov’s March 1947
statement of 890,532 German POWs could in no way be reconciled with Soviet wartime
communiques that spoke of 3,730,995 POWs.” ¹³⁷ The Stuttgarter Nachrichten followed suit in
July, arguing there might be over two million POWs still alive in the USSR. ¹³⁸

Every one of these claims took it as given that substantial numbers of MIAs survived
alongside that much smaller body of war convicted POWs, though perhaps not for long. Almost
without exception, they estimate a much higher numbers of potential POWs than could possibly
exist even under the best of circumstances. German POW/MIA advocates were working with
faulty data, whether they knew it or not. They had at hand only Soviet reports, which were
unreliable and mistrusted, and leftover wartime records, which WASt had intentionally
misrepresented for the sake of propaganda and ideology. While some activists were honestly
misled by these faulty sources of information, others were more cynically willing to accept
WASt figures at face value for their own reasons. Most prominently, Chancellor Adenauer and
Evangelical Relief Association chief and CDU delegate Eugen Gerstenmaier knew perfectly well

¹³⁷ “Erklärung Zur Kriegsgefangene,” 27 June 1949, in Bundesarchiv-Koblenz, B150 – Bundesministerium für
Vertriebene, Flüchtlinge, und Kriegsgeschädigte, 344A – Kriegsgefangenen in sowjetischen Lagern
that the idea of hundreds of thousands of surviving POWs after the end of regular reparations was entirely absurd, but perpetuated such claims regardless.139

Such statements also exist in the larger context of the emerging Cold War, and West German individuals and entities did not fail to capitalize on the Soviet declaration. The Social Democrats (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, or SPD) published a poster calling for the release of the, “5,000,000 who are missing” not long after the end of Soviet repatriations:

This poster contains a symbolic element crucial to understanding the evolution of the German secret camp myth and its iconography: men behind barbed wire. In this early depiction of Germans in a silent camp, the figures do not appear as emaciated wrecks, as they do in later

139 Frei, 136-7.
140 Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands – “5000000 fehlen, gebt sie frei!,” in Bundesarchiv, Plak 004-007-001.
images. They seem more bored than anything else, patiently waiting for someone to recognize their plight and set them free, but not noticeably suffering beyond their enforced absence.

Nevertheless, barbed wire menaces the foreground, demonstrating the involuntary nature of their confinement and implying how that confinement is enforced by violence. This SPD poster also served as prototype for later secret camp appeals, particularly after other groups and parties took the image of the POW/MIA to its logical conclusion, creating the vision of the German hero-victim so necessary for the redemptive aspect of the secret camp myth. More importantly, the focus here on barbed wire demonstrates the beginnings of an inversion of guilt and appropriation of suffering by using one of the most potent symbols of the Holocaust to recast German POWs in a role similar to that of Germany’s own victims.

Ordinary Germans did not take long to react to the Soviet declaration on the end of repatriations and, given the numbers of men unaccounted-for in the east, it is if anything surprising there was not a stronger public reaction. Their early appeals tended to for information rather than direct action. Consider the following response sent by the BMVT to a one Frau Wurst:

It's not easy to comply with your request for a "clear answer" on the silent camps in Russia, as there is hardly anyone in Germany who knows every detail concerning the actual conditions in Russia. As you well know the Russian authorities themselves claim to not be aware of any information about these POW camps, so we have to rely on the statements of the returning POWs. Returnee descriptions have developed the following depiction of the silent camps: There should be no doubt that there actually are a number of camps in Russia, from which no [prisoners] have written. Prisoners of War are moved to these camps to be punished for whatever reason (political liabilities, alleged lack of work ethic and similar causes). Their stay in such camps can, it seems, last for up to several years. On the other hand there are, in our experience with prisoners of war in Russia, hardly a case where the person concerned has not already had the opportunity to notify his kin in Germany. So far despite many loud rumors, there are entirely no proved cases of a prisoner of war spending his entire captivity in one of these silent camps. To our knowledge the official bodies invariably claim that any prisoners of war held in any way in Russia since the war has been allowed to send his family a message, and if they
have no news of him, it must be admitted that he is dead. Are you also in contact with the Search Service for Prisoners of War and the Missing in Stuttgart, Charlottenplatz 17? That service can in most cases provide addresses of homecomers, as well as last known Postnumber to families of the missing, and it is often able to provide information or at least clues about the fate of missing persons.

We regret that we cannot give you more satisfying information. It is extraordinarily oppressive for all parties involved that, four years after the war, there remains considerable ambiguity about the prisoners of war still in Russia, or dead in Russian captivity. Negotiations on these matters will continue with the occupying powers and we hope that they succeed, and one day induce the Soviet Union to provide clear information.¹⁴¹

Frau Wurst was not alone in in her search for information on the missing, nor was she the only one having difficulty determining the proper place to begin such a search. Repeatedly, they found themselves up against two fundamental obstacles: the unreliability of German records, and the inaccessibility of Soviet authorities:

In reply to your letter of 7 January 1949 I inform you that according to the documents presented by the Department on POWs questions, POWs are often sentenced for the smallest of offenses to significant penalties and transported to prison camps. During this time the convicts do not have the opportunity to contact their families. In many cases, however, it was found that after a certain time these convicts are released prior to having completed their sentence in the prison camp and are assigned to a normal POW camp. However, since this release from prison depends on many contingencies, I'm unable to tell you with certainty whether and to what extent your son must serve this punishment. Given the insignificance of his offence, however, it is likely he did not serve the full seven years of his sentence. Unfortunately, there is little opportunity to learn more about your son, as the Russian authorities provide no information about such prisoners.¹⁴²

In this response, the BMVT cast clear responsibility for any lack of information entirely on the Soviet government, and suggested that the former enemy knew more about the missing than he was saying. The BMVT here also implied that the Soviets had it in their power to help, but had chosen not so to do. In reality, Soviet inability to answer West German inquiries about

¹⁴¹ H. Blattman to Frau Wurst, 13 June 1949, in Bundesarchiv-Koblenz, B150 – Bundesministerium für Vertriebene, Flüchtlinge, und Kriegsgeschädigte, 344A – Kriegsgefangenen in sowjetischen Lagern.
¹⁴² E. Bach to Odo Stoellger, 12 January 1949, in Bundesarchiv-Koblenz, B150 – Bundesministerium für Vertriebene, Flüchtlinge, und Kriegsgeschädigte, 344A – Kriegsgefangenen in sowjetischen Lagern
the unaccounted-for owed more to practical and logistical complications than it did to any intentional malice on the part of Moscow. The Soviets had had a hard time even keeping track of their own casualties during the war, so vast was the scale of fighting and carnage on the Eastern Front. To this day, body recovery continues in Russia, with teams uncovering a mass burial site on the Neva near the old Leningrad siege lines as recently as the summer of 2013.\textsuperscript{143} Since the USSR had been so devastated by the German invasion and subsequent liberation, that state can hardly be blamed for not prioritizing record keeping on German prisoners and casualties.

**Das Kriegsgefangeneproblem: The Politics of POW/MIA Advocacy**

German POW/MIA activism took on more concrete forms following the end of regular repatriations, with distinct organizations assuming prominent roles in the ongoing search for West Germany’s missing. Two groups, the German Red Cross (Deutsche Roten Kreuz, or DRK) and the Association of Returnees (Verband der Heimkehrer, or VdH), played significant roles in that search. The DRK in particular interacted closely with the government of Chancellor Adenauer in what was admittedly a complicated and occasionally critical relationship.

DRK president Heinrich Weitz was more than just professionally interested in determining the fate of Germany’s missing. His son was among those unaccounted-for in the USSR.\textsuperscript{144} Unsurprisingly, he had campaigned to make POW/MIA accounting a priority within the DRK even before winning election as president of that organization in 1952. After his election, he was instrumental in shifting the lion’s share of DRK activities toward locating remaining prisoners, and accounting for the missing. Indeed, he was the driving force behind the DRK proposing a resolution at the 1952 International Conference of the Red Cross to complete


\textsuperscript{144} Riesenberger, 11.
the accounting process, and also to gain the release of the “war convicted” still in Soviet custody.\textsuperscript{145}

A key moment in the evolution of the DRK’s strategy towards gaining the release of those remaining German POWs came in 1952 at the 18\textsuperscript{th} International Conference of the Red Cross in Toronto. At that conference, the DRK found concrete reasons to be hopeful, but also experienced a setback. Specifically, the DRK delegation drew considerable encouragement from an agreement between The Peoples’ Republic of China and Japan for the former to return approximately 63,000 Japanese POWs still held in China, with each nation’s Red Cross Society acting as intermediaries.\textsuperscript{146} Despite this, the DRK itself experienced precious little sympathy from other delegations when it came to lobbying on behalf of the war convicted, and any live MIAs who might be with them in the silent camps. Weitz put this hostility down to the persistent taint of Nazism, which limited international sympathies for those Germans convicted of war crimes. As the DRK delegation had well learned at the 1952 Toronto conference, they could, “expect little from general proclamations, as these always amount to moral indictments, which only reinforce the negative attitudes of detaining countries all the more.”\textsuperscript{147} Put more plainly, DRK attempts win outside sympathy by painting German POWs as victims of the war failed since no one had any doubts about just why those men had been in Soviet Russia in the first place.

Weitz therefore concluded that the DRK needed to focus on both reconstructing the image of the missing, as well as to try to develop some manner of direct line of communication with the Soviets, whether through the Soviet Red Cross or government directly. He hoped that

\textsuperscript{145} Riesenberger, 9.
\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 12.
\textsuperscript{147} “Präsidiumssitzung des DRK, Bonn, etwa Juni 1952” in ibid., 27.
by focusing on the humanity of the POWs he could thus tug at heartstrings while downplaying the inconvenient aspects of those men, hopefully without having to consciously remind anyone just why, exactly, they were still held prisoner. He also hoped this approach would avoid directly pointing an accusatory finger at the USSR.\(^\text{148}\) In addition to the problem of war crimes, the DRK and West German POW/MIA also had to grapple with their comparative lack of leverage. Even ignoring the moral ambiguity surrounding the entire issue of German POWs, these advocates were citizens of a nation that was still recovering from the war, despite the “economic miracle” already underway by the early 1950s. Even were they able to open direct talks with the Soviets about the war convicted and missing men, how could they induce them to release those men? The politics of the early Cold War also played a part here, for the more West Germany became a solid member of the West, the less likely its POW/MIA activists were to find a cooperative partner in Moscow.

Weitz’s second chief goal was to develop contacts with the Soviet Union in the hopes of achieving some manner of direct talks on the subject of the war convicted. Such an aim risked further entangling German POW/MIA activism in the national politics of West Germany however, since it threatened to trespass on territory that the most prominent statesman in the new nation, Chancellor Adenauer, considered his personal preserve. Adenauer had already made repatriation of those remaining POWs part of his foreign policy toward the Soviet Union, which included any number of missing men allegedly in the alleged silent camps. Unlike Weitz, and potentially at cross-purposes with the DRK President, Adenauer thought POW/MIA matters a secondary concern to his larger plan of gaining increased recognition and legitimacy for West

\(^{148}\) Riesenberger, 28
Germany. He also hoped that developing diplomatic and economic ties to the USSR would help marginalize the rival East German state, which required a delicate balancing act between repairing West Germany’s relationship with the rest of the west generally, and the United States in particular, while not overly alienating the Soviets. West Germany was, after all, a new country only just emerging from occupation and seeking to rediscover its place within a European order that was itself changing and shifting due to decolonization struggles and the rising dominance of the two superpowers.

Though whether Adenauer personally believed in the existence of the silent camps is unclear, what is certain is that he considered activism on the issue to be subordinate to his larger policy goals. He embraced it when it served his ends, and distanced himself from it when it did not. In particular, Adenauer was determined not to allow independent action by activists and secret camp advocates to get out of control, or to upstage him personally. He repeatedly discouraged attempts by the DRK to send a delegation to Moscow to negotiate directly with the Soviet Red Cross and government after 1949. Writing to Weitz in early 1953, Adenauer informed him that a visit Weitz had been discussing with State Secretary Walter Hallstein would only serve to raise false hopes in the families of the missing. Since Adenauer believed there was no chance the DRK would be able to wrest any concessions from the Soviets, he did not approve the visit. Further, Adenauer argued appealing to the Western Powers was a more effective way to win the return of Germany’s missing, and he feared those powers would see ulterior political motives in the DRK’s planned visit. Weitz attempted to answer such worries, but Adenauer’s

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151 Konrad Adenauer to Heinrich Weitz, 23 January 1953, in Riesenberger, 63-4.
interference effectively blocked DRK efforts to negotiate directly with the Soviets, and nothing came of that planned delegation to Moscow.

Adenauer was not the only politician to attempt to harness the potential of the secret camp myth for his own ends, though he was the most effective one so to do. SPD chairman Kurt Schumacher tried to make the return of prisoners from the USSR a campaign issue during the 1947 state elections in the British occupation zone.¹⁵² This effort appears to be the sole attempt by the SPD to wrest the POW/MIA issue away from Christian Democracy, and though individual SPD members were active in subsequent in secret camp advocacy, they presented no further collective challenge to CDU leadership on that issue. Similarly, West Germany’s right wing parties, such as the National Democratic Party (Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands, or NPD), were content to leave the issue well enough alone, perhaps as reimaging POWs/MIAs as passively redemptive hero-victims clashed with the older, inherited Nazi hero cult conception of the glorious dead.

Appropriated Suffering: POWs/MIAs as Redemptive Figures

The second major group to advocate on behalf of missing Germans was the Association of Returnees (Verband der Heimkehrer, or VdH), which grew out of the 1950 merger of two state-level organizations that had developed incrementally after the war.¹⁵³ Though the VdH did advocate for the return of the war convicted and those missing men whom it believed alive in the silent camps, it did not focus exclusively on the secret camp issue. Rather, the VdH’s larger

¹⁵³ These two groups were the Central Association of Returnees (Zentralverband der Heimkehrer) and the Federal Association of Returnees (Bundesverband der Heimkehrer). Other, smaller organizations were quick to follow suit and join with the VdH. Diehl, Thanks of the Fatherland, 93.
concern was returnee issues generally, and while they prioritized POW/MIA concerns, they had many other attendant ones given the scope of displaced Germans across Europe.

VdH’s POW/MIA advocacy heavily emphasized the redemptive nature of POW suffering and victimization in explicitly religious and Christian fashion, intended both to portray missing and imprisoned Germans in as sympathetic a light as possible and also to contrast with the atheistic Soviet Union. The VdH made publicizing the fate of unreleased POWs its primary mission after 1949 by targeting their appeals via mass media. They flooded daily newspapers across West Germany with horror stories about the Soviet camps as told by POW returnees, with the heavy implication that those Germans who remained imprisoned by the Soviets were experiencing even worse treatment. The VdH also used returnee testimony to confirm the popular belief that POW war crimes convictions were nothing more than the result of communist vindictiveness and harsh victor’s justice.\(^{154}\)

Such a focus on German suffering in Soviets hands reflected the sentiments of the VdH’s membership. Its monthly newspaper, Der Heimkehrer, regularly contained articles and letters from individual members arguing that no one adequately acknowledged German suffering and victimization from the war, particularly that of the men in Soviet custody. While most did admit that Germany’s war crimes were horrific, and deserved some degree of punishment, nevertheless many VdH members argued that the Allies overstated their scope, and that German suffering in the silent camps was actually the worse of the two.\(^{155}\)

VdH publicity efforts culminated in two exhibitions that toured West Germany in the early 1950s and that attracted record numbers of visitors, including Bundestag deputies:


“Prisoners of War Speak,” and “We Admonish,” both of which were underwritten by the West German government.\textsuperscript{156} Much like earlier news media appeals, both of these exhibitions invariably emphasized the imagined brutality of the silent camps, with gaunt, shaved-headed Germans silently enduring communist barbarity behind the wire.\textsuperscript{157} By using such specific imagery, the VdH symbolically transformed German POWs from war criminals into hero-victims. Such representations take the reconceptualization of POWs, and appropriation of others’ suffering that first appeared the SPD’s “5000000 fehlen” poster to its logical conclusion:

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\textsuperscript{156}Moeller, \textit{War Stories}, 40.
\textsuperscript{157}Ibid., 40-1.
\textsuperscript{158}VdH, “Unsere Kriegsgefangenen und die Verschleppten als Sowjetterror klagen an,” in Bundesarchiv – Plak 005-047-049
As before, barbed wire dominates the image, but now the prisoner is reduced from an anonymous crowd to a single, solitary individual, clearly suffering but nevertheless retaining a degree of passive defiance and dignity. A key, powerful message lay beneath all of these images and reinforced a growing sentiment in West Germany in the late 1940s: for all the horrors of the Second World War and the Nazi state, the people of Germany were as much victims of that war as anyone else.

The use of such potent symbols and depictions demonstrates a remarkable attempt at inverting of the realities of the war. The gaunt, bedraggled figures of these images cannot help but call to mind images of emaciated victims of Nazi concentration camps, as too did the emphasis on barbed wire. By using such similar imagery and thus implying similar victimization

159 VdH, “Wir mahnen,” in Bundesarchiv, Plak 005-047-045
of German POWs at Soviet hands, the proponents of the German secret camp myth were appropriating the suffering of Germany’s own victims. Moreover, they were using that appropriated suffering in service of rehabilitating and elevating men who had inflicted that original suffering upon the victims of Germany’s own camps, at however many removes. There is a deep irony at play here as well, as having collectively been aware of and, often, active perpetrators of Nazi crimes against humanity, Germans were already familiar with the meaning and impact of such images they now used to emphasize the plight of their own missing men. Though himself a victim of the Nazi state, Chancellor Adenauer demonstrated a mastery of this language of borrowed victimization and appropriated suffering when he spoke at a POW commemoration event in 1950. He used terms many West Germans had already internalized when he asked if, “ever before in history millions of people have been sentenced with such heartlessness to misery and misfortune?"161 This re-casting of West Germany’s missing as hero-victims of Soviet barbarity thus also acted to manufacture an equivalence of suffering between Germans and their own victims, where it did not seek to mute the voices of latter entirely.

This reconceptualization is also important to understand another aspect of why the secret camp myth was so specifically a West German social phenomenon, rather than a pan-German one. Not only was the POW not a suitable figure for canonization East Germany for political reasons, there also was no comparable empty social space into which he might step. The SED had already established the partisan and the resistance fighter as the only “good” Germans of the war, to bolster both its own legitimacy as ruling party and also its larger plan to establish anti-fascism as the raison d’être for East Germany more generally.162 With such a hero figure already

162 Morina, 326-7.
in place, it is hardly surprising that the SED had no room for any other, particularly one as antagonistic to the party line as West Germany’s hero-victim POW/MIA would have been.

More than just a particular inversion of victimization, the VdH’s campaign also played to the parallel “Clean Hands” myth by which surviving Wehrmacht leadership were re-writing and whitewashing the history of the regular army on the Eastern Front. By arguing that “war criminal” POWs were merely the unfortunate victims of Soviet vindictiveness, the VdH was indirectly arguing against the very existence of war criminals within the ranks of the Wehrmacht. After all, if these men’s convictions were just the result of Stalinist show trials, then it was much easier to believe that other allegations of war crimes, perhaps all allegations of war crimes supposedly committed by the ordinary men on the Eastern Front, were similarly fabricated. This thought process transferred any remaining war guilt onto the shoulders of the Nazi Party elites and their SS cronies, leaving behind common soldiers innocent of any particular wrongdoing. Unbelievable as it may seem, there was a minority presence within the VdH that even attempted to apply this redemptive counter-narrative to the Waffen-SS as well. Specifically, at the first VdH meeting to include former SS members, which took place in October 1952, former SS paratrooper General Herman Bernhard Ramcke gave a fiery speech about how the only real war criminals were the Western Allies. This caused considerable embarrassment for the VdH as an organization, which the rousing applause he received from his immediate audience made all the worse.

This process conceptually transformed the soldiers of the Wehrmacht into apolitical men who did their duty to the Fatherland, only to be punished by the vengeful communist enemy after the war. More tellingly, the Clean Hands myth also reinforced the secret camp myth by

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163 Biess, Homecomings, 114.
portraying all soldiers of the Wehrmacht as men who had been tricked, and victimized, by the illegitimate Nazi state, with the men trapped in the silent camps thus experiencing a subsequent victimization by the vengeance-maddened communists.\textsuperscript{164} Though German POW/MIA activism and belief in secret camps did eventually subside, it nevertheless helped reinforce that larger false narrative, which persisted for decades.

Taken together, then, the DRK and VdH represented the respectable portion of German secret camp advocacy. Both organizations had complicated relationships with official government policy and were at times frustrated by that government’s inability or refusal to act more strenuously on behalf of the men the Soviets retained after 1949, which included both those POWs known to exist and the hoped-for surviving MIAs in the silent camps. The membership of both were intimately connected with West Germany’s missing men, and given the total mobilization of German society for the war effort it would have been surprising if it were not.

\textbf{Delayed Homecomings: Late Returnees and Decline of the Secret Camp Myth}

Despite the number of men West Germans believed potentially still alive in the silent camps, and the plausibility of Stalinist Russia potentially concealing how many live prisoners it held, the secret camp myth was remarkably short-lived. Two key moments that help explain the briefness of this phenomenon: the years 1953-54, and 1955-56. First, early in 1953 Josef Stalin died, allowing less hardline and doctrinaire figures within the Soviet political leadership to moderate certain elements of state policy, POW retention among them. At the same time, a failed uprising in East Germany necessitated some sort of action on the part of Moscow to bolster the

legitimacy of its SED clients, which took the form of the release of approximately 10,000 POWs and 2,000 civilian internees.\textsuperscript{165}

One could be forgiven for thinking that the emergence of live POWs from Soviet captivity in 1953 would embolden German POW/MIA activism, and to a point that is correct. However, a mere handful of years later the secret camp myth was functionally dead, its advocacy groups mostly disbanded or redirected to other concerns, and its adherents more or less demobilized. The 1955 visit of Chancellor Adenauer to Moscow and subsequent release of the remaining war convicted was crucial to this remarkable reversal, and built upon the earlier 1953-54 release. Though neither Adenauer nor anyone else in West Germany was aware of it, the Soviet leadership had been looking for an excuse to get rid of these prisoners, who had become a political embarrassment as well as a roadblock to the re-engagement with the West that the Soviets had been maneuvering toward ever since the death of Stalin. The Kremlin presented this final prisoner release as a “goodwill gesture,” demonstrating once more how the entire drama of POW politics played out against the backdrop of the Cold War.\textsuperscript{166}

Regardless of their feelings on Soviet motives behind the 1953 release, West Germans had high expectations for the late returnees, which dovetailed with the new hero narrative that they had already applied to those men. Specifically, West Germans hoped that these men could re-insert the moral character, which presumably allowed them to resist communist contamination for so long, back into West German society, and so prevent any moral degradation created by “economic miracle” of the early 1950s. Given how high the country had risen from the rubble of the war, some West Germans worried, “we’ve allowed ourselves to be seduced by the

\textsuperscript{166} Williams, 430.
exhilarating feeling of growing prosperity that has long drowned out anything unpleasant and disconcerting.”¹⁶⁷ Like the earlier returnees, these men would likely require a fair amount of assistance to overcome the deprivations of their captivity and to reintegrate into a German society so markedly different than that which they had last experienced prior to their wartime capture. Despite their often physical frailty, many West Germans hoped that these men would bring back into that society a sense of authentic German-ness that would add a moral dimension to the process of national rebuilding, and thus neuter the dangers of looming capitalist decadence.¹⁶⁸ This sentiment carried within it two important aspects of the secret camp myth. First, returning POWs could hardly be potential wellsprings of moral regeneration if West Germans did not broadly consider these men to be clean, or at least cleansed, of any war guilt. Second, as with the earlier returnees, whether or not these men had any particular inclination to act as national moral saviors seems to have mattered little to those determined to see them as such.

Unlike the lack of assistance it had given to the early returnees, West Germany actually followed through for the men who came home after 1953. The economic and physical situation was after all markedly different, in large part due to the “economic miracle” by which West Germany had so rapidly rebuilt itself. Much to the resentment of men who came home earlier, the government went out of its way to help the late returnees, in particular via the passage of the 1950 Returned Prisoner of War Law (also called the Returnee Law or Heimkehrergesetz), which not only granted economic assistance to late returnees but also gave them preferential treatment to access to housing, and whenever possible guaranteed them the return of their prewar jobs or

their equivalent.\(^\text{169}\) The VdH had lobbied heavily for the passage of this measure, and continued to press for additional compensation that had not been included in the original law. Its argument was that the late returnees had demonstrated that they were they “best citizens,” of West Germany, having “conquered new moral ground,” and “elevated the reputation of the German people,” by surviving Soviet captivity without being contaminated by communism. Such arguments demonstrated once more how West German POW/MIA advocates assigned morally redemptive character to the suffering of their missing men.\(^\text{170}\)

Despite a few initial problems, the final repatriation went off without much difficulty. Following Adenauer’s historic visit to Moscow in 1955 another 9,626 German POWs came home, and by early 1956 all remaining German POWs had returned.\(^\text{171}\) With those symbolic resurrections, West Germans apparently were able to as a whole accept that the remaining missing were, in fact, dead and gone. The end of the last round of repatriations in 1956 marked the effective end of popular German POW/MIA activism. The idea of the silent camps lingered for some time during the 1950s popular consciousness, and even served as backdrop for a short-lived subgenre of cult movies, but commanded no further major political action.\(^\text{172}\) Despite Adenauer’s interference with regards to dealing directly with the Soviets on the behalf of remaining German prisoners, Weitz and the DRK generally regarded that repatriation as victory enough, particularly since it led several years later to engagement with the Soviet Red Cross.\(^\text{173}\) For his part, Adenauer had largely used POW/MIA activism as a way to attract support from those interested parties for his larger policies designed to rehabilitate West Germany and secure

\(^{169}\) Diehl, The Thanks of the Fatherland, 101-2.  
\(^{170}\) Verband der Heimkehrer, “Entwurf zum Gesetz über die Entschädigung der deutschen Kriegsgefangenen,” in Biess, Homecomings, 111.  
\(^{171}\) Frei, 225.  
\(^{172}\) Stargardt, 557-8.  
\(^{173}\) Riesenberger, 20-1.
German sovereignty once more, at least in the West. Having achieved that, he had no further reason to be particularly concerned with future agitation on the POW/MIA issue.\(^{174}\) West Germans, for the most part, were more than satisfied with his efforts to rescue the men from the silent camps. Surveys taken in the late 1960s showed that 75\% of all West Germans polled ranked POW repatriation from the silent camps as the greatest accomplishment of Adenauer’s government, a sentiment that persisted well into the 1970s.\(^{175}\) The VdH, largest of the advocacy groups, was itself satisfied that it had gotten back all the live POWs, and through the rest of the 1950s transformed its mission into locating and accounting for the MIAs it was then willing to admit likely were dead somewhere in the East.\(^{176}\)

Despite the vast number of men missing, and initial plausibility of MIA survival in the murkily detailed Soviet camp system, the German secret camp myth lasted only just over a decade. On first inspection, this would appear to be the natural conclusion for such a phenomenon: considering the scale, scope, and racially-charged nature of warfare on the Eastern Front, one would expect that there would be a significant number of men unaccounted-for after the war. So too, with poor and at times intentionally-inaccurate wartime casualty reporting combined and the lingering ideological suspicion of the victorious enemy, it is unsurprising that some West Germans suspected that enemy had secretly retained live prisoners. For West Germans, the question was never one of the existence of prison camps after the end of regular repatriations, for the Soviets had openly admitted to them. Rather, they did not know how many of their men were among the war convicted, nor the specific camp locations where they might be found. Given the number of Germans unaccounted-for, it similarly makes sense that some of the

\(^{175}\) Moeller, “‘The Last Soldiers of the Great War,’” 143-4.
\(^{176}\) Diehl, *The Thanks of the Fatherland*, 177.
missing might well eventually resurface among those camps’ populations. With the final return of living POWs, then, West Germans were for the most part able to accept that their remaining MIAs were in reality dead. However true all of this was for the West German instance of the secret camp myth, there is a comparable myth birthed from a later war in another part of the world that set such expectations on their heads, and persisted far longer, for far less believable reasons.
Chapter 3 – Missing Americans in Southeast Asia and the Origins of POW/MIA Activism

The origins of the American secret camp myth can only be understood via the larger context of the war in Vietnam and the way America fought that war. The majority of America’s missing men came from the air services, and as the high professional and technical requirements of those assignments meant the American POW/MIA population was disproportionately filled by career officers, mostly white, and mostly middle-class or higher. The American military concentrated much its air power against the Ho Chi Minh trail and other supply routes, which led to great difficulty keeping track of downed airmen since they so often went down over sparsely populated jungles, which were often under enemy control. Relatives of the missing were frustrated in gaining information about their missing men’s status, both due to this general uncertainty and also to the covert nature of the air war. For many, the pain of not knowing left them trapped in the no-man’s land of grief, and facilitated their later belief in the existence of secret camps.

Casualty information from these air campaigns was frequently classified, and after the election of Richard Nixon in 1968, often entirely falsified to conceal his illegal broadening of the conflict. Frustrated by the lack of information on their husbands, wives of the missing banded together in an attempt to remedy that situation, and by so doing formed the first American POW/MIA advocacy group. At the same time, many among the MIA wives found themselves trapped between mourning loss and hoping for survival, that toxic psychic environment so vital for the birth of the secret camp myth. Their efforts to learn their husbands’ fates, particularly via engagement with the Nixon White House, laid the foundation for larger POW/MIA activism after the war, and also the birth of the American secret camp myth.
Prelude: American Involvement in Indochina

Vietnam was hardly the first major war in which American servicemen became prisoners or went missing. Indeed, compared with the two wars closest to it in time, the Second World War and Korean War, Vietnam's harvest of POWs/MIAs seems almost inconsequential. Well over seventy thousand Americans are still listed as not recovered from the Second World War. Shorter in duration and smaller in scale, the Korean War left just under eight thousand Americans unaccounted for. Compared with these numbers, even the most generous counting of men unaccounted for in Vietnam seems almost incidental, yet neither the Second World War nor the Korean War spawned such a peculiar form of advocacy of its own. What was it about Vietnam that made it so singular in American imaginations as to facilitate the creation of the long-lasting secret camp myth?

Vietnam, as part of Indochina, had been a French colony prior to the Second World War, during which time the Vichy regime lost it to the Japanese. France’s determination to reclaim it after that war made Indochina one of the early battlegrounds of the postwar movement toward decolonization. France's increasingly desperate efforts to retain control of its colony against Ho Chi Minh’s independence-seeking Viet Minh insurgency, as well as the simultaneous political discussions about how or if to grant greater autonomy to Indochina, progressively involved the United States in that conflict. During the Second World War, the US position on those remaining colonies of the European powers was largely as stated in the Atlantic Charter of 1941, which advocated, “respect[ing] the rights of all people to choose the form of government under which
they will live.”\textsuperscript{177} This principle however became secondary to larger Cold War concerns after the peace in 1945. Indeed, OSS Director William Donovan and State Department diplomat George Kennan both considered the Viet Minh to be a stalking-horse for the Soviets before the Second World War had even concluded.\textsuperscript{178} For their part, the French were not slow to recognize rising American fears about communist takeover in Southeast Asia, and used those fears both to keep the US from backing any proposed settlement in Indochina unfavorable to France, and also to convince Washington of the necessity of underwriting France's efforts in that region. By the end of 1950, the Truman administration had increased aid to the French to approximately $133 million, a sum that increased over the next four years, spurred on by criticisms over the “loss” of China in 1949 and the frustrating stalemate in Korea shortly thereafter. By the end of 1954, the US had underwritten over 80% of France's war in Indochina, a sum of nearly $3 billion.\textsuperscript{179}

No amount of US aid could prevent French defeat in Indochina, however. In a foretaste of the social unrest the next war would bring in the US, the French population divided over the fighting in Indochina, both over the brutal nature of the war on the ground, and also as it brought to the surface the tensions of empire in a nation that largely still considered itself the heir of 1789. In the event, military defeat in the field finally convinced the French government to switch from force to diplomacy as a means to end the conflict. France’s loss of its strategic base of Dien Bien Phu with its entire garrison spelled the end of French efforts to hold on to Indochina.\textsuperscript{180} The French appealed for direct American military intervention, in the form of massive, possibly even nuclear, airstrikes as last-ditch measure to save the base, to no avail. The Eisenhower Administration considered Dien Bien Phu doomed regardless of any US intervention.

\textsuperscript{177} Mark Atwood Lawrence, \textit{Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam}, (Berkeley: University of California, 2005), 24.  
\textsuperscript{178} Ibid., 99-100.  
\textsuperscript{179} Ibid., 276-77.  
\textsuperscript{180} Ibid., 277.
and also felt Congress unlikely to approval such relief in time, or indeed at all. With that
defeat, France's already faltering will to continue finally collapsed. The French and Ho's
government had engaged in intermittent negotiations since 1946, frequently interrupted by the
latest outbreak of fighting and rarely making any progress even when no such violence occurred,
but after Dien Bien Phu, France's only hope of wringing any concessions at all were pinned on
the discussions taking place in Geneva in 1954. The flawed nature of those Geneva Accords,
and the subsequent violation of their terms, drew the US deeper into Southeast Asian affairs,
including complicity with the unpopular South Vietnamese regime, and finally dragged it
incrementally into its own military quagmire in the Second Indochina War. The nature of that
war fundamentally shaped the American secret camp myth, as the US military’s emphasis on
counter-insurgency and supply interdiction played a key role in creating the missing men later
presumed to survive in the alleged secret camps.

The Geneva Accords mandated a division of Vietnam, North from South. Nominally, this
division was temporary and the accords scheduled national reunification elections for 1956.
However, the US's picked man in the South, Ngo Dinh Diem, undermined that provision and all-
but guaranteed the continued existence of two separate, ideologically antagonistic Vietnamese
states. Diem's anti-communist credentials, if not actual achievements, made him the best choice
in the eyes of the US as a nationalist alternative to the wildly popular but politically unacceptable
Ho. When Diem staged his own, rigged referendum in 1955, preempting the 1956 elections he

knew he could not win, the US moved to backstop his regime and the existence of a separate, non-communist South Vietnam. 182

Those who opposed the Diem regime in the south quickly organized to resist this preemption, including early elements of the National Liberation Front. The NLF, which Americans more commonly referred to by the pejorative slang of “Viet Cong,” grew into a full-blown insurgency that the anti-communist state in the south was unable to quash or eventually even contain by itself, and so drew increasing amounts of first American aid and then troops into Indochina. Stay-behind cadres of Viet Minh, who had remained in the south after the 1954 armistice, formed the most important seeds of the NLF, but indigenous political groups that opposed Diem played significant roles as well. The formal founding of the NLF came in 1960, after Hanoi shook off its earlier hesitation to back fully the southern insurgents. 183

This challenge to the legitimacy of South Vietnam took time to develop, of course, and Diem’s government did not initially consider it to be that dire of a threat. When President Dwight Eisenhower visited South Vietnam in 1957, Diem had greatly reduced the power of the nascent NLF and driven it piecemeal into hiding deep in the countryside. Somewhat surprisingly, Ho’s government in the north was not quick to support the southern insurgents. Ho still believed as late as 1956 that despite Diem’s subversion of Geneva and continued US support for his actions, a political reunification of the whole of Vietnam was possible. 184 By 1959 however, he had abandoned any such hopes and ordered North Vietnamese troops into neighboring Laos to begin construction of covert routes to the South as a preliminary action ahead of formally recognizing the NLF. This web of interconnected pathways and jungle trails

which eventually bore Ho’s own name progressively conveyed so much resupply and reinforcement as to draw considerable US attention.\textsuperscript{185} More important to the creation of the American secret camp myth, it also quickly drew American air power, and led to the loss of American airmen under often-ambiguous circumstances in remote, rugged terrain.

**The Trail: US Interdiction Efforts as Source of POWs and MIAs**

A covert supply route, the Ho Chi Minh trail was a network of paths and roadways, winding through regions sparsely populated even by the standards of Southeast Asia. The remote, inaccessible nature of the trail made rescue and recovery of those Americans lost during various aerial campaigns problematic, and often left information on their statuses incomplete. The North Vietnamese began infiltrating men and supplies in 1959, to supplement stay-behind cadres and formations already present. The trail itself was built upon the centuries-old network of small footpaths which connected the villages of the interior, which the North Vietnamese expanded and rationalized to the point where by the early 1960s foot, bicycle, and pack animal traffic had given way in many areas to motorized transport, chiefly using Soviet-bloc and Chinese trucks. US efforts to cut the trail concentrated largely on aerial interdiction since it ran through thick jungle terrain barely accessible otherwise, though there were a number of supporting ground operations as well. The remoteness and difficulty of access to targeted areas all but guaranteed that rescue and recovery of airmen shot down during interdiction actions would be a difficult matter, even for a military superpower with first class air assets. What is more, many of these campaigns fell into legal grey areas, or were explicitly illegal, which helped to restrict already-incomplete information about the missing. The inability to determine just what

had happened to these men fueled early rumors and suspicions that grew into the American secret camp Myth.

As early as 1956, the US had established and manned facilities in South Vietnam under the auspices of the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) for the purposes of training the nascent Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). Over 16,000 of these advisors and other US personnel were in country by 1963, and some of them ended up missing in action. As an example, on 22 April 1961, enemy guerillas ambushed and killed a four-man team of advisers operating in Laos. Though the US military initially classified all four casualties as “Killed in Action: Body not Recovered,” that classification later changed to “Unaccounted-For,” which all four officially remain to this day. These early losses were exceptions, however. The US lost the bulk of its POWs and MIAs following President Lyndon Johnson's 1964 escalation, often referred to as the “Americanization” of the war. In addition to the increased use of US ground troops, this escalation caused a dramatic upsurge in attempts to disrupt cross-border enclaves and traffic on the Ho Chi Minh trail, and as a result contributed to the creation of the secret camp myth via the increased casualty rates.

186 Statler, 196.
Who were these men who remain officially unaccounted for? Initially, each service arm was responsible for accounting for its missing men, as was the Department of Defense. At the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in January 1973, the figures of these separate entities listed a total of 1,986 POWs and MIAs, which dropped to 1,290 after the Operation Homecoming repatriation of known prisoners later that year. By way of comparison, a little over 58,000 American service personnel died in Southeast Asia between 1 November 1955 and 15 May 1975, out of a total 3.4 million who served in some capacity in Southeast Asia during the war.

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190 Michael Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Unending Vietnam War*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 2009), 210

Following the 1992 Senate hearings on POW/MIA matters, the Department of Defense’s POW/Missing Personnel Office centralized all the Vietnam-era casualty records.\textsuperscript{192} That office now maintains the official list of the missing, and provides valuable insight into exactly who was lost, where they were lost, and in what manner. This last point is an important one: while the list, broadly, is of those “Unaccounted-For,” it is not strictly a list of those missing in action. As with the example of the four advisers lost in Laos in 1961, a significant proportion of “unaccounted-for” are men whose fates are indeed known. Initial casualty reports did not include these men as POWs and MIAs, but subsequent revisions added them to those categories.\textsuperscript{193} The mathematics of the missing is itself an important part of the story. Pragmatic discovery and political intervention both caused men to be added to the rolls of the unaccounted-for, both during the war years and subsequently. Similarly, the delay between discovery and identification of remains confounds the larger question of just how many Americans truly remain missing in action, and inflate the potential population of the alleged secret camps.

Indeed, to this day men known to have been killed in action, but whose bodies were not recovered, outnumber those whose deaths are still only presumed, 852 to 749. The small remainder is comprised of a handful of missing civilians, and POWs known to have died in captivity but whose remains were not returned.\textsuperscript{194} In total, Defense Department statistics record 1,649 men still unaccounted-for in one of these ways, several of which transparently fail to meet any common sense definition of being truly “unaccounted-for.” Of these men, over half were Air Force and Navy aviators, numbering 883. Similarly, POWs and remains recovered after the war also come more frequently from aviators than from ground troops. The Air Force reports 332

\textsuperscript{193} Allen, 180.
POW returnees at war's end, as well as 481 men whose remains were eventually found and returned, as well 16 POWs known to have died in captivity, and one man (Jasper Page) who managed to escape from captivity on his own.\textsuperscript{195}

Breaking these statistics down even further, we see that of those 883 aviators still unaccounted for, the majority went down over Laos, North Vietnam, or Cambodia. The Air Force lists 197 lost over Laos, 181 over North Vietnam, and 27 over Cambodia, while for the Navy the numbers are 17 for Laos, and 255 for North Vietnam respectively. Conversely, the unaccounted-for from the Army and Marine Corps were overwhelmingly lost within South Vietnam, with only 167 men from both service arms going missing in Laos, North Vietnam, and Cambodia taken together.\textsuperscript{196} This is not of course to say that adherents of the secret camp myth focused exclusively on missing aviators, nor that lost ground troops were entirely absent from those adherents' attention, but pilots and aircrews who went missing over hostile territory were necessarily of greater interest after the war since they had been lost in significantly larger numbers.

The broader background of these men is also telling, beyond just their service arm. 1151 of those eventually accounted for, and 879 of those considered still unaccounted for were officers, opposed to only 442 and 670 enlisted men respectively.\textsuperscript{197} This too sets the majority of the missing apart from the bulk of men who served in Vietnam, as being officers they were much more likely to be volunteer, career men, rather than draftees. Additionally, as officers most of


these men were from at least the middle class, as the commissioned ranks required a college
degree, the exceptionally rare battlefield promotion notwithstanding.\textsuperscript{198} This is not to say that all
pilots and aircrew held full commissions, indeed many Army warrant officers in particular flew
the many of the Bell UH-1 “Huey” helicopters, but as a rule military flyers did not come from
the ranks, and generally also not from the working class.

Education contributed as well to racial differences between the missing and the larger
armed services more generally during Vietnam. The overwhelming majority of POWs and MIAs
were white, and race played a part in the secret camp myth. Upon entering the military, all
recruits took the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT). Along with other service-specific
exams, this test largely determined what each man’s military occupational track would be. High
scoring recruits ended up in categories I and II, which qualified them for technical and
intelligence work, which included most air service positions, whereas those in categories III and
IV were almost always destined either for basic support jobs or the combat infantry.\textsuperscript{199} Minority
recruits usually ended up in either III or IV due to having received inferior education earlier in
life, particularly those African Americans who had grown up prior to desegregation.\textsuperscript{200} The tests
themselves were culturally biased to favor whites and included material with which minorities
were considerably less likely to be familiar.\textsuperscript{201} Once assigned to categories III and IV, it was
exceptionally difficult to gain transfer to more technically sophisticated work and, in
combination with the college requirement, contributed further to making the pool of men most

\textsuperscript{198} Officer Candidate School, the main path for promising recruits (draftee or otherwise) to become officers,
generally had a degree prerequisite, and the Reserve Officer Training Corps and service academies were by
definition part of higher education. James Westheider, \textit{Fighting on Two Fronts: African Americans in the Vietnam
War}, (New York: New York University, 1997), 123.
\textsuperscript{199} Those who failed to even make it into Category IV were usually released from service. Ibid., 38.
\textsuperscript{200} Ibid., 38-9.
\textsuperscript{201} John Darrell Sherwood, \textit{Black Sailor, White Navy: Racial Unrest in the Fleet during the Vietnam War Era}, (New
York: NYU, 2007), 53-4.
likely to end up POW or MIA overwhelmingly white.\textsuperscript{202} The Air Force in particular further compounded this racial disparity by blanket-banning any carrier of sickle cell anemia traits from flying and aircrew positions, and those traits are genetically much more common in African Americans than in whites.\textsuperscript{203} Taken together, we have a clear picture of those men who ended up either missing or in captivity, and it is one that is important to why activism on their behalf persisted for so long. These men came from the established classes within larger American society. To be sure, not every man was a John McCain or James Stockdale, but collectively they were prominent enough to ensure that any group that advocated on their behalf could not be simply written off as a fringe element, or politically unimportant.

**Back to the Stone Age: Aerial Campaigns and their Missing Men**

Since airmen form the bulk of the populations of the alleged secret camps, it is important to examine more closely the specifics of those campaigns during which they were lost. In addition to direct support of ground units, American flyers conducted numerous interdiction campaigns against traffic on the trail, and also to break up known or suspected Viet Cong staging areas in Laos and, later in the war, Cambodia. Finally, the US used strategic bombing against North Vietnam in an effort to bring Hanoi to the bargaining table. Of these air campaigns, three concentrated on Laos: Operations Barrel Roll, Steel Tiger, and Commando Hunt. Operation MENU, a conglomeration of six subordinate operations named BREAKFAST, LUNCH, DINNER, SNACK, SUPPER, and DESSERT, targeted suspected NLF supply and concentration


\textsuperscript{203} This policy would remain in place until 1981, when medical testimony and congressional pressure finally convinced the Department of Defense to lift the ban, which seems to have never been about the actual science of the disease traits in question. Roland B. Scott, “US Air Force Revises Policy for Flying Personnel with Sickle Cell Trait,” *Journal of the National Medical Association*, Vol. 72, No. 9, 1982, 835-36.
areas in Cambodia. Finally, Operations Rolling Thunder, and Linebacker I and II brought air power to bear against North Vietnam directly. Taken together, these operations serve as useful examples of the nature of the war in the air, and its casualties.

Barrel Roll and Steel Tiger were the first major attempt to use air power for interdiction, as well as the first significant incursions into ostensibly neutral Laos. The mutual violation of that state's neutrality by both the US and North Vietnam predisposed each party to keep the other’s secret throughout the conflict, despite temptations to exploit the situation for propaganda purposes. This secrecy also had the unintended consequence of reinforcing the secret camp myth when it later emerged. After all, if both the US and North Vietnamese government had been lying about their activities in Laos during the war, why should anyone trust their casualty reports from those campaigns? POW/MIA activists could well be forgiven some skepticism of official accounts of these illegal operations, as they could quite rightly protest that both governments had every reason to minimize and downplay those actions, perhaps even to the point of writing off live MIAs for the sake of mutual convenience.

US efforts in Laos were concentrated mainly against the trail, as well as its North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao defenders. In 1964 the CIA attempted to build up the Royal Laotian Air Force for interdiction purposes via a scheme code-named Project Water Pump. This action served as precursor to both Barrel Roll and Steel Tiger, and employed mainly US T-28 Trojan training aircraft converted for ground attack. These efforts were however too small to be effective and suffered far too many casualties at any rate, with pilots barely coming on line fast

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enough to replace losses. Direct American action came later that same year, with the approval of Barrel Roll and Steel Tiger in December 1964.

The two campaigns ran concurrently and were mutually supporting. Steel Tiger consisted of operations flown over southern Laos and targeted the Ho Chi Minh trail and border sanctuaries primarily, while Barrel Roll took place over the northern parts of the country and was used more to directly assist the Laotian government in its struggle against the Pathet Lao. Of the two, Barrel Roll began in December 1964 and originally covered all air operations over Laos, until 1965 when its purpose was modified into direct support of Royal Laotian forces in the north of the country, when US commanders created Steel Tiger to replace its southern interdiction aspects. There was considerable variation in the type of aircraft used during Barrel Roll as American tacticians experimented with the most effective way to target the trail, and minimize losses from increasingly effective NLF/Pathet Lao air defenses. Everything from Korean War-vintage propeller-driven aircraft like the A-1 Skyraider to modern jet fighter-bombers such as the F-105 Thunderchief were employed, as was the massive B-52 Stratofortress strategic bomber. However, the jets proved less effective than propeller aircraft as the latter’s slower speed allowed for more accurate target acquisition and time over target. Though jet aircraft were never fully phased out of Barrel Roll, in part due to the Air Force’s enthusiasm for using the latest and greatest technology regardless of practicality, converted gunships such as the AC-47 and AC-130 “Puff the Magic Dragon” and “Spooky” carried out the bulk of early Barrel Roll strikes. In total, the US lost 131 aircraft during Barrel Roll raids between 1964 and 1973. As with other US-led air campaigns, the number of losses in Barrel Roll are not particularly heavy nor did they

come at a very high rate. The operation lost 131 aircraft over the course nine, and during the first week of the operation only two missions of four aircraft each flew over Laos, which the North Vietnamese may not have even noticed as a new US effort.208

Operation Steel Tiger split from Barrel Roll in April 1965 to cover interdiction duties over southern Laos. Like Barrel Roll itself, Steel Tiger was a motley affair conducted with many different aircraft and also like it, Steel Tiger was remarkably reflexive. The US ordered raids chiefly in reaction to the discovery of Vietnamese activities, and these raids were initially under considerable political oversight and constraint. American leadership feared collateral damage among civilian populations, both for its own sake and also for the risk of excessive casualties and exposing the covert air war to public view.209 This is not to say that civilian casualties were infrequent, however. As all air operations over Laos intensified through the end of 1965 and into spring of 1966, there were numerous incidents that led US Ambassador William Sullivan to restrict Steel Tiger's operational boundaries, as well as instituting similar constraints on other US air missions over Laos.210

That an ambassador had such broad authority over military operations may seem unusual, but in this case was just one aspect of the Johnson Administration’s tendency to micromanage the war. The president agreed with Sullivan’s recommendation that due to the potential damage aerial interdiction could do, both to US-Laos relations and also to the very concept of Laos as a neutral entity, US diplomats should coordinate the bombing closely with the Laotian government to keep them on board. More specifically, at a meeting of the Coordinating Committee for United States Missions in Southeast Asia (SEACOORD) on 27 March 1966, which Sullivan

208 Tilford, 67.
209 Van Staaveren, 66.
210 Ibid., 130.
chaired, all present agreed with his recommendations for restricting strikes and requiring target verification prior to any missions. From that meeting onward, his embassy staff had de facto control over authorizing targets on the strength of their coordination and recommendation powers, to the endless frustration of Air Force commanders.\textsuperscript{211}

Unlike Barrel Roll, Steel Tiger did not continue right up to the last days of direct American involvement in Southeast Asia. The Tet Offensive in 1968 cast aerial interdiction efforts into harsh light as Tet should not have been possible if Steel Tiger had been as successful as its proponents claimed. The subsequent pause in interdiction flights had the secondary effect of freeing Air Force resources for use against the trail in southern Laos and South Vietnam itself, as did President Johnson's decision to halt Operation Rolling Thunder raids against North Vietnam. Air Force commanders incorporated the existing Steel Tiger apparatus into these new efforts, called Operation Commando Hunt, which became the largest aerial interdiction campaign of the entire war.\textsuperscript{212}

Commando Hunt benefited doubly from inherited institutional experience gained from Steel Tiger and resources from Rolling Thunder, and massively increased the number and weight of missions against the Ho Chi Minh Trail compared to Steel Tiger. During the first phase between 1 November 1968 and 30 April 1969, Commando Hunt averaged 423 daily sorties.\textsuperscript{213} On paper, Commando Hunt was a resounding success, destroying or significantly damaging an estimated 46,000 enemy trucks according to official US record keeping.\textsuperscript{214} Like much else about Vietnam War record keeping, these results were optimistic, to put it politely. In that same year,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{211}Van Staaveren, 56-7.
\item 212 Tilford, 152-53.
\item 214 Ibid.
\end{itemize}
the CIA reported that North Vietnam’s Sino-Soviet allies had only sent it 6,000 vehicles in total.\textsuperscript{215} Much as US ground commanders fixated on “body count” as the ultimate measure of success or failure, aerial commanders pointed to this increasingly dubious “truck count” as proof that Commando Hunt was succeeding. Also like the body count, the truck count had less to do with observable reality than it did with inaccurate statistical estimates and wishful thinking. According the US’s own calculations, North Vietnam should have long since run out of vehicles to send down the trail, yet they continued to infiltrate men and supplies into the south.\textsuperscript{216}

Like Barrel Roll and Steel Tiger, Commando Hunt was not without its share of casualties. Like the casualties from those other campaigns, Commando Hunt’s POWs and MIAs helped to foster the secret camp myth by the ambiguous nature of their casualty status. In total, just under five hundred aircraft of all types were lost over Laos in these three operations. Approximately four hundred US airmen died, while a little more than five hundred ended up listed as MIA, or KIA-BNR.\textsuperscript{217} The covert nature of Commando Hunt raids, and the attendant difficulty in rescue and recovery in a country whose neutrality the US claimed to be respecting, was of equal importance to the creation of the secret camp myth. These men had gone missing in a region where, officially, no Americans other than a small number of advisors operated. During the war, this was concealed by falsified loss reports, which claimed they had gone missing somewhere on the South Vietnamese side of the border. Such deceptions inevitably angered the families of these men when they eventually discovered the government had been lying concerning the location and manner of their loved one’s disappearance. Such wartime deception about so emotionally powerful an issue was a significant contributing factor to MIA advocacy groups’

\textsuperscript{215} Tilford, 118.
\textsuperscript{217} Lamy, 1.
refusal after the war to accept any accounting by that government as full and complete. After all, the government had been lying about where and how the men had gone MIA in the first place, who was to say it was now telling the truth when it claimed they could not still be alive in secret captivity?

Laos was not the only geographic point of contention with regard to the missing, nor the only “secret war” that contributed to body of missing men lost under ambiguous circumstances. Similar to the more famous Ho Chi Minh Trail, the NLF also smuggled substantial amounts of supplies into South Vietnam from the Cambodian port of Sihanoukville. The Cambodian government under the leadership of Prince Norodom Sihanouk quietly turned a blind eye to such activities and also the establishment of sanctuaries and camps on their side of the admittedly poorly defined border. Sihanouk was not a supporter of the Hanoi regime and in particular resented the way it treated his country as a handmaiden, but was nevertheless a pragmatist and hoped a degree of passive accommodation would keep Cambodia from being further embroiled in the expanding war next door. President Richard Nixon's decision in 1969 covertly, and illegally, to strike these sanctuary and supply areas not only expanded the war itself but also resulted in another harvest of American servicemen missing in another remote, inhospitable part of Southeast Asia. More important to the secret camp myth, like their missing comrades from Laotian operations they went missing in places where, officially, no Americans operated.

The first of these Operation MENU raids was BREAKFAST, was the brainchild General Creighton Abrams who, in February 1969, was certain that US Intelligence had at long last located the elusive “Central Office for South Vietnam,” (COSVN) from which the North

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218 H. Bruce Franklin, MIA or Mythmaking in America, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 1992), 86.
Vietnamese and NLF were coordinating the southern insurgency. Abrams believed he had found the enemy’s headquarters in a sanctuary area located just across the Cambodian border, in the “fish hook” region. B-52s flying from Guam on the morning of 17 March 1969 and, under guidance from ground controllers who alone knew exactly where the bombers actually were, successfully converted several square miles of Cambodian jungle into flaming ruin, and turned for home without suffering a single loss.

Regardless of whether COSVN was in that area or indeed even existed as a discrete entity, the Nixon administration considered the attacks to be both successful on their own terms and more broadly a validation of covert raids across the Cambodian border. In reality the B-52s did little damage to enemy forces, as a Special Forces Daniel Boone team sent to recon Area 353 later that day found out to its dismay. Sent in to collect the few, presumably “dazed” communist survivors, these two Special Forces men (Bill Orthman and Barry Murphy) and their eleven accompanying ARVN soldiers found themselves in desperate need of rescue as their helicopters went down under heavy fire. Another helicopter made its way through the hail of bullets to rescue Orthman and three of the South Vietnamese soldiers, but Murphy died on the spot, and was not recovered. Like all other MENU casualties, his death was reported as having happened on the South Vietnamese side of the border via a sophisticated system of double-reporting and falsification designed conceal the raids from the public and, more importantly to Nixon, the prying eyes of Congress.

Additional missions, code-named LUNCH, SNACK, DINNER, DESSERT, and SUPPER, followed over the next fourteen months with a total of 3,650 more secret B-52 raids on
supposed Viet Cong base areas and resupply cadres inside the Cambodia.\textsuperscript{224} Despite this number of raids, MENU and its attendant “secret” ground incursions resulted in far fewer casualties than the Laotian or Vietnamese aerial campaigns, with only ninety men unaccounted-for.\textsuperscript{225} Despite this quantitative difference, the men lost over Cambodia had a disproportionate impact on the creation of the secret camp myth. Specifically, the covert and indeed illegal ways the US government had used and then lost these men contributed greatly to their families’ distrust of that government’s postwar accounting efforts. Since efforts to conceal the violation of Cambodian neutrality were that much more elaborate, and came to light alongside the Watergate scandal via the Congressional testimony of Air Force Major Hal Knight, these particular MIAs may have even weighed more heavily than their Laotian counterparts on those who already distrusted official government POW/MIA accounting efforts.\textsuperscript{226}

That is not to say that the secret camp myth was built entirely upon cases of men lost in covert actions at the periphery of the fighting in Vietnam itself. The major air campaigns in both Vietnams brought their own grim harvests of missing men whose ambiguous status contributed the myth’s creation. Though these men were lost during operations that were at least nominally legal, they were lost in larger numbers than the Laotian and Cambodian campaigns. As a result, they contributed to the growing number of casualties whose final fate remained ambiguous, and who could conceivably still be alive in secret captivity.

Operation Rolling Thunder was the first major air campaign over Vietnam proper. Casualties were correspondingly higher than in earlier raids, both due to the much larger scale of

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{224} Shawcross, 28.
\textsuperscript{226} Shawcross, 152.
\end{flushleft}
Rolling Thunder and also Soviet and Chinese advisors had helped the enemy develop increasingly effective air defenses. Hanoi in particular was protected by a sophisticated air defense network consisting of both modern surface to air missiles and anti-aircraft artillery. In 1965 and 1966 alone the Air Force lost a total of 489 aircraft over North Vietnam.\(^{227}\) By the close of Rolling Thunder, that number had risen to just under a thousand, with over eight hundred of their aircrew killed, captured, or otherwise lost. US records report 922 aircraft lost during Rolling Thunder, the majority brought down by Hanoi's air defense network. By contrast, the records kept by Chinese advisers in North Vietnam claim 1707 shot down with over 1500 more damaged throughout the campaign.\(^{228}\)

Rolling Thunder’s overall organization and structure also contributed to its comparatively higher casualty rate. Unlike the campaigns fought over Laos and Cambodia, Rolling Thunder bore a striking similarity to the strategic bombing philosophies of World War II. This is hardly surprising, since those senior officers involved with Rolling Thunder had either had their first experiences over Europe or Japan, or had come up in the shadows of men who had.\(^{229}\) While Air Force General Curtis LeMay's desire to “bomb them into the Stone Age” may be apocryphal, it is nevertheless demonstrative of the thinking of the men who planned and carried out Rolling Thunder.\(^{230}\) With leadership that was very much of an older mindset about how air power should be used, it is not surprising that those leaders would employ similar strategies and tactics that had led to such heavy losses in aircrews in the campaigns over Germany in that earlier war, despite the embrace of the remarkable technological advances since 1945. Rolling Thunder suffered as well from top-down managerial interference, with the Johnson administration instituting

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\(^{227}\) Tilford, 121-22.  
\(^{228}\) Prados, 126.  
\(^{229}\) Tilford, 95-6.  
\(^{230}\) Ibid., 98.
bombing halts periodically for political reasons, chiefly tied to the ongoing and often-stalled Paris peace talks. Rolling Thunder raids were suspended in October 1968, and officially halted one month later for this very reason.231

Finally, there were Operations Linebacker I and II. Linebacker I was essentially Rolling Thunder revamped and relaunched in 1972 in response to North Vietnam’s Easter Offensive of that year. Linebacker I began on 10 May 1973 and aimed fatally to damage the North Vietnamese attack by cutting off the supplies on which it fed. US aviators concentrated attacks both on the infiltration routes, and on the major points of entry into North Vietnam itself, such as the ports and rail crossings through which the Chinese and Soviets provided aid. It was a massive effort, utilizing not only B-52s but also most other types of bombing and attack aircraft in the American arsenal.232 All told, the US lost a total of 134 aircraft during Linebacker I and other air operations flown during the Easter Offensive.233

Informally known as the “Christmas Bombings,” Linebacker II took place 18-29 December 1972 to compel North Vietnam to return to the peace negotiations from which it had withdrawn in November. Unlike Linebacker I, which focused on precise strikes against enemy supplies and supply routes, Linebacker II intended to force the North Vietnamese to come back to the peace table via sheer, brutal, and at times seemingly indiscriminate destruction.234 In total, Linebacker II resulted in 15 B-52 losses, with a total of ninety two crewmen on board. Of those

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231 Allen, 17-18.
233 Tilford, 245.
234 Gilster, 75.
men, eighteen died, fifty-seven were either rescued or captured, and the remaining fifteen ended up listed as missing in action.235

A Full Accounting: POW/MIA Activism and Wartime Diplomacy

It is important to recognize that even as these air campaigns were ongoing, US leadership found ways to make domestic concern over the missing a part of its negotiating strategy, and to serve its larger war ends. Well before the conclusion of hostilities, the Nixon administration had raised concerns over POW/MIA issues in ways its predecessors had not. In the Joint Peace Proposal made by the US and South Vietnam, made public 25 January 1973, point 2 stated:

The release of all military men and innocent civilians captured throughout Indochina will be carried out in parallel with the troop withdrawals mentioned in point 1. Both sides will present a complete list of military men and innocent civilians held throughout Indochina on the day the agreement is signed. The release will begin on the same day as the troop withdrawals and will be completed when they are completed.236

This proposal carried within it an important seed of the secret camp myth to come. Specifically, the second sentence stipulates that both sides would present complete lists of exactly whom they held throughout not just North and South Vietnam, but all of Indochina. In other words, the US expected North Vietnam to account not just for the POWs they had taken, but rather for all known prisoners and missing men throughout the war zone, including Laos and Cambodia. The actual number of men unaccounted was and is disputable, since estimates varied considerably depending on who was counting and which men they chose to consider “missing in action.” Officially at least, the US claimed 1,335 of its men were in captivity at the time of the

Paris Peace Accords in January 1973. American POW/MIA activists repeatedly called for more information from the Vietnamese government concerning those men who remained unaccounted-for after the 1973 repatriation of known POWs. They almost always invoked some variation on a “full accounting” of the missing when they did so. No group has ever satisfactorily defined exactly what constituted a “full accounting.” The vague definition of this demand made it impossible to meet, and coupled with the ambiguous definitions of just who exactly was “unaccounted-for,” laid the groundwork for belief in MIA survival in secret camps for decades after the end of hostilities.

While the presence of captive and missing Americans in Southeast Asia is necessary for the secret camp myth to exist, it is not sufficient to explain that myth on its own. Since that myth grew from within Vietnam POW/MIA activism, it is important to understand how that activism came to exist, and what motivated the people within the movement. As the war in Vietnam ground seemingly endlessly onward, concerned individuals coalesced around the issue of determining status of POWs and accounting for the missing. The League of Wives of American Prisoners in Vietnam, which later changed its name to the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia, was the first coherent group that formed from this mass. The League grew to be a driving force in POW/MIA activism during the war and in its aftermath, and though it has never directly advocated for the existence of secret camps, it has played a crucial role in fostering that myth and encouraging believers in it.

Equally important to the rise of recognizable POW/MIA advocates was the manner in which the issue became enmeshed in the diplomatic and political maneuverings of the Nixon White House. Specifically, President Nixon saw in the efforts of the League a perfect
opportunity to hijack what could otherwise be yet another weapon in the anti-war movement’s arsenal. By lending official support and breaking from the Johnson-era policy of keeping POW/MIA relatives at arm’s length, Nixon sought to use POW/MIA activism as part of his efforts to recast himself as leader of a “respectable” peace movement, separate from the odious street-level rabble-rousing of the peaceniks. Specifically, by making accounting for the missing his own issue, Nixon sought to redirect its constituency into support for ending the war on his own terms, and at a time of his own choosing. The way in which Nixon engaged with the League and other POW/MIA activists is important to the rise of secret camp mythology since he overemphasized the number of POWs who could still be alive, then failed to bring home nearly this many in 1973. By setting expectations as high as he did, and then failing to satisfy them, Nixon encouraged the belief that the remainder were still alive, but secretly held elsewhere.

The rise of POW/MIA activist groups and their complicated relationship with official government accounting efforts helped shaped the emergence of the secret camp myth following the war. Who were these activists, and how did they become engaged in POW/MIA issues? The nucleus of postwar POW/MIA advocacy began long before America managed to disengage from direct involvement in Vietnam. The first real moment of activist organization came in 1967, when a group of San Diego POW/MIA wives coalesced around the remarkable person of Sybil Stockdale, wife of then-squadron commander James Stockdale, who had been shot down and taken prisoner two years earlier. POW/MIA wives occupied an odd non-place in the social hierarchy of officer’s wives and professional base life. That culture defined a wife’s status largely by that of her husband, and the ambiguous state of a captured or missing man thus translated into social distancing for wife and family left behind. Not yet widows, other military

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wives viewed them nevertheless as something closer to that than not. Isolated and initially lacking any official support mechanism, these women had organically drifted towards one another and became a de facto support group.\textsuperscript{239}

Though the military established housing for the immediate families of career men serving in Vietnam on the old Schilling Air Base in Salina, Kansas, no service arm initially notified POW/MIA wives of its existence. Indeed, the administration of Schilling Manor, as the base had been renamed in January 1966, did not want to allow POW/MIA wives to live there at all, fearing the impact their presence might have on the morale of the other wives. This changed in 1967 when POW wife Kathleen Bonnie Johnson found out about Schilling from an Army Times article and successfully applied for housing, but even then POW/MIA wives remained an outgroup among military dependents, albeit one to be pitied more than scorned.\textsuperscript{240}

The women of the League, and wives of POWs/MIAs more generally, cut very sympathetic figures in the emerging national narrative. Class played a part in this, since they tended to be middle- or upper-class, white, and married to men who were more often than not career officers. While the majority of Americans fighting in Vietnam were working-class draftees, those men only made up a small minority of POWs/MIAs.\textsuperscript{241} Given this distinction, the women who initially made up the majority of the League and of early POW/MIA activism generally were predisposed to stand apart from other wartime activist groups, particularly those of the anti-war left, as a “respectable” constituency. That many were also young and photogenic surely did not hurt, either.

\textsuperscript{239} Allen, 25-6.
\textsuperscript{241} Allen, 41.
Neither Wives Nor Widows: The League and early POW/MIA Activism

It is important to understand the initial makeup of this group of POW/MIA wives, since the early League eventually grew from a small support group to a bona fide special interest on par with any other in American politics. By their own account, these women initially found out about one another through the unofficial grapevine that lies just beneath the surface of career military life. The women who formed the League first met on 7 October 1966, when Sybil Stockdale and twelve other POW/MIA wives got together for lunch at her home in Coronado, CA. By her own account, Stockdale was surprised to learn that some of these women did not know the options available to them for seeking information about their missing husbands. The meeting lasted all afternoon, as the women talked about what they did know, rumors they had heard, and potential points of contact within the military and government of which others might avail themselves. Stockdale and the others met again the next month, and soon made such meetings a regular event that grew in size as additional wives heard about the group through word of mouth. The group formalized its name and organizational structure the following year in 1967. Now officially the League of Wives of American Vietnam Prisoners of War, the group prepared itself to contact the government formally in an effort to gain more information about their missing husbands, though they did not yet see the need to lobby directly for their release.

The initial motivation of the League was primarily informational in nature, a desire to discover just what had happened to their husbands. The idea of POW/MIA accounting, of determining what, exactly, had happened to the missing has been its core mission ever since. Indeed, to this very day the League lists obtaining, “the fullest possible accounting for the missing” as it second most important aim, just behind obtaining the release of any remaining

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242 Sybil Stockdale, 145-46.
POWs.244

This quest for information on the missing was crucially important on an individual level to the wives of the League. Many of these women found themselves in a psychic no-man's land, young, often recently married and with small children, separated from their husbands and with no certainty of ever necessarily being reunited. “We're not divorced, not widowed, and we're not really married either,” was the sentiment of POW wife Eileen Cormier.245 She was far from the only League woman to experience this sense of ambiguity, of being trapped between hope and mourning. Evelyn Grubb, wife of POW Captain Wilmer “Newk” Grubb, who was shot down in 1966 and subsequently died in captivity, described the situation as “my prison of being legally a wife but actually a widow.”246 Patty Zuhoski, married just over a month before her husband was shot down, had similar sentiments: “It's a very lonely existence. You're married but you're not married. You're not single. You're not divorced or widowed. Where does that put you in society? That puts you in your own world.”247

This ambiguous sentiment was not a new phenomenon nor unique to Vietnam itself. Historian Jean-Yves Le Naour examined an earlier example during the First World War, where the wives of French MIAs found themselves similarly trapped, and expressed themselves in language similar to the women of the League:

It's strange – I always hold out hope. It seems as if an extraordinary thing had happened and the word missing doesn't mean death....Why shouldn't we be among the many families who have had no news for two or three years because the missing were kept from writing? It's a mad hope, maybe, but it has never left me.248

245 Eileen Cormier, in Margery Byers, “At Home with the Prisoners' Families,” Life, 20 October 1967, Vol. 63 No 16, 34B.
246 Evelyn Grubb and Carol Jose, You are not Forgotten: A Family's Quest for Truth and the Founding of the National League of Families. (St. Petersburg, FL: Vandamere Press, 2008), 295.
MIA wives in particular experienced this sensation of increasingly unrealistic hope, which persisted in the absence of concrete proof of death, to a greater degree than their POW counterparts who, often, had at least some information pointing to their husbands’ survival. That need to know, and hope, made it much easier to believe any new rumor or scrap of information that suggested potential survival. Caught in such an unenviable emotional position, such women found subsequent talk of secret camps containing live MIAs particularly appealing.

The League’s initial efforts to clarify husbands’ statuses also led to its involvement in the politics of the war. By serving as a resource for wives of captured or missing men, the League also served to focus the dissatisfaction of those women with what they perceived as inattentiveness on the part of the Johnson administration. They believed that the government was not doing nearly enough to ensure humane treatment of their husbands, as well as regular mail communication. Specifically, the League membership was very much disturbed by the government's official position that keeping quiet about POWs/MIAs was the best way to guarantee Hanoi’s humane treatment of those men, as well as its adherence more generally to Geneva Convention standards of behavior, standards which both sides frankly honored more in the breach than observance. Some of the wives believed this hands-off position indicated that the government was blandly indifferent toward American POWs generally, including Stockdale herself who had direct evidence of her husband's mistreatment. Though mail delivery was irregular, some contact was possible between families and POWs, and James Stockdale managed to get word to his wife about various tortures he had endured via clever use of invisible ink.²⁴⁹

Though often very frustrated with the US government for failing to keep them properly informed about their missing husbands, the women who made up most of the League’s early

²⁴⁹ Sybil Stockdale, 207.
membership were not yet all that politically active, particularly by the standard of activists of the period. As “members of the last generation of hat-and-glove military wives called upon by their country to pack without question, to follow without comment, and to wait quietly with a smile,” they did not initially concern themselves with the larger issues surrounding the war, save in those instances where such issues directly touched upon the fate of captured and missing men.250 The manner in which these women, and other POW/MIA activists, became enmeshed in the toxic politics of the Vietnam War and its aftermath helped fertilize the ground from which the secret camp myth grew.

250 Moreau, xv.
POW/MIA activism’s engagement with the Nixon administration is crucial to understanding how the American secret camp myth grew, and the specific form it took. Indeed, Nixon’s impact is difficult to overstate, as his efforts unintentionally fed both key aspects of secret camp advocacy. First, his efforts to co-opt POW/MIA relatives away from the anti-war movement supported and reinforced the idea within the League that many, perhaps most, of their missing husbands were still alive in enemy captivity, chiefly through the “Go Public” publicity campaign. Those League members and others who were trapped in the no-man’s land of grief found reasons to keep hoping for reunion with their missing men. When they did not get that expected reunion, many among them had been hoping too much, and for too long, to give up, and instead embraced the idea of secret camps to avoid facing the unendurable reality that their men were dead, and had been all along. Second, the Operation Homecoming repatriation heavily and explicitly emphasized the heroic, redemptive qualities of the POWs. Nixon intended that these men should serve as unimpeachable counter-examples to the various elements of the popular left whom he so loathed. However, by expending so much effort in building them up, and simultaneously only returning a fraction of those his efforts had led POW/MIA activists to believe survived, Homecoming fed the myth that the remaining missing, now fully-realized as hero-victims, must still be alive in secret captivity. As a result, the League continued to agitate for further accounting, and other, fringe elements of POW/MIA activism began to articulate for the first time the idea of secret camps in which the remaining MIAs must still survive. When these groups discovered Nixon’s duplicity regarding their cause, they became even more distrustful of official practices, especially those that presumed the death of the MIAs in the
absence of evidence to the contrary.

**Peace With Honor: POW/MIA Activism’s Initial Embrace of Richard Nixon**

To be sure, the women of the League never were mere puppets of the White House, nor did they uniformly support Nixon’s policies. Frustrated by irregular communication with their captive husbands and incomplete information on whether or not they were even still alive, the women of the League grew increasingly active through the last years of the Johnson presidency. The League especially resented the effectiveness of North Vietnam’s propaganda use of prisoners, and what they saw as a reluctance or refusal of their own government to attempt any countermeasure or refutation. Combined with the late-term disasters that drove Johnson not to seek reelection, these two elements naturally inclined the League to favor Nixon’s candidacy in 1968. In particular, Nixon's promise of an about-face on the war and “peace with honor” led the League to believe that here at last was a president whom they could trust to do right by them and their missing husbands.251

For his part, Nixon needed little persuasion to make the POW/MIA issue much more public than had Johnson, though not solely out of any great empathy for those men or their families. Nixon had campaigned on what appeared to be a peace platform, albeit one very different from and hostile to that of the anti-war movement. Specifically, he had promised that he would bring “an honorable end” to the war in Vietnam.252 His definition of that honorable end presumed, however, the long-, or at least medium-term survival of South Vietnam as an independent and self-sustaining entity. Additionally, Nixon quite correctly gauged that to accomplish this goal he would need to reverse, or at least halt, the increasing popularity of the

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larger anti-war movement, which called for a rapid withdrawal from the conflict. Having campaigned loudly though non-specifically on ending the war Nixon was determined to recast himself as the leader of a peace movement distinct from the squalid baying of the street demonstrators.253

One method he seized on to accomplish this rebranding was key to the popularization of the secret camp myth: co-opting the POW/MIA issue, both as an excuse to remain engaged in Southeast Asia and also to steal so potentially potent a weapon from the hands of the peaceniks Nixon so despised.254 This is not to say that members of the League were dupes, nor blindly trusting that, at last, they had an unalloyed friend in the White House, but it is undeniable that initially at least the League had high hopes for this new president. However, by accepting his assistance, POW/MIA activists unintentionally joined their cause to Nixon’s covert plans to continue and extend the war.

The POW/MIA issue gave Nixon an excuse to revitalize public support for the war and also to justify continued involvement despite public troop withdrawals. By embracing that issue, he argued that staying militarily engaged in Southeast Asia was necessary lest America abandon its brave boys behind the wire. The circularity of this argument, that America must continue to fight to bring back the POWs it had lost in earlier fighting, was muted by the argument’s emotional weight, which helped with “winning the hearts, if not the minds” of a public rapidly wearying of the seemingly endless quagmire.255 Nixon also aimed to make the POW/MIA into figures worthy of proper celebration at war’s end, a status that other Vietnam veterans were

254 H. Bruce Franklin, MIA or Mythmaking in America, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 1992), 48-9.
255 Jeffrey Kimball, Nixon’s Vietnam War, (Lawrence, KA: University of Kansas, 1998), 167.
much more rarely afforded, and never automatically. The “Go Public” campaign combined these elements into a cross-media publicity blitz, which included both official government messaging and also efforts by the League and other POW/MIA activists.

The official kick-off to the campaign came at a press conference given by the Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird on 19 May 1969. Laird appealed on humanitarian grounds for the immediate release of all American prisoners in Southeast Asia, whom he numbered between 500 and 1,300. Laird also accused the North Vietnamese of failing to live up to their Geneva Convention responsibilities with regard to prisoner notification and contact via neutral third parties. Similarly, he called on North Vietnam to allow international inspection of its holding facilities to ensure the “proper treatment” Hanoi insisted it was delivering. He argued that, “The North Vietnamese have claimed that they are treating our men humanely, I am distressed by the fact that there is clear evidence this is not the case.” This sentiment became a common one among POW/MIA activists, who elevated Hanoi’s supposed duplicity to an article of faith. It also reinforced a key aspect of secret camp mythology, for if the enemy was treating known POWs abominably, how much worse must be the suffering of the MIAs in the secret camps?

Another idea contained within his statements is equally important to the emergence of the secret camp myth: casting doubt on exactly how many prisoners the North Vietnamese claim to hold. Laird’s wide numerical range of suspected American prisoners gave family members a reason to hope their missing man might in fact be a prisoner who just had not yet been identified. So too, by prominently calling out North Vietnam’s refusal to allow international inspection of its prison facilities, outside of a handful heavily managed Soviet-directed incidents, Laird added

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256 Franklin, 49.
258 Beecher, 3.
more sinister implications to how North Vietnam handled its prisoners. After all, if they had not treated known prisoners humanely and were not forthcoming about even whom they held, who was to say that the villainous Vietnamese communists might not have kept some secretly after the war, for whatever depraved reason?

Laird quickly followed up his statement with another two days later after Xuan Thury, head of the North Vietnamese delegation to the peace talks, had turned down his appeal for full prisoner disclosure. Playing to the moment, Laird said he was, “Deeply shocked and disappointed by this cruel response of Hanoi’s representative to such a basic request for humanitarian action.” Laird here framed the refusal of North Vietnam to account for its prisoners as a cruel and intentional act, thus reinforcing how Hanoi could not be trusted to on matters relating to POWs and MIAs. Laird was personally an enthusiastic supporter of Go Public within the Nixon Administration, so such statements are hardly surprising. He had gone out of his way to make POW/MIA affairs a priority within the Defense Department upon taking office, and lent considerable support from on high to POW/MIA accounting efforts within that department and elsewhere.

Laird also won support for Go Public from the service arms themselves through such media grandstanding. They needed little encouragement in any case, as the leadership of each had felt stifled by the Johnson Administration’s reluctance act more directly on POW/MIA issues. The Air Force in particular had proposed its own PR initiative in 1967 only to see it shelved, and felt that public pressure was the only way to force Hanoi to treat captured Americans appropriately. Somewhat more cynically, the Navy felt that officially publicizing the plight of POWs and MIAs would at least reassure the American public that the government

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really was doing all it could on behalf of those missing men.²⁶²

The military was not alone in reacting positively to this new publicity campaign. In November, Congress unanimously passed a bill designating the ninth of that month to be National Day of Prayer for POWs. Simultaneously United We Stand (UWS), a front group founded by Texas billionaire and longtime POW/MIA activist H. Ross Perot, launched an ad blitz demanding immediate release of all Americans held in Southeast Asia.²⁶³

In addition to these and other media events, the Nixon administration embraced those activists whom the Johnson administration had kept at arm’s length. The first direct area of cooperation between activists and the Nixon Administration occurred against this backdrop of increased government activity, when Sybil Stockdale wrote to Nixon in her capacity as National Coordinator of the now-renamed National League of Families. The President had given a prime-time press conference on 3 November 1969 in which he failed to mention POWs/MIAs at all, which Stockdale and others within the League feared signified the White House was backing off from Go Public.²⁶⁴

Many of the families were deeply disturbed that you did not mention the plight of the prisoners in your message to the nation on November 3, 1969. We are at a point where we feel we must meet with you personally so that we may be reassured about your own personal interest and thoughts pertaining to the most desperate straits in which our husbands and sons find themselves. If you can find to see a representative group from our number, we would be deeply grateful. We have been and remain your loyal supporters.²⁶⁵

Stockdale need not have worried. Nixon was from the very start of his administration attempting to seize the mantle of peacemaker away from the anti-war movement. In the first dozen drafts of his 3 November speech, he included the following: “For as long the desire for

²⁶² Davis, 198-99.
²⁶³ Franklin, MIA, or, Mythmaking in America, 49-50.
peace occupies the nation, no other goal occupies my thoughts and energy. My every day as President has been a day of dedication to ending the war."

He followed this up with the idea that while Americans might be united behind wanting the war to end, the real issue was whether to continue to search for what he termed a “just settlement,” or rather just accept defeat and cravenly pull out. While staff revisions did result in less specific language, the overall rhetorical emphasis on peace remained. This emphasis on charting a new course towards peace on his own terms served Nixon’s ambitions well in the main. Gallup polling following the 3 November speech indicates that the overwhelming majority of those polled both had heard the speech (72%) and agreed with his plan to end the war (80%). Furthermore, in light of his speech, most (72%) agreed that public demonstrations were detrimental towards the achievement of that peace.

Even before Stockdale wrote to the President, his staff was planning on incorporating POW wives into their larger plan to sell Nixon’s “secret plan” for peace. Among other elements, one of the proposed actions on this front was assigned to his deputy assistant Alexander Butterfield, which read “Push passage of Congressional Resolution to pray for POW’s (sic) November 9th and tie-in POW wives—unanimous support for the President.” (Emphasis mine). This was hardly the only directive to push for greater incorporation of POW/MIA advocacy into Nixon’s agenda. In the more substantive “November 15th Gameplan” talking paper, Nixon’s staff cited how important it would be to, “arrange for the POW wives to

266 Richard Nixon, “12th Draft,” 23 October 1968, in National Security Council Files—Vietnam Subject Files, Box 79, Drafts of President’s Nov. 3 1969 Speech (folder 1 of 2).
267 Ibid.
269 “Gallup Telephone Poll—The President’s Speech,” 4 November 1969, in National Security Council Files—Vietnam Subject Files, Box 79, Memo’s (sic), Letters of Exchange and Reaction to the President’s Nov 3 1969 Speech (Folder 1 of 2)
270 Talking Paper—Image of the President, in National Security Council Files—Vietnam Subject Files, Box 79, Notes of President’s Nov. 3 1969 Speech Folder.
unanimously endorse on that day [9 November] the President’s plan for peace.\textsuperscript{271}

Nixon’s staff had already by autumn 1969 explored the potentialities of using the POW wives for their own propaganda purposes. Ken Cole, in a memo to H.R. Haldeman 22 September 1969, commented that, “the President noted the report regarding the wives of the captive pilots and the POW’s,” and agreed with meeting a delegation from their group.\textsuperscript{272} Haldeman for his part was not slow to forward this on to Kissinger, repeating how Nixon had personally found the stories of POWs and their wives to be useful countermeasures to North Vietnamese propaganda efforts.\textsuperscript{273}

Stockdale and a handful of other POW/MIA wives accepted the proposed invitation and visited the White House on 12 December 1969 to discuss the issue in person, which marked a significant change from how the previous administration had kept several layers of bureaucracy between them and the president.\textsuperscript{274} Nixon viewed this meeting explicitly as a way to assuage League fears that his “Pursuit of Peace” speech signaled a turn away from POW/MIA activism, and also to further bind the League to the service of his own Vietnam policy.\textsuperscript{275}

The meeting itself was almost more than anything for which Stockdale and the other relatives could have hoped. Nixon appeared to say all the things they had so long wanted to hear, that North Vietnam was subjecting American prisoners to “unconscionable” behavior and that the President was personally willing to go on record publicly demanding that their rights under the Geneva Convention be guaranteed. At last, the League members and others present felt

\textsuperscript{271} Talking Paper—November 15\textsuperscript{th} Gameplan, in National Security Council Files—Vietnam Subject Files, Box 79, Notes of President’s Nov. 3 1969 Speech Folder.
\textsuperscript{273} Haldeman to Kissinger, 23 September 1969, in National Security Council Files—Vietnam Subject Files, Box 94, December 1970 US POWs in NVN Folder (1 of 3).
\textsuperscript{274} Moreau, 364.
that progress was being made on the behalf of their missing men. Stockdale herself claimed that the evening following her White House visit was the first time she slept soundly since her husband's capture four years prior.\textsuperscript{276} She was not alone in seeing the new president as an inspiring new hope for POW/MIA families, at least initially. The wife of missing pilot John J. Hardy, Jr. later commented that “President Nixon can do something about this, he's the only one that can.”\textsuperscript{277}

The League was not the sole non-governmental actor to involve itself in Go Public. Established veterans’ organizations responded to the Go Public appeals, particularly an UWS-backed ad campaign of November 1969. The UWS received a staggering volume of responses to their 10 million newspaper ads and postcards that targeting groups like the Veterans of Foreign Wars and American Legion.\textsuperscript{278} Of greater significance, an initially obscure group called the Victory in Vietnam Association (VIVA) also involved itself in Go Public. As the name suggests, VIVA’s primary concern was achieving some manner of victory in Vietnam for the US, but with the advent of Go Public it shifted efforts to the POW/MIA issue. The manner by which it did so led to the creation of the first major physical symbols of POW/MIA activism, and eventual secret camp advocacy: the POW/MIA bracelets. Spiritual ancestors of the yellow ribbon magnets so ubiquitous across bumpers and tailgates of any current mall parking lot, these bracelets were each engraved with the name of a missing man and proved wildly popular with those looking for a convenient way to show solidarity at a bargain price.\textsuperscript{279} Indeed, the very convenience of the VIVA bracelets brought staggering numbers of Americans into at-least superficial contact with

\textsuperscript{276}Sybil Stockdale, 367-68
\textsuperscript{278} These ads and mailings all contained a returnable section where the recipient could sign and return to affirm their support of Nixon’s policies. Davis, 222.
\textsuperscript{279} Each bracelet retailed for either two and a half or three dollars, depending on whether it was nickel-plated or made of copper. Franklin, 56.
POW/MIA activism during and after the war, with over four million sold by 1973. This included A-list celebrities and prominent politicians, including but not limited to H. Ross Perot, and Ronald Reagan.\textsuperscript{280}

Perhaps still worried that he had not fully secured the POW/MIA constituency, Nixon made his point more clearly with a policy statement on 15 December, three days after meeting with representatives of the League. Again, he emphasized that North Vietnam was responsible for accounting for America’s missing men, and simultaneously castigated them for not having doing so satisfactorily already. Similarly, he used that failure as an example of Hanoi’s overall unreasonableness, thus blaming the North Vietnamese for the continuation of the conflict he supposedly had a “secret plan” to end, calling such alleged failures, “cruel, indefensible action[s],” and, “a shocking demonstration of the inflexible attitude they have taken on all issues at the negotiating table in Paris.”\textsuperscript{281}

\textbf{Talk Only About Prisoners: The Political and Propaganda value of POWs}

Paris itself would serve as important touchstone of the evolving nature of POW/MIA activism during the war years. Encouraged by the statements and actions of the Nixon administration, several family members of POWs/MIAs traveled to Paris at year’s end 1969 in a much-publicized attempt to pressure North Vietnamese negotiators, though ultimately without much success. While this trip was not Nixonian in origin, the White House was interested in how it could use that visit for both diplomatic and propaganda purposes. Discussing the possibility earlier in September 1969, Kissinger mentioned to Nixon that Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge considered the trip by a select group of wives to be a potentially useful if unorthodox way to

\textsuperscript{280} Franklin, 57.
make North Vietnam look bad.\textsuperscript{282} These wives were themselves potent symbolic proxies for the suffering of their missing husbands, and the North Vietnamese had already made efforts to spin POWs and their families to their own ends. Hanoi previously had announced that those wives would be more likely to get information about their missing husbands via involvement with the peace movement.\textsuperscript{283} Additionally, during an earlier, informal visit, the North Vietnamese embassy had told two wives that if they had any hope of seeing their husbands again, they should demonstrate against the war as soon as possible.\textsuperscript{284} Neither those individual wives nor the League generally responded positively to such heavy-handed approaches, but the possibility that it might shift in that direction was more than a little concerning to the Nixon Administration.

In the event, the North Vietnamese had little time for League representatives when they reached Paris in December and only met with three of them on Christmas Eve, 1969, and then only briefly. During the meeting, which lasted only a little over an hour, the North Vietnamese representatives refused to answer any substantive questions about the fate of missing and captured Americas, and insisted that the only thing that might benefit them would be to pressure the US government to end the war as quickly as possible.\textsuperscript{285} Clearly, both Nixon and the North Vietnamese were willing to at least try to use the POW/MIA wives as bludgeons against one another. More importantly to the creation of the secret camp myth, such a direct refusal by the North Vietnamese to offer any information about the missing even during a face-to-face meeting helped reinforce the idea that they had something to hide on the subject.

Symbolic exploitation of POWs and MIAs was not limited to the international stage.

\textsuperscript{283} Kissinger to Nixon, 11 October 1969, in Nixon Presidential Materials Staff, National Security Council Files—POW/MIA, Box 1—Presidential Daily Briefs, October 11-21 1969 Folder
\textsuperscript{284} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{285} Moreau, 153.
Nixon was more than willing to use POW/MIA family members as campaign props during his 1972 re-election bid. He feared his enemies at home would find a way to turn the sympathetic women of the League against the war, or him, despite his years of engagement with that constituency. During the last months before the general election, James Fazio warned Kissinger that Radio Hanoi had broadcast several interviews purportedly with captive US pilots, all of whom pledged their support for George McGovern in the upcoming election, and requested their wives make contributions to McGovern’s campaign. More conspiratorially, Kissinger advised Nixon not long thereafter that news of a possible small-scale POW release might well be a scheme on the part of the North Vietnamese to embarrass the administration and throw the election to McGovern via the high-profile participation of anti-war activists in those prisoners’ release.

It should surprise no one that Nixon was more than willing to use as potent a symbol as America’s missing men into his unique style of campaigning. In his “Assault Book” plan for the 1972 campaign, Haldeman summarized McGovern’s position on POWs as one of abandonment, that the US should, “a) pull our (sic) all our troops and forces, and all our leverage over Hanoi; b) abandon our ally to the enemy, -- and c) then hope “on faith” that Hanoi will give us back our prisoners and d) rely on world opinion to get our prisoners back.” Predictably enough, he then went on to propose Nixon could find ample room to attack McGovern over this position. Drawing such a contrast inadvertently helped also to foster secret camp paranoia. By popularizing the idea that all of America’s missing would only come home if Hanoi was forced

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287 Kissinger to Nixon, 22 September 1972, in ibid.
289 Ibid.
to release them, Nixon also fostered the belief that Hanoi would not release all its prisoners if not forced so to do. Such sentiments helped create a default mindset where the North Vietnamese were presumed to always prefer retaining American prisoners, and only ever gave them back when induced or compelled so to do.

The idea that McGovern planned on abandoning America’s POWs and MIAs found a very receptive audience, further demonstrating how effective Nixon’s engagement with POW/MIA activism had been in recasting that aspect of the war in his own favor. So too, it served to reinforce the larger narrative that Nixon, and only Nixon, could bring all the boys home. The plan was to hammer how wrong McGovern had been about everything related to Vietnam and if he did get elected, “the SOB would leave our prisoners in Hanoi—and count on the good will of that barbarous regime to get them back.”

Nixon employed the power of the bully pulpit to sell his framing of POWs/MIAs as a prominent war issue outside of election season as well. One of his administration’s very first foreign policy reports to Congress made it abundantly clear just what the official line was going to be regarding missing Americans in Southeast Asia, lest anyone mistake his earlier statements and actions for mere grandstanding:

In human terms no other aspect of conflict in Vietnam more deeply troubles thousands of American families than the refusal of North Vietnam to agree to humane treatment of prisoners of war or to provide information about men missing in action. Over fourteen hundred Americans are now listed as missing or captured, some as long as five years, most with no word ever to their families. In the Paris meetings we have sought repeatedly to raise this subject—to no avail. Far from agreeing to arrangements for the release of prisoners, the other side has failed to even live up to the humane standards of the 1949 Geneva Convention on prisoners of war: the provision of information about all prisoners, the right of all prisoners to correspond with their families and to receive packages, inspection of POW camps by an impartial organization such as the International Red Cross, and the early release of sick and wounded prisoners.

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This is not a political or military issue, but a matter of basic humanity. There may be disagreement about other aspects of this conflict, but there can be no disagreement on humane treatment for prisoners of war. I state again our readiness to proceed at once to arrangements for the release of prisoners of war on both sides.\footnote{Nixon, “United States Foreign Policy for the 1970s: A New Strategy for Peace – A Report to Congress,” 18 February 1970, in Richard Wilson (ed.), 439.}

Nixon’s rhetorical linking of POWs to the Paris talks was intentional. POWs played a prominent role in Nixon’s overall negotiating strategy or, rather, his strategy to stall negotiations long enough to secure some sort of quasi-victory his “peace with honor” required. Specifically, by putting POWs at the forefront of his negotiators’ priorities, he could then insist on dealing with nothing else until all sides had agreed a solution to that issue. Indeed, one does not need to look far to see this specific impetus in play. Nixon wrote a note to Kissinger on the back of a copy of his 27 February 1970 daily briefing on the Paris talks, saying that, “I have changed my mind – From now on until further direction from me – [Ambassador] Habib is to talk only about prisoners.”\footnote{Nixon, in Kissinger to Nixon, 27 February 1970, in Nixon Presidential Materials Staff, National Security Council Files—POW/MIA, Box 1—Presidential Daily Briefs, February 20-28 1970 Folder.}

Such an emphasis, in both public relations and closed-door diplomacy, on accounting for the missing and bringing the boys home, contained potential pitfalls. Publicity on the POW/MIA issue necessarily created public expectation for more than just speeches and media events. If the government cared so greatly about obtaining the release of American prisoners, what exactly was it waiting for? After all, repatriation of POWs traditionally came after the cessation of hostilities, so the longer the Nixon administration continued to prosecute the war in any fashion, the more hollow rang its supposed concern for those prisoners. The North Vietnamese themselves played to this usual aspect of prisoner repatriation by insisting that POW/MIA families would be best served by urging an immediate end to the war. They also periodically released small numbers of
prisoners while making complete release contingent on a full American withdrawal and end of
support for the Southern regime, thus making the POW/MIA issue serve their own ends.\textsuperscript{293}

Indeed, some POW/MIA advocates even took the North Vietnamese at their word. Since
these advocates' primary concern was obtaining prisoner release and MIA accounting, they then
began to demand an immediate and complete withdrawal of US troops.\textsuperscript{294} By awakening this
constituency, Nixon had inadvertently set a clock ticking on how long they would wait for him to
make good. The League in particular developed a complicated relationship with the
government's efforts on POW release and MIA accounting, once the heady excitement of the
December 1969 meeting wore off. They were initially grateful to apparently have an ally in the
president, but elements within the League's ranks quickly grew suspicious of both his sincerity
and also the government’s actual capacity to do anything substantial to force POW/MIA
concessions from the enemy during wartime. It did not take long for many in the League to start
running out of patience for an administration that talked a big game but never quite managed to
accomplish anything concrete. The family of Army Warrant Officer Quentin Beecher, a
helicopter pilot lost in bad weather 11 June 1967, took exception to the refusal of the military to
change his status to KIA, as they were convinced he could not have survived the crash.
Additionally, his widow could not remarry due to his persistent MIA status. Beecher’s family
ascribed this refusal not merely to bureaucratic inertia or incompetence, but rather to specific
government policy aimed at using POWs and MIAs in Vietnam to justify the continuing US
military presence in Southeast Asia. Beecher’s mother stated, “I think they're misleading us for
their own purposes.”\textsuperscript{295}

Others were willing to go even further in their criticisms of Nixon's motives in

\textsuperscript{293} Allen, 36-37
\textsuperscript{294} Ibid., 52.
\textsuperscript{295} Mrs. Samuel Beecher, in Austin, Kramer, and Morgenthaler, 1.
publicizing POW/MIA issues. Several wives of missing men gave interviews to *The Wall Street Journal* in 1971 and explicitly stated their belief that the Nixon administration was using POWs/MIAs as an excuse to continue the war:

[The government] sees the POW issue as an excuse to keep a 'residual force' in Vietnam.\(^{296}\)

It shook me when the administration made it appear we were there (in Vietnam) because of the POWs. This is a bunch of bull. I resent using the POWs as an excuse to stay in Vietnam. Washington is just trying to save face.\(^{297}\)

We've been used to drum up support for the war.\(^{298}\)

These women were admittedly a minority within the League’s constituency, but they were nevertheless correct that prisoners and the missing made for exceptional propaganda tools. Even prior to Go Public, North Vietnam had already made a concerted effort to parlay American concerns about their missing and captured men into pressure to end the war. In 1967, two East German reporters, Walter Heynowski and Gerhard Scheumann, visited and extensively photographed those Americans being held at Hỏa Lò Prison, the notorious “Hanoi Hilton.” *Life* magazine republished their article in October of that year, albeit with extensive annotation concerning those areas that the editors of *Life* considered questionable or entirely manufactured. Among the key points that article made, which *Life* disputed, were that prisoners were well treated, had access to regular mail service, were not brainwashed or abused, and that the benign Vietnamese guards philosophically considered the prison a “hotel for unasked guests.”\(^{299}\) Even less believably, Heynowski and Scheumann reported that each prisoner they spoke with praised the level of medical care they had received and, crucially, that each man invariable spoke of a

\(^{296}\) Mrs. Louis Jones, in Austin, Kramer, and Morgenthaler.

\(^{297}\) Mrs. Randolf Ford, in ibid.

\(^{298}\) Mrs. James Werner, in ibid.

longing for home and family.\textsuperscript{300} \textit{Life} editors took exception with much of the article, going so far as to compare it to a Potemkin village, and the prisoners in question later confirm the entire visit was a heavily managed visit largely at odds with standard brutality of life in the Hilton.\textsuperscript{301} Nevertheless, that the Vietnamese went of their way to orchestrate elements so certain to play upon the heartstrings of those back in America demonstrated how well they understood the propaganda power of the POW and missing man.

The Vietnamese were hardly the only ones to use those men as propaganda tools. Recasting POWs and MIAs into heroic, sympathetic figures lay at the heart of Go Public and other elements of US POW/MIA activism, transforming them into hero-victims of a war not of their own making. A series of League newspaper advertisements demonstrated this clear transformative intention by stressing Vietnamese inhumanity towards prisoners and how that affected the families back home. Each one of these ads heavily accused Hanoi of refusing to accommodate reasonable requests for information on which prisoners it held and other violations of mandated Geneva Convention behavior toward POWs.\textsuperscript{302} Photos of worried wives appear prominently in these ads, next to such pleas as, “My husband, Alexander, is a Lt. Commander in the Navy. Four years ago he was reported missing in action. There's a chance he was taken prisoner and is still alive. But I don't know. And I can't find out. Hanoi won't tell our government. Hanoi won't tell me.”\textsuperscript{303}

Every one of these appeals invariably ends with the statement, “We ask no more than we give. All American and South Vietnamese prison camps are inspected regularly by official

\textsuperscript{300} Hecknowski and Schuemann, 27.
\textsuperscript{302} Allen, 19.
\textsuperscript{303} National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia, advertisement, “One side of the POW question is not complicated. That's the human side,” Records of the United States Senate, 102nd Senate, Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs, Records Received: Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, Policy Files, Box 8.
neutral observers – The International Red Cross.304 Such statements helped to frame the larger narrative that this series of ads and much POW/MIA activism generally sought to establish as canon: we Americans are fighting this war cleanly and fairly, and the evil Vietnamese communists are not. Our poor boys are being victimized, as are their families by extension, while we are the only ones to scrupulously observe international conventions on fair treatment.

The language used in these League ads is remarkably similar to that used in the official statements being used by US negotiators in Paris, and that similarity is hardly an accident.

To be sure, the crafters of Go Public and League members were not at this stage secret camp advocates and none of these messages mention or imply the existence of secret camps, but their efforts at elevating the missing to such heights served secret camp advocacy well after the war. After all, if the returning POWs were heroes for having endured victimization at enemy hand, how much more heroic must be the men who continued to suffer in the alleged secret camps? Furthermore, that very suffering, which these advertisement claimed the North Vietnamese uniquely were inflicting on their captives played to another core aspect of the secret camp myth: the appropriation of suffering. Such coordinated messages resonated emotionally with the American populace but in casting America and South Vietnam so simplistically as good guys who played by the rules, they failed to accurately reflect the ugly realities of the war. While some American facilities were indeed inspected by international third parties, others were not, and especially not those run by the South Vietnamese. Additionally, US authorities usually transferred their prisoners to South Vietnamese facilities in a deliberate evasion of the Geneva Convention. South Vietnam was not a signatory to the 1949 convention, and the US, which was,

304 National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia, advertisement, “One side of the POW question is not complicated. That’s the human side,” Records of the United States Senate, 102nd Senate, Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs, Records Received: Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, Policy Files, Box 8.
violated Article 12 of that treaty each time it transferred captured insurgents and North Vietnamese fighters to South Vietnamese facilities, which it regularly did. Conditions in these prisons often were as bad, if not worse, than the hardships and tortures endured by American POWs in the Hilton. North Vietnamese officials were quick to point out this hypocrisy, including national Premier Pham Van Dong:

For their part, the U.S. troops and their agents in South Viet Nam [use] the most barbarous tortures [on] the Vietnamese patriotic fighters and ordinary citizens captured by them and they have instituted a horrible penitentiary regime as evidenced by the “tiger cages” in the Pulo Condore prison...

For their part, the U.S. Government has carried out very perfidious and wicked maneuvers. It has made every effort to distort the above-mentioned humane policy of the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam Government. It has put forth hypocritical contentions about “humanitarianism” in the so-called “prisoner of war issue,” etc. The U.S. Government is using the “prisoner of war issue” to cover for its odious crimes against the Vietnamese people, its war acts against the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam, and its schemes to prolong and extend the war of aggression.

Admittedly, this was a diplomatic exchange two high-level public officials and should be treated as such, but neither was it the first public airing of the US's failures to live up to its own lofty rhetoric on prisoner treatment. In 1969 Christian Century reporter Don Luce toured several South Vietnamese facilities and found them squalid, brutal places rife with prisoner abuse. Con Son Prison in particular was notorious, both for its miserable conditions and also how it was historically a dumping ground for those political prisoners considered dangerous by the Saigon regime. Among others, Luce interviewed an NLF cadre there who described how guards would routinely beat prisoners for minor infractions, in her case failure to salute the South Vietnamese

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305 Franklin, MIA, or Mythmaking in America, 48-49.
306 Pulo Condore was the older, colonial-era name of Con Son prison. Pham Van Dong to William Fulbright, 14 December 1970, in Records of the United States Senate, 102nd Senate, Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs, Records Received: Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, Policy Files, Box 1.
flag and sing the national anthem.\textsuperscript{307}

A visit by an American Congressional delegation to Con Son and other facilities that same year had even greater public impact. The South Vietnamese made some efforts to cover up the worst aspects of these prisons by hiding away the most abused prisoners and concealing the basest conditions from visiting American eyes. However, Congressional staffer Tom Harkin bluffed his way into a restricted area and discovered the brutal, everyday conditions of the prison. What is more, he documented what he saw with a personal camera, despite insistence by dismayed South Vietnamese guards that such behavior was prohibited. Even more impressively, he managed to hang onto the film all the way back to the United States, despite several attempts by both the South Vietnamese and American officials to deprive him of such damning evidence.\textsuperscript{308} The photos shocked the public when \textit{Life} Magazine published them several months later, with their graphic depiction of just how America's ally was treating the prisoners consigned to its care. The prisoners depicted showed unmistakable signs of abuse, neglect, and malnutrition.\textsuperscript{309}

The \textit{Life} story also revealed that US officials were well aware of how the South Vietnamese were mistreating their prisoners, contrary to Go Public statements about how the US and its allies always treated its captives humanely. Frank Walton, the former LAPD commander of the Watts district and American adviser to the South Vietnamese administrators of Con Son, was on-site at the time of Harkin’s visit, and had initially described the facility as a “place more like a Boy Scout recreational camp.”\textsuperscript{310} Walton’s pleasant accommodation of the delegation quickly turned hostile when he learned Harkin had told the horrified Congressmen exactly what

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{308}{“How They Unearthed the Tiger Cages,” \textit{Life}, 17 July 1970, Vol 69 No. 3, p.2A.}
\footnotetext{309}{“The Tiger Cages of Con Son,” \textit{Life}, 17 July 1970, Vol 69 No. 3, p.27.}
\footnotetext{310}{Frank Walton in “The Tiger Cages of Con Son,” p.29.}
\end{footnotes}
he had seen in the restricted areas. Attempting to get Harkin to turn over the damning film, Walton angrily insisted that, “You aren't supposed to go poking your nose into doors that aren't your business.”

Harkin’s photos had no more impact on POW/MIA activists than any other of the ugly revelations concerning the war, who generally held the *Life* story to be an isolated occurrence, or possibly even fabricated. This is understandable, as part of the plausibility of the American secret camp myth depended on the North Vietnamese enemy not behaving honorably toward their prisoners. After all, the rationale went, since the North Vietnamese had refused to allow inspectors into their prisons during the war, who is to say that they had even been honest about how many American prisoners they actually held? North Vietnam’s supposedly unique inhumanity was therefore a necessary precursor for the existence of the secret camps, and survival of MIAs hoped to be in them.

There is another important element of the larger secret camp phenomenon present here as well: without denying the barbaric conditions American POWs endured in North Vietnamese captivity, Harkin’s photos and other accounts demonstrate how such suffering was not unique to them, and that the US and South Vietnam rarely treated their prisoners with much greater solicitude. After the war, secret camp advocates treated the story of suffering into a strictly one-sided affair, thus making it a tale of American victimization, thus appropriating the pain of their own victims and making it their own via POW proxy.

**Complete and Official Identification: The Impossible Standard**

Go Public promoted not just the idea that North Vietnam was brutalizing American POWs, but also via the constant repetition of “Hanoi won't tell our government. Hanoi won't tell me” and similar statements, reinforced the idea that there could be a far greater number of POWs

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present than was in fact the case. Nixon’s diplomatic strategy also reinforced this idea, by using the supposed refusal of North Vietnam to disclose how many prisoners they really held as a reason to stall more substantial peace negotiations. During his remarks at the opening of the 1970 session of the Paris Peace Talks, US Ambassador Philip Habib claimed that North Vietnam’s refusal to make a, “complete and official identification,” of its prisoners was an intolerable roadblock to any further talks, and, “This is a matter that cannot be held in abeyance. It cannot wait until the end of the war.”

Though Nixon’s diplomats were not secret camp advocates and make no explicit mention of secret camps, such an emphasis contributed to that myth by both making the North Vietnamese appear that much more dishonest and also by playing up POW victimization. Ambassador Habib's use of the phrase “complete and official identification” in his 1970 statement, without defining what would constitute “complete and official” demonstrates the former point. Such slipperiness made such charges virtually impossible for North Vietnam to refute, regardless of how much information Hanoi disclosed on the subject. The existence of MIAs and KIA-BNRs all but guaranteed Hanoi could know little or nothing about some missing Americans, which effectively prevented any genuinely “complete and official” accounting. This infinitely moveable goalpost became a useful tool to justify continued American troop presence in Vietnam, for as Habib concluded, “This is a matter that cannot be held in abeyance. It cannot

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312 National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia, advertisement, “One side of the POW question is not complicated. That’s the human side,” Records of the United States Senate, 102nd Senate, Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs, Records Received: Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, Policy Files, Box 8
313 Ambassador Philip Habib, “Text of the Opening Remarks by Ambassador Philip C. Habib at the Seventy-Sixth Plenary Session of the New Paris Meetings on Viet-Nam,” 23 July 1970, in Records of the United States Senate, 102nd Senate, Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs, Records Received: Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, Policy Files, Box 9.
wait until the end of the war.”

Two years later, Habib’s colleague Heyward Isham, head of the American Delegation, had very similar things to say. Hanoi had by that point provided a POW/MIA list, and so Isham now argued that that list was intentionally incomplete, and that men known to have made it to the ground alive failed to appear on the “so-called ‘complete’ list.” Though Isham had changed the rhetoric slightly, Nixon’s larger tactic remained clear: so long as one man remained unaccounted for, North Vietnam had not lived up to its obligations and so the peace talks could not proceed. Isham’s focus on airmen known to had safely ejected is also important to the creation of the secret camp myth as it constructed the expectation that therefore such men must be in enemy captivity, despite Hanoi not mentioning them in its prisoner lists. Though neither Isham nor anyone else at the time took this idea to its logical conclusion, secret camp advocates after the war certainly did.

Isham’s assumption that aircrew who made it to the ground should be on such lists was fundamentally flawed, despite being a convenient excuse to keep the war going. Outside of urban areas, Southeast Asia was not particularly densely populated, and relatively few people lived in the dense, vast jungles of the interior. It was a very easy part of the world for people to disappear without a trace. Even during the war, the American military acknowledged this reality with regards to its downed pilots. When interviewed by The Wall Street Journal in 1967 on the subject of jungle survival, Marine Corps. Lieutenant Colonel Pat Caruthers was bleakly realistic on a pilot's chances. After speaking on how common it was for airmen to suffer serious or

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314 Ambassador Philip Habib, “Text of the Opening Remarks by Ambassador Philip C. Habib at the Seventy-Sixth Plenary Session of the New Paris Meetings on Viet-Nam,” 23 July 1970, in Records of the United States Senate, 102nd Senate, Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs, Records Received: Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, Policy Files, Box 9.

315 Heyward Isham, “Text of the Opening Remarks by Ambassador Philip C. Habib at the One Hundred and Forty-First Plenary Session of the New Paris Meetings on Viet-Nam,” 20 January 1972, in Records of the United States Senate, 102nd Senate, Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs, Records Received: Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, Policy Files, Box 9.
debilitating injuries following even a textbook ejection, he commented on just how hostile was the environment in which those men usually found themselves, concluding with the dry understatement that, “If a man's not found within 10 days, he's got a real personal problem.”

Caruthers was not alone in understanding how making it to the ground was no guarantor of survival. Testifying before Congress later in the 1990s, former Air Force intelligence officer William Gadoury similarly explained how aircrew faced the formidable challenges when parachuting into the jungles of Southeast Asia. Gadoury had served three years in Vietnam during the war and had worked at the Joint Casualty Resolution Center in the 1980s where by his own admission his highest priority was, “to find hard, credible evidence that Americans were still alive in Indochina, evidence which I dearly hoped would lead to the return of some of my former comrades in arms.” Despite such a hope, Gadoury admitted he had never found any such evidence, though he continued to hope that some men might somehow still survive. More to the point, he argued that even those men who made it to the ground uninjured would have found survival exceptionally difficult. He described his own experiences in the jungles during recovery operations, that even with the benefit of proper survival equipment, supplies, and medical aid as needed: “Sometimes, laying in my cot I wonder[ed], if I didn’t have the cot, if I didn’t have the mosquito net, the military rations and all the things we have out there, how long could I last?”

Men Redeemed: Operation Homecoming and POWs as War Heroes

The Nixon administration was remarkably successful in engaging with POW/MIA activism and folding it into the administration’s own plans for the war via Go Public and Nixon’s

316 Lt. Colonel Pat Caruthers in Austin, Kramer, and Morganthaler, 4.
diplomatic emphasis on POW/MIA accounting. In particular, the government believed it had succeeded in recasting the POWs and the missing as war heroes of the new type, whom it could now use to manufacture a triumphant exit from the war. Having achieved at last “peace with honor,” Nixon was determined to use POW repatriation to publically validate his efforts in Southeast Asia, completing their transformation into long sought-after heroes of a war that had produced precious few others. Unlike the largely anonymous return of most troops who had completed their tours of duty throughout the war, Nixon had in mind for the POWs something that called back to the celebrations that marked the end of World War II. In practice this all coalesced into Operation Homecoming, and the manner in which Operation Homecoming ultimately failed to satisfy POW/MIA activists accelerated the growth of the secret camp myth both by failing to bring home as many POWs as activists believed still alive, and also by treating those men who did return as hero-victims to be celebrated.

The Pentagon had done exploratory work for Operation Homecoming as early as 1967 when it established a POW working group to write policy on how to handle returning prisoners. This group initially concerned itself with avoiding some of the stumbles of the Korean War repatriation, where returning POWs suffered the stigma of cowardice or even of sinister North Korean brainwashing. In 1971 Defense Secretary Marvin Laird established a larger POW/MIA Task Group to coordinate repatriation and related matters.319

Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Roger Shields headed the new Task Group, with Rear Admiral Horace Epes, Jr. heading the subordinate Task Force that was to act as staff for the Group.320 That Task Group's preparations show clearly the Nixon

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320 Davis, 184.
administration believed the image of the POW as beaten, but unbroken hero was important. They created instructions for returning about how to properly address the press, specifically by limiting their answers to patriotic love of country and how they looked forward to family reunions, and to avoid any political commentary on the war or captivity.

Such massaging was likely unnecessary. Many prisoners had already internalized an idea of themselves during their captivity that meshed well with the hero narrative Nixon and others were so eager to create. The origins of this attitude lay in the Code of Conduct adopted after the Korean War, adopted in 1955 in part to address the communist taint with which some of that war's prisoner had supposedly returned. North Korea’s frequent propaganda use of coerced POW confessions and statements led the American public to suspect all POWs had been ideologically contaminated during their imprisonment. The Department of Defense commissioned a special advisory committee following widespread media reports of alleged misbehavior among returnees, to both determine the degree of truth to those stories, and ascertain what could be done to repair the damage. That committee discovered that reports of collaboration were highly exaggerated, but nevertheless recommended that a new code of conduct be written to make explicit that such behavior was unacceptable and must not be repeated, despite how rarely it actually occurred.

The Code dictated expected behavior for all service members, should they wind up prisoners of war. Among other things, it required that those taken prisoner had a duty to continue to resist and attempt escape whenever possible, as well as keeping faith with fellow prisoners and making no statements of disloyalty to the US and its allies. Finally, the Code insists that every serviceman “never forget that I am an American, fighting for freedom, responsible for my

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322 Davis, 12-13.
actions, and dedicated to the principles which made my country free. I will trust in my God and in the United States of America. “323 The message inherent in all of this is clear: American servicemen are expected to continue their struggle even in captivity, albeit in a less direct manner. American POWs in Vietnam internalized this expectation to such a degree that predisposed them to the passively heroic image Nixon wanted them to be, and that later secret camp advocates needed them to be.

Prisoners like James Stockdale knew full well that the resistance required by the Code would anger his North Vietnamese captors and result in violent retaliation, but was determined to hold to it regardless. He was hardly alone in such sentiments.324 Fearing that cooperation with the North Vietnamese would aid their propaganda efforts, Stockdale and other prisoners employed various forms of passive resistance, such as playing dumb and, when brought to breaking point, doing their best to limit their utility to their captives. These men also actively worked to keep others from taking the easy route of cooperation, or at least to make sure there would be a post-war accounting for those determined to have violated the Code of Conduct.325

Other prisoners were quick to attest to holding the same mindset of patriotic resistance during captivity after repatriation, and to having rejected all communist cajoling to support the anti-war movement:

I would like to say that so far as I know every man who has been a prisoner supports and has supported our President and his policies. At no time during my imprisonment have I failed to support my President, my country, and my President's policies.326

For years and years we've dreamed of this day, and we've kept faith- faith in God, in our President and in our country. It was this faith that maintained our hope that someday our

324 Stockdale described this as “Unity over Self,” unaware perhaps of the irony of resisting communism via collective action. Jim Stockdale, 252.
325 Ibid., 254.
dreams would come true and today they have.\textsuperscript{327}

The official agreement for prisoner repatriation on which Homecoming was based itself includes another seed of the secret camp myth. The 1972 negotiations that led to the Paris Accords one year later included substantial discussions on POWs. Both sides agreed to simultaneous repatriations of those prisoners and, crucially, Hanoi agreed to arrange the release of all prisoners held throughout all of Indochina, not just those in North Vietnam itself.\textsuperscript{328} That element of the larger peace agreement reinforced the already-strong presumption among POW/MIA activists that Hanoi both knew the status of all Americans captive or missing elsewhere in Southeast Asia, and also was able to make its various allies and clients comply with those terms.

The Nixon administration ensured that Homecoming was heavily televised, and at times scripted to manufacture the appearance of a victory America had manifestly failed to win outright militarily. In total, 591 prisoners came home to much pomp and fanfare, and the government lavished them with attention and material comfort, including but not limited to back pay for their time in captivity, lifetime passes to major league baseball games, use of new cars, and trips to Disneyland.\textsuperscript{329} Nixon personally wanted to make sure the returning prisoners felt appreciated, going so far as to direct his staff to put together souvenir baskets for POWs and their families when a group came for a high-profile dinner at the White House in May 1973.\textsuperscript{330}

The attention paid to these men at times bordered on the obsessive, and it is hard not to see in such activity a willing turn away from the reality of Vietnam to a re-imagined version of

\textsuperscript{329} “Home at Last!” \textit{Newsweek}, 26 February 1973, p.18.
\textsuperscript{330} Haldeman to Steven Bull, 15 March 1973, in White House Special Files, Special Material Office Files—H.R. Haldeman Chronological Files, Box 202, March 1973 (A—I) Folder
the war. Indeed, at times the rejection of that reality was almost physical, demonstrated by no
less drastic an action than an Executive Order that the flags lowered to half-mast to mark the
death of LBJ be returned to full height. Johnson's failure to win in Vietnam was thus
symbolically eclipsed by Nixon's “victory,” as demonstrated by not so much by the end of direct
American involvement, but more importantly by the return of the prisoners he had for so long
claimed were the existential reason America had persisted in its long struggle in that country.
Those who accepted this rewriting of the Vietnam War narrative thus preconditioned themselves
to accept the later secret camp myth, which took the idea of “POW return as victory” one step
further, and applied it to those men still unaccounted-for from the conflict.

Nixon hoped to build upon the success of Homecoming to transform celebration of the
POWs’ return into a larger re-contextualization of the whole conflict. He had already made his
position on this matter clear in February 1973 when he told the Joint Chiefs of Staff that while he
did not want to exploit the POWs, nevertheless, “we now have an invaluable opportunity to
revise the history of this war. For eight years the press has called the Vietnam war immoral and
those that went to Canada moral.”

This was not the only time Nixon had expressed such sentiments concerning the
usefulness of returning POWs. Following Homecoming, he confirmed such intentions with
Roger Shields, “They [the POWs] should be recruiters, speaking on college campuses, and
writing. They have thought deeply about themselves and their country and we should benefit
from it. They must be used in an effective way.” Shields affirmed that that should be entirely
possible, since “They see changes in the United States that they don’t like and want to change
these.” Clearly pleased, Nixon replied, “These men can inspire and we shouldn’t lose this

331 Allen, 65.
332 Memoranda of Conversation, Richard Nixon, Elliot Richardson, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Brent Scowcroft, 15
Importantly, Nixon considered these men to be so potentially useful because of their status as hero-victims. They had kept the faith throughout their imprisonment and torture at communist hands, only to come home to find longhaired peaceniks running amok. As a result, Nixon believed them perfect instruments for reinserting a moral tone he believed the country had lost due to the social upheaval of the war years. Secret camp advocates later seized upon this same sentiment, and applied its hopes for moral renewal to the MIAs they claimed survived in the secret camps.

It is possible to find a few dissenting voices among all the celebrations surrounding the POWs return. In an issue that also featured three major stories on the returnees, Newsweek also included a story about the much larger population of regular Vietnam veterans who had received no such fanfare upon their return, often faced serious obstacles reintegrating into the civilian world, and found precious little official assistance in overcoming such problems. These men were essentially left to their own efforts once out of uniform, and suffered disproportionate unemployment as a result. Unlike their POW counterparts, the public at large far more frequently viewed these veterans negatively, as uncomfortable reminders of the war’s turmoil, or even as drug-addled, potentially violent lunatics. Newsweek’s story also highlighted an irony of the disproportionate attention the US paid to POWs versus other veterans by pointing out how there was one government that made reintegration, training, and employment assistance a high priority for all veterans, regardless of their status: North Vietnam.  

Of course, not all Americans agreed with the narrative of POWs as hero-victims. Commentators disagreed about how to label these men, as well as whether they were ready or fit for the hero role in which so many Americans seemed determined to place them. While many

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lauded these men unconditionally, others were more apprehensive that the public at large was assigning an identity regardless of whether those men all wanted it. A Time magazine article tellingly entitled “A Celebration of Men Redeemed” expressed such skepticism with its opening lines: “If it was a war without heroes, many Americans were intent on making the prisoners fit that role.”

Nixon certainly fit this particular model of behavior, both politically and on a personal level. For him, the prisoner release not only gave America some heroes at last, but also served to validate those military actions he had ordered supposedly on their behalf. Speaking at length with UN Ambassador John Scali in early February 1973, he commented:

President: Did you see the POW release? Wasn’t it great?
Scali: Yes.
President: Like Armstrong on the move (sic)—God bless America
It’s good for the American people to see some brave men.
The POWs felt the bombing got them out.
He was not alone in his satisfaction with having at last filled the long-empty role of Vietnam war hero, regardless of what the men themselves might have to say on the matter. Newsweek commentator Shana Alexander noted how eagerly other Americans accepted the idea of POWs as war heroes:

World War I had the Rainbow Division. World War II had Iwo Jima and the Bulge. Even Korea had the men at Changin Reservoir. But until last week the longest and most dismal of all America's wars had victims, casualties and the faceless brutalities and braveries common to all wars, but no heroes at all. Well, we have them now.

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335 Even the name of this article is telling of the role many wanted the returnees to fit. “A Celebration of Men Redeemed,” Time, 19 February 1973, p. 19.
Alexander's purpose was to highlight how selection of this heroic role for returning prisoners was in a way artificial and dissimilar from previous wars, where the heroes usually emerged from battlefield actions of one sort of another. At the same time, she noted how imposing that role upon men who often came back from captivity with any number of problems and traumas might well do them more harm than good. “The final irony,” she concluded, “may be that after eight cruel years as prisoners of war, they have now become hostages of propaganda, prisoners of peace with honor.”

Ultimately, Homecoming did succeed in its short-term goal of manufacturing at least an ersatz triumph out of POW repatriation, and thus generated something to which the Nixon administration could point to justify its policies in Southeast Asia. Indeed, during the return Nixon’s staff estimated they had gained considerable political capital from the “euphoria” of the prisoner return, which hopefully could be turned to the service of other items on the Nixon agenda. It, and Nixon’s engagement with POW/MIA activism had unintended consequences, however, that fueled growing discontent within that activism, and that ultimately laid the foundation for the American secret camp myth. Nixon’s decision to work with the League raised hopes that POW/MIA relatives at last had a champion, and Go Public gave them reason to hope that far more POWs survived in enemy captivity than was indeed the case. Go Public and Homecoming both also contributed to the concept of the POW/MIA as hero-victim, whose repatriation signaled a triumphant end of American involvement in the Vietnam War. However, far too few men actually came home, with Homecoming only resulting in the return of fewer than six hundred of the roughly 1,300 men activists hoped were still alive. This was not nearly enough to satisfy POW/MIA activism, particularly after Go Public had gone to such lengths to

338 Alexander, p.32.  
convince them that North Vietnam had not been honest about how many POWs it held. Where were the rest? As one MIA mother said shortly after Homecoming's conclusion, “When the prisoners of war came home, everyone said the war was over. Everyone was talking about peace with honor. But when you abandon 1300 men there is no peace with honor.” Subsequent attempts and failures to satisfy these families and their allies were the final contributing factors to the birth of the secret camp myth, and were crucial to its longevity in American politics.

Chapter 5: Radicalization of POW/MIA Advocacy and the Emergence of the Secret Camp Myth

Operation Homecoming had raised hopes for MIA survival too high for its comparatively small number of actual returnees to satisfy. Individuals within POW/MIA activism had believed in that survival for too long, and too fervently, to accept that their loved ones were dead, and likely had been the whole time. At the same time, POW/MIA activism as a whole was becoming more militant, for two key reasons. First, many early League members disengaged from public activism, either because their missing man had come home, or because they were able to find a way out of the no-man’s land of grief. Second, new activists joined the League and otherwise became active, who now demanded not just the truth about whom among the missing might still be alive, but in a very real way, also the resurrection of the dead. Go Public had convinced these activists that the MIAs must still be alive, and so they rejected the finality of Operation

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Homecoming when those men did not reappear. In the absence of strong evidence to support such a belief, they seized upon conspiratorial concepts to justify belief in MIA survival, most importantly that of the secret camps. When a Congressional investigation in the 1970s failed to reveal any surviving MIAs, these individuals saw such a failure not as debunking the idea of MIA survival, but rather as a cover-up. Having progressively made space for themselves within POW/MIA activism, secret camp advocates redefined that activism through the 1970s in such terms as to prefigure its revival on more hysterical, even less believable terms in the 1980s. More importantly, they helped to popularize and normalize the idea that the US government had knowingly abandoned live POWs in Vietnam, who now survived in secret captivity.

“Have You Forgotten Him?” Why They Continued to Believe in MIA Survival

For all its fanfare, Operation Homecoming had failed to address the concerns of many within the POW/MIA community and the discrepancy in men returned versus men expected was fertile ground for the growth of the secret camp myth. For many individuals within POW/MIA activism, the only alternative to believing in something like secret captivity was to accept that the missing were actually dead, which they were unable or unwilling to do. What was it that fostered such a belief? Beyond the basic emotional need for it to be true, there are several specific reasons that encouraged POW/MIA activists to believe that secret camps had to exist.

Most immediately, a few supposedly dead men did resurface during Homecoming. Most notable among this handful of individuals was Marine Private Ronald Ridgeway. The Marines had reported Ridgeway killed in action near Khe Sahn in 1968 and his family received a set of remains purported to be his for burial. However, in 1973 Marine Corps officials informed her that they had located her son alive in North Vietnamese captivity, validating his mother’s refusal to accept the finality of his alleged death. Admittedly, the body had only conditionally been
identified as Ridgeway's, and had not been found with his dog tags, but nevertheless this startling death and resurrection tale helped fuel belief that other Americans could still be alive in Southeast Asia.\textsuperscript{341} Ridgeway’s family was not the only one to experience this sort of reversal of expectations. The Air Force believed that Captain James Wilder had likely died in captivity, but abruptly informed his wife of his survival shortly before he too reappeared during Homecoming.\textsuperscript{342} Such remarkable reappearances of supposedly dead men encouraged other hopeful relatives of the missing to believe their man might reappear as well.

The failure of supposedly living POWs to appear similarly encouraged belief in MIA survival, interestingly. The parents of MIA James Ray believed that their son was a live POW on the strength of reports from earlier returnees, but despite this, the Army subsequently informed the Rays that their son had died in captivity. For their part, neither the NLF nor North Vietnam officially acknowledged they had captured Ray or that they knew anything about him. Believing the first reports of his survival, his parents rejected subsequent claims of his death, and suspected instead that the Army or the Vietnamese must have been lying for reasons unknown.\textsuperscript{343} Similarly, Hanoi radio announced the capture of Navy pilot Lieutenant James Teague in 1967, but did not include him on the Homecoming lists of expected returnees. When Teague did not reappear, his suspicious father claimed, “The North Vietnamese are holding out on us. We know this.”\textsuperscript{344} Thus, while “dead” men reappearing fostered hopes for MIA survival, “live” prisoners failing so to do did not always discourage family members from believing they were still alive. Belief in secret prison camps where these missing men might survive built upon such hopes.

In addition to misclassifications like these, there were also cases of deliberate status

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\textsuperscript{342} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{343} Tidings of Joy- And Heartbreak, p.20.
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falsification. This generally stemmed less from any sinister motive on the part of North Vietnam however, but rather from well intentioned but shortsighted actions of the friends of this or that man. Witnesses from time to time spun their loss reports in such a way as to foster illusions of survival that they knew to be impossible:

A guy is flying, he does see his wingman shot down. Two guys go in, and they’re deader than a doornail. He’s thinking to himself, “If I report that they’re dead, the wife’s going to be brokenhearted, she’ll get death gratuities, and that’s it.” If I report him MIA, his pay keeps going, and it will cushion the blow for a little while.

Now put me in that position, and I come back and tell you I just saw your son flew into the ground. Do you think I’m going to tell you that? Hell no, because the way I think, if I tell you your son got target fixation and flew into the ground, to my way of thinking, what I would be telling you is, “You know, what you had for a son is a real idiot.” That’s not true, so what am I going to say?

So what are we going to do? We twist the report. But now I’ve given you a shred of hope. It’s not an out-and-out false report. I told you he flew into the ground, but I just twisted “why.” So now he has the option of ejecting.345

Men employed this sort of spin out of a sense of compassion for their dead comrade’s family, but doing so often had unintended consequences. Family members who thus received such a “shred of hope” became remarkably resistant to later reports of their man’s death. They did not take well to learning that he had been dead the whole time after believing he was alive for so long, years in some cases. Additionally, learning that they had been lied to actually could lead to a retrenchment of original survival belief:

Now, I come back 6 years later. You know all the stories, the different reports, the conflicting stories: this guy tells you that; that guy tells you something else; you talk to the other people here, they’ve got conflicting stories, and now I come back and tell you, “Your husband flew right into the ground, I saw him.” What are you going to believe? You’re faced with, “Well, yes, here’s one more guy. He really knows. Oh, yeah? Well, get lost, buddy.”346

346 Ibid., 109.
What is more, family members often grew paranoid after such revelations, and sometimes came to doubt *all* wartime information about their missing man, while at the same time holding fast to the core belief in that man’s potential survival:

> Where are you left? Exactly as you were before I showed up. It’s very simple if I just give you one story and then seven years later we forget everything that happened and I give you a second story and explain it to you. Now, after all you have heard and all the frustration and all the pain that you’ve been through for seven years, if I come back and give you that story you probably will not believe it. You are faced with a situation of “what the hell can I believe?”

The US Government's position before and during Homecoming also reinforced belief in MIA survival. Throughout Go Public and well afterward, the official line was Hanoi knew far more about America’s missing than it had disclosed, with the heavy implication that it was purposefully holding back information about live POWs. This included the Homecoming returnee list, which the Defense Department considered provisional at best. In its press releases on the subject, that department repeatedly amended the estimated POWs and MIAs and moved men back and forth from one column to the other, which created the impression that any number of unlisted men might still be alive. More specifically, the Defense department believed fifty-four of the men Hanoi claimed had died in captivity, were more likely still alive. As a result, official US POW lists contained those men despite their names being on Hanoi’s dead list, regardless of Hanoi’s repeated insistence that all fifty-four were dead.\(^348\)

The controversy surrounding the fifty-four casts into sharp relief the shifting nature of POW/MIA activism after 1973. Indeed, those fifty-four men were one of three major concerns the League communicated in early 1973 to Nixon’s Military Assistant, Brigadier General Brent Scowcroft. As the US had listed these men as POWs, on the basis of their own “good evidence,”

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\(^347\) Ibid.
\(^348\) Roberts, p.1.
the League found it suspicious that they did not appear on Hanoi’s list of confirmed prisoners.\textsuperscript{349}

More generally, the League was dismayed that so few MIAs had resurfaced among the POW population contrary to its optimistic expectations. Only 51 out of the estimated 1,334 MIAs came home during Homecoming, and only 7 had reappeared from the 317 missing in Laos.\textsuperscript{350}

This is not to say that League membership uniformly believed in the MIAs all survived in secret captivity. Some League members, and others, already suspected the belief in MIA survival owed less to factual inconsistencies in Hanoi's accounting, and more to the psychological inability of the families of the missing to give up in the absence of firm evidence of their loved one's death. In other words, they recognized firsthand that many of their compatriots were trapped in the no-man’s land of grief. Reporting on the subject, Steven Roberts of the \textit{New York Times} commented that, “More significantly, many simply cannot believe that their men are dead.”\textsuperscript{351}

Some MIA recognized this behavior in themselves, that their refusal to accept the likely death of the MIAs was a factor in their continued involvement in League affairs, and that such sentiments stemmed more from personal need than any reasonable expectation or observable evidence. League national board member and MIA father Colonel John Scott Albright admitted that psychological need played a part in his belief in secret camp survival: “Each of us who has an MIA is personally convinced he's all right. That's what drives us. Some believe in the face of insurmountable odds, but what is the alternative?”\textsuperscript{352} That alternative was, of course, to accept the unacceptable, and so many MIA family members instead looked for some specific excuse to

\textsuperscript{349} The League’s message counted these missing men to be fifty three rather than fifty four, for some unknown reason. Helene Knapp to Brent Scowcroft, 20 February 1973, in Nixon Presidential Staff Materials, National Security Council Files—POW/MIA, Box 2—Vietnam Subject Files, Vol. VI Jan 1973 Folder (1 of 2)
\textsuperscript{350} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{351} Roberts, p.5.
\textsuperscript{352} John Scott Albright, in ibid., p.4.
keep hope alive.

Regardless of personal motivation, the members of the League continued their publicity campaign after Homecoming with a modified message tailored towards MIA survival. In February 1973 the League and other advocacy groups ran a full-page advertisement in *The Washington Post* and other major newspapers. “Have you Forgotten Him?” appeared in large, block text across the top of the ad, over a grainy photograph NVA troops herding Navy Lieutenant Ronald Dodge into captivity in 1967. In accusatory tones, the ad spoke of how the North Vietnamese had shot Dodge down, but had not disclosed his status. The League’s advertisement argued Dodge was just one example of how Hanoi’s POW/MIA accounting was, “inaccurate and incomplete.” Though this advertisement does not explicitly mention secret prison camps, “Have You Forgotten Him” heavily implies their existence. After all, by February 1973 the North Vietnamese had returned all the POWs it admitted holding and emptied out their known POW camps, so where exactly were they keeping Lieutenant Dodge?

On the surface, “Have You Forgotten Him” stands as an example of a continuation of the same message from Go Public: Hanoi is being dishonest and we must continue to agitate, as long as even a single man remains unaccounted for. Its subtext, and that of similar advertisements, heavily suggested that these missing men could still be alive, in enemy custody. The White House reinforced this mindset as well when administration officials met with League representatives on 29 January 1973. Nixon made a brief appearance, and Kissinger told them that the government believed Hanoi’s POW/MIA lists were incomplete and as such unacceptable. He


went on to outline how the government planned to force a full accounting from North Vietnam. Interestingly, while he stated that, “we also did not believe they [North Vietnam] will hide any POWs,” and that, “in North Vietnam it is almost inconceivable that they will hide any POWs,” nevertheless, “they have tended to collect their prisoners together. They can’t use the men for blackmail if they don’t know they hold them.”³⁵⁵ Via such shifting rhetorical focus, Kissinger was able to reassure the League of the government’s due diligence on their behalf, maintain their hopes that the missing would soon be accounted for, and also manipulate their fears that even with the coming of peace the dastardly communists might be acting duplicitously with regards to some minority of live prisoners held outside North Vietnam.

Despite such reassurance, the League had other reasons to fear the completion of the Homecoming repatriations. League members knew how the US Government had dealt with MIAs following previous conflicts. If precedent held, many of those men would be automatically reclassified from missing in action to presumed dead after a relatively short period of time. As some of the older League members were well aware, after the Korean War the Defense Department had wasted little time before doing just that. Barely a month after the end of official prisoner exchanges in September 1953, the Defense Department announced that,

> In light of casualty reporting experience in Korea, it is now the considered opinion of the Department of Defense that most of these men must eventually be presumed dead. They have not been reported so before because of strict requirements that there be reasonably conclusive evidence of the fact before a man is reported as having died.³⁵⁶

That final line is crucial to understanding one of the fears of Vietnam POW/MIA activists following Homecoming: if men were only declared dead following “reasonably conclusive evidence of the fact,” and the Defense Department had done just one month after prisoner

repatriation, how much time remained before their missing men were written off as well? As League National Coordinator Helen Knapp commented within months of Homecoming's completion, “It's becoming much more desperate...too many of our officials and news media are saying all the men are home now.”\(^{357}\) Such desperation led many to seize upon any seemingly-plausible excuse to believe in MIA survival, including the existence of secret camps.

**Fundamental Uncertainty: Changes in POW/MIA Activism after Homecoming**

At the same time, the League and POW/MIA activism generally was experiencing a demographic shift, which signaled a move toward secret camp advocacy. Relatives of POW returnees, as well as others who accepted the verdict of Homecoming, often departed from activism. In particular, the wives who made up the original League constituency became a much smaller percentage of overall membership, and no longer controlled the direction of the movement as they had during the war. The public face of POW/MIA activism generally shifted from being primarily the photogenic “hat and gloves” wives of career men who made up the bulk of League membership during the war, to the parents, siblings, offspring, and other relatives of the remaining MIAs. Total League membership also shrank noticeably as most POW family members withdrew from active participation.\(^{358}\) Indeed, for many of the founding members of the League it appeared that their mission was essentially over and there was little or no further reason for the League as an organization to exist. Even those old hands who did believe in further accounting activism often found themselves shouldered aside during the reordering that followed Operation Homecoming. These new activists, both in the League and elsewhere, carried into POW/MIA activism a new strain of militancy and an even-more potent refusal to accept the likelihood of MIA death. More importantly, they also were the first to explicitly articulate the

\(^{357}\) Helen Knapp, in John Sarr, “Where are these Men?”, Washington Post, 4 June 1973, C.1

\(^{358}\) “League Representation,” 29 April 1974, State Department Records – Frank Sieverts, Box 38, Records of the US Senate 102nd Congress, Select Committee on POW/MIA Issues, RG 46
idea of secret prison camps in Southeast Asia.

Other advocacy groups similarly experienced a shift in emphasis on POW/MIA issues after Homecoming. MIAs played a much more prominent role at the 74th National Convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars than they had previously. During that convention, the membership of the VFW agreed that the return of POWs and accounting for MIAs were unsatisfactory and resolved, “that the President and the Congress of the United States be petitioned to increase action in obtaining information on the fate of the MIAs.” To be sure, the VFW was talking about locating MIA remains and determining how and when they had died, not locating live men in secret camps, but nevertheless such a change of focus from POWs to MIAs speaks to the larger move away from men known to be alive towards ambiguously missing men.

The shift of emphasis from POWs to MIAs also signaled a change in the emotional landscape of POW/MIA activism. The missing were a much more ambiguous subject than known POWs had been. John Sarr of the Washington Post reported that, at a post-Homecoming League rally, “This fundamental uncertainty underlaid (sic) the rally – it was neither a wake for men known to be dead nor angry protest on behalf of the living.”

Beyond this “fundamental uncertainty,” additional external factors raised hopes for the possibility for the survival of the missing in covert captivity. A cottage industry of POW/MIA information vendors had arisen among the refugee communities clustered around the periphery of the war zone, Thailand in particular. Those who had fled often carried with them rumors they had picked up along the way about missing Americans. The most common type of evidence turned in to American authorities was missing dog tags. Well over ten thousand sets of tags as well as supposed copies of tags surfaced in the years following the war. Often, those approaching...
US officials with such tags claimed to have further information or a set of American remains to sell.\textsuperscript{361} Though there was no official reward policy for returning artifacts or remains of missing Americans, many in Southeast Asia nevertheless believed that handing them in would result in either money, or immigration assistance.\textsuperscript{362}

Even setting aside possible ulterior motives of those who turned in dog tags or copies thereof, their existence was not a good indicator of MIA survival as the sheer volume of lost tags alone should have indicated. American servicemen routinely lost their tags throughout the long period of direct US involvement in Southeast Asia. Knowing this, DIA investigators placed very little weight on dog tag reports. Later analysis determined that close to 90\% of all tags turned in belonged to Americans who had returned from the war in one way or another.\textsuperscript{363}

Investigators and POW/MIA activists took other sources of evidence more seriously. Chief among these were the “live sightings” reports of alleged MIAs following the American withdrawal. Much like the dog tags reports, live sightings came chiefly, though not exclusively, from refugees. The Defense Department’s POW/Missing Personnel Office reports that since the collapse of South Vietnam in 1975, there had been 7,576 live sightings, though fewer than 2,000 of those are purportedly first-hand accounts.\textsuperscript{364} Such volume alone implied that there might be some Americans left behind in Southeast Asia, and were particularly attractive to those predisposed to believe precisely that.

As with the dog tag reports, this source of evidence is misleading, however. As Joint Casualty Resolution center investigators noted, the majority of these accounts were second-hand.

\textsuperscript{362} Robert Sheetz, “‘Dog Tags’ Report,” 1 July 1991, in Investigator Files – Hilton Foster, Box 4, Records of the US Senate 102nd Congress, Select Committee on POW/MIA Issues, RG 46
\textsuperscript{363} Bill Codhina to Alex Greenfeld, 19 February 1992, in Investigator Files – Hilton Foster, Box 4, Records of the US Senate 102nd Congress, Select Committee on POW/MIA Issues, RG 46.
at best, which made verification difficult under the best of circumstance. Speaking later in the 1980s, Air Force Lt. Colonel Paul Mathers, who worked on MIA accounting through the 1970s, commented that, “There's so much mythology about this, but we have no proof that would stand up in court. We hear hundreds of secondhand accounts. We're always traveling up to the refugee camps to check the stories out. But we never seem to be able to find the guy who'll say, 'I'm the one who saw them.'”

Second, the rationale behind most “live sightings” presumed that any Caucasian seen in Southeast Asia was likely an American prisoner. This is faulty for two reasons. First, Vietnam was closely allied with the Soviet Union, a relationship that only grew closer as Sino-Vietnamese relations soured. Visitors from the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact states could be and often were mistaken for Americans. More conspiratorially, secret camp advocates claimed that these visitors were, in fact, the missing men from the secret camps who had been transferred from Vietnamese to Soviet custody, interrogated and brainwashed, and later sent back to Vietnam with new Russian identities, for some reason. Second, there were some non-prisoner Americans known to have stayed behind after the war, including a handful of deserters and collaborators. These men were from time to time mistaken for live MIAs. Even if these two points had not been the case, live sightings suffer from another problem in common with the dog tag reports: witness unreliability. While it is of course wrong to cast blanket-aspersions upon every person who came forward with an account, dog tag, or live sighting report, it is also undeniable that a shadier element within the refugee communities in Southeast Asia very much desired to make money off

MIA hunters, and desperate family members of the missing. Regardless of motivation, almost all live sighting reports were vague, lacked details, and failed to identify whom the alleged POW in question was, beyond being supposedly an American. That POW/MIA activists considered such reports believable in the face of such limitations again points to how much personal need played into belief in MIA survival, and the existence of secret camps.

Neither the League nor other activist groups concerned themselves with these sorts of evidence sources during the war, preferring instead to seek information from official sources. Such a shift in focus signaled two things. First it was another indication of the new demographic gaining prominence within POW/MIA activism after 1973. These new activists were frequently at odds with the old guard. To this point, POW wives had been the face of such activism, but now other types of relatives challenged their leadership. Wives were after all often less willing to wait endlessly for final determination of their husbands' status compared to other family members. These women needed some form of closure to escape the netherworld between wifedom and widowhood, even if their husband never came home. Along the same lines, MIA wives needed a presumptive declaration of death for their lost husbands if they wished to legally remarry, as many did. As Knapp herself acknowledged during the League's contentious 1973 national convention in Washington, DC, “A father or mother or sister or brother can wait forever for a finding, but wives and children cannot.”

Second, the turn toward dog tags and live sighting reports mark a growing distrust within POW/MIA activism for official sources of information. The new entrants into POW/MIA activism were much less likely to trust government sources, both due to Watergate revelations of how dishonest the Nixon administration had been, and also because of the looming threat of what

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368 Robert Sheetz, “‘Dog Tags’ Report,” 1 July 1991, in Investigator Files – Hilton Foster, Box 4, Records of the US Senate 102nd Congress, Select Committee on POW/MIA Issues, RG 46
League members termed “arbitrary” status changes for MIAs. The potential mass-shifting missing men’s status from “unaccounted-for” to “presumed dead,” aggravated the growing friction between wives and other relatives of the missing. This practice had been rationalized and codified during World War II via the Missing Persons Act, which mandated that “a lapse of time without information” was enough for the death of any given missing man to be presumed.\footnote{Douglas Clarke, \textit{The Missing Man: Politics and the MIA}, (Washington, DC: GPO, 1979), 19-20.}

Influential figures within the League decided to take preemptive action. Specifically, Scott Albright hired New York attorney Dermot Foley to file a class-action suit to block any such status changes.\footnote{Barker, B.4.} On 20 July 1973, the US District Court for Southern New York granted a temporary injunction against any further status changes, which in practice put an end to unrequested status changes.\footnote{Evelyn Grubb and Carol Jose, \textit{You Are Not Forgotten: A Family's Quest for Truth and the Founding of the National League of Families}, (St. Petersburg, FL: Vadamere Press, 2008), 293.}

Though League attitudes were indeed shifting and hardening, League members remained uncertain as to how to proceed after Homecoming. Donald Barker acknowledged how the role of wives within the League was changing, in his reporting on the League's 1973 National Convention. Without discounting the real emotional pain felt by other relatives, he identified how the conflicting desires of the remaining wives were causing disunity within the League itself over the subject of status determinations. Barker is perhaps most telling in his depiction of Knapp herself, whom he describes as the “wife (or is she a widow?) of a missing pilot.”\footnote{Barker, B.4.}

The growing conflict between family members of the missing was not confined solely to the 1973 League convention. Those relations whom the League had previously restricted to secondary roles now lobbied vigorously for greater roles within the League in the 1970s. Among other changes that accompanied this power shift, the League altered its membership rules,
enabling entry for all relatives of the missing. This included the so-called “adoptive” relatives, people who were not actually related to any of the missing but who could “adopt” this or that MIA, for the bargain price of five dollars a month.\textsuperscript{374} The adoptive members were admittedly not full participants, but their inclusion marked a move away from the more pragmatic attitudes of the wartime POW wives, concerned first and foremost with the fate of their missing husbands, to a broader political, and at times frankly paranoid, position. Many of these new members were much more concerned with validating the war and redeeming America’s war efforts, a desire that predisposed them toward redemptive reconstruction of the missing into hero-victims.

It is important to discriminate between POW/MIA activists generally, and secret camp advocates in particular. Admittedly there was no hard and fast line between the two, and the degree to which any given activist believed in the existence of secret camps varied by person and over time. Nevertheless, some distinctions exist. First, older League members tended to be more skeptical of secret camps and of POW/MIA conspiracy theories generally. Those who became active during and after the mid 1970s tended to be less personally invested in discovering the fate of a specific missing man than the wives who had started the League, and more broadly invested in conspiratorial ideas concerning men left unaccounted-for. What is more, this new activist demographic was politicalized to a much greater degree. Specifically, they tended to be exceptionally distrustful of official government accounting, especially when it told them things they did not want to hear.\textsuperscript{375}

The League’s annual meeting in June 1974 was a telling example of the power shift within POW/MIA activism, and rise of secret camp advocacy. Radical elements of the newer

\textsuperscript{374} This policy is still in place, though now one needs to pay the full year’s sixty dollars up front, rather than by the month. “You Can Help,” viewed 21 April 2014, at http://www.pow-miafamilies.org/partners-and-supporters/you-can-help/

\textsuperscript{375} H. Bruce Franklin, \textit{MIA or Mythmaking in America}, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 1992), 129.
membership mocked and catcalled League Executive Director Scott Albright so much that he left the stage without even completing his opening statement. He resigned soon afterward, signaling a radicalization of the League as militant newcomers then took over leadership positions. Compounding this change was an increase in cross-pollination between newer League members and Voices in Vital America (VIVA), an energetic lobbying group previously allied with the League but with disparate goals of its own. It is telling that VIVA originally was an acronym for the “Victory in Vietnam Association,” and only changed its name once that goal became patently impossible. Unlike the League, VIVA was not solely concerned with accounting for the missing but more broadly in justifying and validating the US's actions in Southeast Asia. Similarly, many of the newer, more extremist members of the League and POW/MIA activism generally were less concerned with discovering the fate of the missing, and more with redeeming the legitimacy of the larger war. Even for those who were direct relatives of missing men, those men seemed to have served better as symbols of a noble effort cravenly abandoned, than as actual human beings with undetermined fates.

Many of the older members felt alienated by these newcomers, whom they often regarded as zealots lacking any real personal stake in the larger POW/MIA question. League founding member and MIA mother Iris Powers testified that,

I’ve been condemned and vilified for seeming to care more about the families of our missing men than of the men themselves; but I believe that’s the way our men would have wanted it, if there had to be a choice. I bitterly resent having “concerned citizens” hysterically tell me that they care more about my son than I do—and this has happened. I wonder what motivates people who have made our problem their crusade! Most prominent among those who rose within the League during this shift was Ann Mills

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377 Allen, 57.
378 Iris Powers, in Hearings before the House Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia, Ninety Fourth Congress, first session, Part 2, 43.
Griffiths, sister of missing Navy Lieutenant Commander James Mills. Griffiths had been an early member of the League but unlike many among the old guard had always been unusually militant in her desire to discover the fate of her missing brother, and sided with the new element coming into the League.\textsuperscript{379} So too, she had connections to VIVA as well via their own “Support our POW/MIAs,” organization that she headed, and into which VIVA dumped its assets when the larger organization closed in 1976.\textsuperscript{380}

In addition to the power shift among League members, the 1974 meeting also marked a change in overall attitude throughout the POW/MIA community generally. This new demographic now assuming leadership roles within the League employed symbols and images already in use in POW/MIA activism and attempted to associate them more broadly with the overall war itself. This was a deliberate effort to recast Vietnam as story of the missing, with other aspects of that larger conflict subordinated to that narrative of missing, victimized men. The metal bracelets first promoted and sold by VIVA in 1970 prefigured this shift, by asserting the vital importance of the missing while at the same time subtly downplaying the visibility of the much-larger body of conventional war veterans. Those bracelets continued to symbolize the missing even after 1973, as the League and VIVA both continued to refer to them in their post-Homecoming campaigns. “Don't take your bracelets off!” thundered a full-page advertisement in the Washington Post, “there is more you must do!”\textsuperscript{381}

When it comes to long-lived POW/MIA symbols, however, one cannot find a more persistent or pervasive piece of iconography than the black POW/MIA flag itself. The League commissioned World War II veteran and commercial artist Newt Heisley to design the flag in

\textsuperscript{379} Keating, 50.
\textsuperscript{380} Michael Allen, \textit{Until the Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Unending Vietnam War}, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 2009), 151.
\textsuperscript{381}“Have You Forgotten Him?”, A.7.
In its center we see a male POW in silhouette, head bowed, with barbed wire and a menacing guard tower in the background. The words “POW/MIA” above this tableau and “You Are Not Forgotten” beneath it complete the overall design. Heisley used his Marine son, recently returned from training, as model for the flag’s iconic central figure. The flag quickly surpassed even VIVA's bracelets in terms of popularity and became the premier symbol of POW/MIA activism, as indeed it remains to this day. More than that, the flag has become a de facto icon for the war itself, helping to refine that war in terms of POW/MIA victimization and abandonment.

The Hostage Hypothesis: Initial Rationale Behind the Secret Camps

One of the more challenging aspects of secret camp advocacy was for advocates to explain why North Vietnam had built the alleged secret camps to begin with. What possible reason could they have for such camps, and for retaining the prisoners within them? Though answers to that question varied depending on which secret camp advocate one asked, the most common one given was that North Vietnam retained POWs as insurance against secretly promised reconstruction aid. Since the US had never delivered that aid, North Vietnam had never returned the last of the prisoners.

North Vietnam had made reconstruction aid a sticking point during the Paris talks but one of the apparent triumphs of Henry Kissinger’s negotiating team had been to get them to drop the issue as precondition to prisoner repatriation. Domestically there was considerable pressure on this front. In February 1973 Republican Congressman Jack Kemp had written to Kissinger that...

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383 Keating, 85.
the US should not even consider reconstruction aid until all POWs had been returned and Hanoi accelerated its MIA accounting programs.\footnote{Jack Kemp to Henry Kissinger, 1 February 1973, in National Security Files—Henry A. Kissinger Office Files—Country Files, Far East: Vietnam, Box 110, EC Reconstruction Folder (3 of 3).}

Article 21 of the Paris Accord complicated matters by stipulating that the United States would, “contribute to healing the wounds of war and to postwar reconstruction of the Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam and throughout Indochina.”\footnote{Paris Agreement, in Henry Kissinger, Ending the War in Vietnam: A History of America’s Involvement in and Extrication from the Vietnam War, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003), 448} However, POW return and MIA accounting were explicitly not provisional upon the fulfillment of Article 21, and the Agreement covered their particulars in Article 8. Even in early drafts of what eventually became Article 21, the North Vietnamese acknowledged that reconstruction aid and POW repatriation were separate issues.\footnote{“Protocol on Healing the Wounds of War and the Rehabilitation of Economy in North Vietnam,” 10 January 1973, in National Security Files—Henry A. Kissinger Office Files—Country Files, Far East: Vietnam, Box 110, EC Reconstruction Folder (3 of 3).} They also were well aware that any such aid would have to come from separate Congressional action. However, among the many bits of dirty laundry to eventually surface following Watergate was a secret letter from Nixon to Premier Pham Van Dong written 1 February 1973. In that letter, Nixon informed Pham that, “Preliminary United States Studies indicate that the appropriate programs for the United States contribution to postwar reconstruction will fall in the range of $3.25 billion in grant aid over five years.”\footnote{Richard Nixon to Pham Van Dong, 1 February 1973, in “Text of Announcement by State Department and Two Nixon Letters,” New York Times, 20 May 1977, p.17.}

This too was admittedly well short of any definitive agreement for specific amounts of aid, and viewed on its own merits appears just to have been an estimate on what could be worked out in the future. However, secret camp advocates read into it the implication that American POWS were collateral to an eventual aid deal. Since Nixon reneged on that promised deal, surely that was why the Vietnamese never released those prisoners. While plausible within the mindset...
of the secret camp advocate, in reality there was a fatal flaw in such reasoning: The Vietnamese government has always maintained that it held no remaining prisoners after 1973, nor has it ever offered to return missing Americans in exchange for cash.\textsuperscript{388} If the missing were actually hostages, it is strikingly odd that Hanoi never bothered to send a ransom note.

Regardless of why they chose to believe in MIA survival, secret camp advocates were united with most in larger POW/MIA activism in fearing their hard-won national prominence was endangered. More than just general worries of the nation giving up on the missing after Homecoming, they had reason to believe that federal government, so long an ally, was turning against them. Specifically, they felt threatened by William Clements’ appointment as Deputy Secretary of Defense in 1973. Not only was he no ally of the League or any other group, Clements believed the time had more than come to start presuming the deaths of the remaining MIAs. Such a process had been the practice in prior American wars and given how few men were still to be accounted for, Clements might well be forgiven for at least initially imagining that this move would be mostly uncontroversial. It is doubtful he would have changed his mind even if he had fully appreciated how this would incite the worst fears of POW/MIA activism. Clements did not think much of the League, VIVA, or any other advocacy group to speak of, and found MIA activism generally to smell not a little of a con game, going so far at one point to state,

There is not a shred of evidence, not one hard piece of evidence, that would give us hope that there are survivors among the MIAs. The crudest thing going on is the profit-making on bracelets and bumper stickers and fund raising that uses the sadness of the families of these men and the sympathies of their countrymen for profit. The rumor-mongering by charlatans makes my blood boil.\textsuperscript{389}


Clements rejected the idea that there needed to be some sort of forever-search for the missing or that the US should deviate how it had handled such matters in earlier wars. Writing to Nixon in July 1973, Clements had already raised the concern that outside influences might well disrupt the accounting process and divert that process from properly authorized government bodies into the hands of those with personal axes to grind:

I am concerned that the process for equitably determining status of the missing in Southeast Asia may be unduly influenced by emotional factors rather than the law governing such determinations and the facts bearing on each individual case. For example, some family members are seeking an immediate change from missing to deceased, regardless of whether available information justifies such a declaration. Conversely, others are demanding a complete moratorium on status changes until Southeast Asia can be swept for grave sites and combat locations where men were lost.

In my view the status determination process, as established by law and experience, should be allowed to function as prescribed if we are to maintain fairness, credibility, and consistency. It is not our intent to write off our missing men prematurely, but at the same time we cannot condone building undue hope for the family members without justification.390

Going further, Clements cited just how unlikely survival was virtually any of those still listed as missing, citing both statistical evidence and also the testimony of returned POWs.391 Finally, he concluded with the recommendation that the US follow standard postwar operating procedure with regard to the missing:

In the past, many were continued in a missing status because of lack of information from the other side. Now that the men have returned, the positive information that they have given us has been added to the data already available. The fact that reports from our returned prisoners of war indicate that many others apparently did not enter the captivity environment is also a significant factor that must be considered.392

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Clements did not foresee that this would be seen as an attack by POW/MIA activists, and probably would not have cared if he had. More importantly, where POW/MIA activists saw his actions as abandonment, secret camp advocates perceived his supposed haste to close the book on the missing as intentionally covering up MIA survival. Testifying later, Roger Shields claimed that in 1973, Clements had all-but ordered him to give up on finding any more live prisoners. After Shields argued that he could not say that there were no more live Americans, he claimed that Clements angrily replied, “You didn’t hear me. I said they’re all dead.”

For the League and other groups, revelations of Nixonian dishonesty and the appointment of Clements seemed to confirm two dreaded fears: the government had been stringing them along as convenient war boosters, and now planned on sweeping any remaining hope for MIA survival under a rug of political expediency.

The League did not speak with one voice on this issue. Some members held faith that the Joint Casualty Resolution Center would eventually determine the fate of the MIAs. Others even went so far as to publicly call out their radicalized compatriots, arguing those members were “simply refusing to accept reality.” Such reasonable objections were however increasingly in the minority as POW/MIA activism narrowed what was and was not acceptable realities with regard to the remaining MIAs.

**The Montgomery Committee: POW/MIA Activism’s First Congressional Inquiry**

Disillusionment with the Nixon administration did not, yet, mean an overarching rejection of all official accounting efforts. In 1974 the League and other groups lobbied for Congressional hearings on the missing, which eventually led to the September 1975 formation of

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the House Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia. That committee’s stated purpose,

…is to conduct a full and complete investigation and study of (1) the problem of United States servicemen still identified as missing in action, as well as those known dead whose bodies have not been recovered, as a result of military operations in North Vietnam, South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia and the problem of United States civilians identified as missing or unaccounted for, as well as those known dead whose bodies have not been recovered in North Vietnam, South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia; (2) the need for additional international inspection teams to determine whether there are servicemen still held as prisoners of war or civilians held captive or unwillingly detained in the aforementioned areas.

The press generally referred to this committee as, “The Montgomery Committee” after its chairman, G. V. “Sonny” Montgomery (R-Mississippi), and POW/MIA activists had reason to be optimistic at that choice. Montgomery had a history of being sympathetic to veterans’ issues, and of opposition to the anti-war movement generally. More to the point, Montgomery had not been silent in his belief that men had been left behind in Southeast Asia and that the government was not doing enough to locate them and hold the Vietnamese accountable. Though he never articulated belief in secret camps as such, Montgomery claimed to be the loudest voice speaking for the missing in Congress.

Despite such promise, the Montgomery Committee proved a massive disappointment to the League and other activists. Chairman Montgomery notwithstanding, others on the committee were less than enthusiastic about the prospects of finding any more live prisoners. Furthermore, some even rejected the idea that Vietnam should shoulder any further responsibility for America’s missing men. Representative Richard Ottinger noted during the opening comments of

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396Americans Missing in Southeast Asia: Hearings before the House Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia, 94th Congress, 1st Session, Part 1. ii.
398Franklin, 14-15.
that committee’s deliberation, “...I think the attitude of the North Vietnamese is that we made a moonscape out of their country, we killed thousands and thousands of their people, and disrupted their economy completely, and the notion that they should have to come forward first in these circumstances seems incongruous.”

It is unlikely Vietnam could have provided better information about the missing even had it been so inclined. Ottinger correctly observed that the only-recently reunited country was still dealing with the war’s destruction, particularly the ravaging of its communications and logistical networks. The North Vietnamese had acknowledged how this had limited their capacities to keep track of prisoners during the war, with Pham Van Dong privately acknowledging how hard it was to keep track of prisoners held outside the capital, the numbers of whom changed daily as new reports came in. Prior to 1970, the North Vietnamese had an even harder time tracking their prisoners due to the decentralized, ad-hoc system of their camps and holding facilities. After US Special Forces’ raid on the Son Tay prison facility of that year, the North Vietnamese consolidated virtually all of their POW camps into three main facilities in and around Hanoi (the Hilton, and the smaller and less well-known Plantation and Zoo). They still did not keep records of prisoners in transit prior to their arrival in Hanoi, however.

Further dampening League hopes, witnesses testifying before the House Select Committee did not support the idea of live MIAs remained in captivity in Southeast Asia. On the contrary, many spoke of how difficult POW/MIA survival was, and how unlikely it was that missing men could have survived the destruction of their aircraft. Dr. Roger Shields, head of the

399 Representative Richard Ottinger, in *Americans Missing in Southeast Asia: Hearings before the House Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia*, 12.
400 Memorandum of Conversation, Arnaud de Borchgrave and Pham Van Dong, 24 October 1972, in Nixon Presidential Staff Materials, National Security Council Files—POW/MIA, Box 3—Vietnam Subject Files, backchannel Message – 1972 Southeast Asia Folder.
401 Franklin, 196.
Defense Department’s POW/MIA Task Force, testified before the committee on 30 September 1975 that air crews, comprising the majority of the missing, were often lost under such circumstances that even identifying the wreck of a given aircraft was quite difficult, to say nothing of the crew it carried:

Now, to implement the accounting procedures, which we felt was going to be very difficult, we know that many of our men—most, in fact—were lost in aircraft accidents, incidents, shoot downs, and so forth. We know that in the case of high-speed aircraft carrying ordinance and other explosive munitions, that oftentimes it’s very difficult even to find enough of the airplane to identify.\textsuperscript{402}

Striking more directly at the foundation of the secret camp myth, he testified that while the Vietnamese probably did have some American remains left to return, there was nothing to indicate they retained any live prisoners. Further, Shields testified that it was unreasonable to expect the Vietnamese or anyone else in Southeast Asia to have perfect knowledge of what happened to every American who had disappeared during the war:

We know, on the other side of the coin, that there are a substantial number of men who were lost, about whom North Vietnam and its allies have very little information, men who were lost in isolated areas, analogous to airplane crashed in this country in which wreckage and remains are not located for many years.\textsuperscript{403}

For their part, League representatives offered testimony on the feasibility of continued MIA survival, attempted to frame the overall debate in terms that presumed survival as the starting point, and especially argued against any policies that could lead to presumptive status changes. League Executive Director Earl Hopper argued that not only was the League fundamentally opposed to the idea of presumptive findings of death for MIAs, they also opposed even the idea that the relatives of a missing man could request a status review by the military if it could potentially lead to a status change. Hopper argued that even when instigated by next of kin

\textsuperscript{402} Dr. Roger Shields, in \textit{Americans Missing in Southeast Asia: Hearings before the House Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia}, Part 1, 33.

\textsuperscript{403} Ibid., 35.
such reviews violated the civil rights of the missing since they could hardly represent themselves, and argued such processes were just an excuse to conveniently move MIAs into the KIA-finding of death category. Hopper argued that only “factual proof” or an “extensive documented search effort” could justify such a change, though he failed to define exactly what he considered acceptable levels of either.404

Chairman of the League’s Board of Directors E. C. “Bus” Mills made points similar to Hopper’s, adding specifically that the traditional status change process abnegated the government’s “legal and moral obligations” to the missing and “declaring them dead without substantial proof is not justified and is a violation of the individual rights of that prisoner or missing man.”405 The League position here was clear: these men should be presumed alive unless shown to be otherwise, regardless of how unreasonable such an expectation was given the specifics of any given case. Since they should be presumed alive, the government therefore should continue to search for them and press Vietnam for further accounting. Being even more specific, Mills used the example of a POW by the name of Sparks who supposedly had written his parents about how well he was managing in captivity, Though Sparks did not return during Homecoming, and the Vietnamese claimed to never have held him prisoner, Mills argued his letters demonstrated that, “the burden of proof should not be with those parents to prove that he is still alive.”406 To be clear, Mills did not claim that this example demonstrated the existence of secret prison camps, but his argument was premised on the twin ideas of Sparks, and others like him, surviving in enemy captivity.

404 Earl Hopper, in Americans Missing in Southeast Asia: Hearings before the House Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia, Part 4, 56.
Such presumptions of survival were deeply unrealistic, as the League’s board well knew but apparently chose to ignore. Navy Lieutenant Commander and former POW George Thomas Coker had testified before that body in 1973 about various aspects of the POW/MIA experience. Among other things, he explicitly told the board just how heavily the odds were stacked against anyone whose aircraft went down over the jungle. Presuming the airman’s parachute opened correctly, which was not a given, he still risked getting killed by whatever had knocked down his plane to begin with. If he then made it to the ground in one piece, there were numerous instances of NVA forces, NLF guerrillas, or locals killing pilots while they attempted to evade capture, or even following surrender.\(^{407}\)

Coker went on to testify that as dangerous as capture was, it was also often the only way a man had even a chance at survival. Men who suffered injuries ejecting or on the ground found the Southeast Asian bush and jungle exceptionally inhospitable, as indeed did even healthy men. Deadly infections set in very easily even for minor wounds and life-saving treatment could only come from the enemy under such conditions. Even then, death was as real a possibility as survival as Coker personally attested:

> To give you a very real example of this, is my own case. My leg was injured. It became infected. If I had been 1 week later getting to Hanoi, I don’t think I would have lived. When they finally got me there, I had to go to the hospital for an operation—this was 3 weeks later. When they took me in there I thought they were going to cut my leg off. But they cut it all open and drained all the junk out, and they gave me enough medication to overcome it. And I consider myself one of the luckiest medical cases up there. It was a very small injury, really superficial, nothing major—but it became infected. One more week and I would have been dead.\(^{408}\)

If a man with such minor injuries could barely survive, clearly anyone with more substantial wounds would have far slimmer chances. That the League’s board heard this

\(^{407}\) Coker, in *Americans Missing in Southeast Asia: Hearings before the House Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia, Part 2*, 113-4.

\(^{408}\) Coker, in *Americans Missing in Southeast Asia: Hearings before the House Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia, Part 2*, 113-4, 115.
testimony only to ignore it points to how much hope overrode the reality that MIA survival was not likely, or in some instances even possible.

Committee hearings continued through late 1975 and into 1976, with the Committee publishing its final report on 13 December 1976. That report did not speak favorably towards there being any real possibility of live American prisoners remaining in Southeast Asia. It recognized that the unaccounted-for of all classifications were a very small percentage of those Americans who had served in Southeast Asia throughout the war, and that evidence for their continued survival was cursory and circumstantial at best.\textsuperscript{409} The report cited extensive witness and expert testimony when it stated that, “the experiences of rescued airmen and returned POWs does little to contribute to the belief that many airmen now missing in Southeast Asia could have survived. Indeed, the record indicates that possibility as very slight.”\textsuperscript{410}

That report struck even more directly at the hopes of POW/MIA activists and especially secret camp advocates when it pointed out that to date all MIA survival investigations had turned out to be based on evidence that ranged from scanty, to entirely fabricated. The committee acknowledged that despite this, family members of the missing might well continue to hold out some hope. Regardless of that, “The committee, therefore, reluctantly concludes that no Americans are still held as POWs and the focus must be on gaining an accounting for men who lost their lives in battle or after capture.”\textsuperscript{411}

This would have been bad enough in activist eyes, had the committee not then gone a step further. The committee recognized that not only were no more living American prisoners in

\textsuperscript{409} Americans Missing in Southeast Asia: Final Report Together with Additional and Separate Views of the Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia, United States House of Representatives, (Washington, DC: GPO, 1976), 22.

\textsuperscript{410} Ibid., 51.

\textsuperscript{411} Americans Missing in Southeast Asia: Final Report Together with Additional and Separate Views of the Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia, United States House of Representatives, 229.
Southeast Asia, but that there likely would not ever be a full accounting for every single man still missing. Having examined how Americans had gone missing, and where, the committee concluded that, “A total accounting for all 2,546 Americans who did not return from Southeast Asia is not now, and never will be, possible.”

Above all, the conclusions of the Montgomery Committee existed within a narrative of the missing that had functioned well enough in previous wars, but was so unsatisfactory to Vietnam’s MIA families: the missing belong among the heroic dead, not the victimized living, and it was time to move on. They should be commemorated, mourned, and have their remains recovered if possible, but be no longer frantically searched-for:

It would seem correct, then, to pay tribute to all those Americans who served their country in Indochina but failed to return and whose fate is unknown. Theirs was not the task to determine the political and military conditions under which the struggle in Southeast Asia would be waged; rather it was their often thankless task to give of their youth in sweat and blood. They answered the call to fight a difficult and unpopular war in a distant land. They fought with honor and with pride, hoping that through it all they might make possible for others the way of life with which they were familiar and which they loved. In so doing, this report concludes, they paid the ultimate price in service of their country…

…It is the final recommendation of this report that a memorial be erected on the grounds of Arlington National Cemetery, and that, after an accounting has been achieved, the name of each man who never returned from that war in Southeast Asia be inscribed thereon, and that appearing above the names be written:

IN GRATEFUL REMEMBRANCE OF THOSE WHO GAVE THEIR LIVES IN SERVICE OF THEIR COUNTRY, AND WHO SLEEP IN UNKNOWN GRAVES.

THIS IS THEIR MEMORIAL—THE WHOLE EARTH IS THEIR SEPULCHER.

For all the apparent compassion of its conclusion, the Montgomery Committee findings did little to assuage POW/MIA activists, and nothing at all to dissuade true believers in the secret

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412 Ibid., 241.
413 Americans Missing in Southeast Asia: Final Report Together with Additional and Separate Views of the Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia, United States House of Representatives, 247-8.
camps. This failure derives more than anything else from a fundamental misunderstanding by that committee as to why the older MIA narrative failed to satisfy families of Vietnam’s missing men. As Ed Hopper’s testimony shows, the presumption of POW/MIA activism was that the missing were alive until proven otherwise, rather than dead unless confirmed still alive. Those activists who were trapped in the no-man’s land between hope and mourning needed the MIAs to be alive, so they necessarily rejected any conclusion that did not support and reinforce that need. What the Montgomery Committee intended to be tribute and memorialization, the League and its allies saw instead as dismissal and cover-up, the latter being a particularly strong suspicion in the wake of Watergate. Montgomery himself personifies the older mindset, for though he opened the hearings inclined to believe in MIA survival, he did not presume it nor continue to hope for it in the absence of positive evidence. What is more, the Montgomery Committee’s had failed entirely to grasp the second key feature of secret camp myth, that of the heroic recasting of POW/MIA into hero-victim. The men its report spoke of were definitively dead. Heroic perhaps in their sacrifice, but not sufficiently so to redeem the otherwise compromised national enterprise that was war in Vietnam.

For this failure, many within POW/MIA activism now symbolically cast Montgomery aside and vilified him for coming to the wrong conclusions. Some even went so far as to brand him a traitor on par with Jane Fonda, and refer to him as “V.C. MontGOMERy,” thus to childishly imply that the true sympathies of a man known for assaulting anti-war demonstrators actually lay with the communist enemy. League Director Ann Mills Griffith declared that, “the conclusion that all P.O.W.’s and M.I.A.’s should be declared dead is ludicrous, particularly in

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414 Franklin, 15.
415 Clarke, 99.
light of recently initiated negotiations between the United States and Vietnam.”\(^{416}\) Another League member, Carol Bates, angrily proclaimed the committee’s hearings had been “inept,” and “incompetent,” alleging that Montgomery himself spent his time, “sitting in his office in Washington, and playing gold in Meridian, Miss[issippi],” rather than actually getting to the truth about live MIAs.\(^{417}\) Though both stopped short of openly declaring their belief in the existence of secret camps, these two long-time League members clearly felt the Montgomery Committee had abandoned live MIAs to their fate.

Going further than Griffiths and Bates, Bruce W. Most, who had reported on POW/MIA issues through the early 1970s, wrote an editorial for the *Los Angeles Times* in which he argued that the Committee’s report was “presumptuous at best,” and “ignored such blatant cases as that of Navy Lt. Ron Dodge.” Though he too did not use the term “secret camps” explicitly, Most did mention “numerous reports” of live Americans being held by the enemy, and cited a Vietnamese defector who Most claimed said it was “common knowledge” that there were live POWs in Haiphong.\(^{418}\)

The League’s 1976 meeting coincided with the end of the Montgomery Committee hearings and shows how clearly the League had turned against that committee’s chairman, even before they had seen the final report. Montgomery attended in person and reviewed the findings of his committee before the League membership present. While he did promise to do everything in his power to ascertain the ultimate fate of the MIAs, nevertheless he made the mistake of presuming their death was more likely than survival. Montgomery remarked that, “our MIAs lost


their lives in service of their nation,” and that future accounting efforts must be based on, “reason, not emotion, and facts, not rumors.”⁴¹⁹ A “concerned citizen” in attendance, Jo Ann Waller, thought Montgomery’s speech was merely an attempt to mollify the angry League membership, and that “It stinks what’s going on here. Only 4 of the 10 members of the committee are here today. Our men didn’t ask to go over there to fight, and they didn’t ask to be abandoned by the government, either.”⁴²⁰ Other League members reacted even more harshly to Montgomery, with a mother of two MIAs screaming in response to his speech that, “You are not God! You are a servant of the people!”⁴²¹ Clearly, for some within the League, keeping faith in MIA survival had come to mean literally just that. So too, they expected the “servants of the people” to keep looking for MIAs until the people were satisfied, regardless of how unrealistic it was to expect further live Americans to be found.

This should not be surprising, given those factors that contributed to the birth of the American secret camp myth. Years of well-meaning falsities spoken by comrades of dead men, of government reporting errors and discrepancies, and indeed active deception and manipulation by the Nixon Administration, had engendered hopes too great to be denied. Families of the missing could not accept that they had been wrong to hope, that their men were almost certainly dead, and so latched on to the most appealing remaining explanation: the missing must be in secret captivity, somewhere in Southeast Asia. Their own government had abandoned them there, and could not be trusted to ever bring them home as demonstrated by the craven betrayal of the Montgomery Committee report. More than anything else save Watergate, that report poisoned any remaining POW/MIA activist trust in official MIA accounting. From this point on,

⁴²¹ Sawyer, “No Hope, MIA Families Told,” A6.
the “cowardly government bureaucrat” stereotype, more concerned with covering up embarrassing realities than getting to the truth, would dominate POW/MIA activist narratives, rising eventually to be as much a villain of the piece as the Vietnamese communists themselves.

However, this is not to say that the rest of the 1970s were a time of renewed vigor for POW/MIA activism generally, or the League in particular. On the contrary, while opinions did harden and radicalize within that community, external interest diminished as Vietnam fatigue gripped the nation. League involvement in national political contests did not help matters. Particularly damaging for the League was the bitter Republican primary of 1976, in which longtime League ally and original VIVA sponsor Ronald Reagan challenged President Gerald Ford for the nomination. Reagan made MIA accounting a subordinate element of his foreign policy platform, seamlessly if not entirely coherently combining Ford's failure to force an accounting from the Vietnamese with the impending return of the Panama canal zone, détente with the Soviets, and normalization of relations with China as all collective signs of weakening American power on the world stage, remediable only of course via a Reagan presidency. More specifically, he appealed directly to the League for support during the primary season, promising if elected he would appoint a secretary of state to take “every reasonable and proper step” to get the League what it wanted.

Reagan failed in his primary challenge, but that he had included MIA accounting in his platform pulled the League further into his orbit and thus left that group in the unenviable position of having bet on a losing horse. Though temporarily embarrassed by this, the League

422 Allen, 173.
424 Allen, 176-77.
had by that point a long history with Reagan, who had been part of POW/MIA activism since the war years. That relationship only grew more pronounced as Reagan’s political star rose.

For his part, Ford made a mistake similar as had Montgomery by admitting that what League wanted might just be impossible to deliver. Addressing the League convention himself, he promised that while his administration would continue to “employ every effective means to account for your loved ones,” nevertheless, “information for every missing man may never be available.” While League membership strongly applauded other points in his speech, particularly when he asserted that no normalization of relations with Vietnam was possible without first resolving the MIA issue, they did not receive him with unqualified zeal. League Coordinator for Oregon Barbara Parker, meeting with the president briefly after his speech, informed him that she, “didn’t think he was doing everything he could,” and, after he replied to the contrary, added, “do more.”

Beyond national politics however, America was tired of Vietnam and all the problems associated with it. The POW/MIA movement in general reacted to all these various setbacks by digging in its heels and continuing to insist that Vietnam would never be truly over until the missing had been fully accounted for. Surviving the wilderness years of the 1970s, POW/MIA activism experienced a dramatic revival of fortune and also public visibility in the 1980s. That revival moved belief in the secret camps from being a fringe one within the POW/MIA community to a much more mainstream, popular opinion. Frustrated by the failure of officialdom to resurrect the missing, secret camp advocates discovered new justification for why the black POW/MIA flag should continue to fly high. They were aided in this pursuit by political opportunists who saw in POW/MIA activism a way rewrite the history of the Vietnam war, as

426 Sawyer, “A Father Charges MIA ‘Cover-Up,’” B7.
well as charlatans who used the desperate hopes of MIA families to line their own pockets and, somewhat surprisingly, Hollywood.

Chapter 6 – High Water Mark of the Secret Camp Myth

The 1980s heralded a revival in national interest in Vietnam POW/MIA affairs and subsequently the secret camp myth as well. Such was the reversal of fortune that those activists who had felt themselves betrayed by the Montgomery Committee in the mid-1970s would not only regain national attention, but also a second Congressional inquiry on the matter. Three important factors contributed to this resurgence on interest. First, the Iranian Hostage Crisis at the end of the 1970s reawakened the image of the prisoner and hostage in the American consciousness. Second was the appearance of lurid allegations that the Vietnamese had secretly warehoused of hundreds of sets of American remains. Third, POW/MIA activists embraced a new cinematic subgenre, the POW/MIA rescue film, which gained popularity among the gloriously pulpy action movies of that decade. These three factors combined with a concerted push by right wing politics to recast the POW and MIA as American heroes cravenly abandoned by their government, and so attempted to make their heroic suffering the face of the larger Vietnam experience. Such was the revival of interest in the missing from Vietnam that Congress once more launched hearings into the possibility of live POWs and secret camps, only to once more conclude that none of the former still survived, and the latter likely had never existed at all.

Prisoners Again: The Iranian Hostage Crisis
In November 1979 radical Iranian students stormed the US embassy in Tehran and seized the staff they found there. This was a moment of particular importance for the revival of both POW/MIA activism and secret camp advocacy as graphic images of subdued Americans being paraded through the streets of Tehran, surrounded by angry crowds, could not fail to evoke similar images of downed pilots being led through Hanoi to the Hilton. The national media was not slow to report on the thematic similarities between the Iranian hostage crisis and the missing men from Vietnam. Reporting on the story approximately one year later, *New York Times* reporter Steven Roberts described how the entire situation had resonated with the American public:

It was as if the whole nation had been blindfolded and hogtied, hauled through the streets of a strange city with people taunting them in a foreign tongue. Americans’ sense of futile rage grew even sharper last April after they tried and failed to rescue the hostages.\(^{428}\)

Roberts here uses language that was already a staple of the POW/MIA community and had been used during Go Public, such as the pictures of Ron Dodge’s capture and humiliation in the “Have You Forgotten Him?” advertisement after Operation Homecoming in 1973.\(^{429}\) Though not blindfolded in those photos, Dodge is being led through the streets under North Vietnamese guard in a very close match for the American prisoner experience in Iran. So too, the helpless frustration of those earlier League pronouncements ring through in what Roberts calls America’s “futile rage.”

Roberts went further symbolically link the current crisis and Vietnam prisoner-
rescue failures:

No myth goes deeper in the American character than the belief that good will triumphs in the end, that the cavalry will ride over the hill at the last minute and save the day. Accordingly, the spectacle of American troops, trapped by swirling sand and faulty helicopters in a remote desert, then crashing into one another in their haste to escape, could hardly have been more humiliating…the good guys had lost—again.\textsuperscript{430} (emphasis mine)

Roberts is alluding here to a direct antecedent of the failed Iranian hostage rescue. On 21 November 1970, US Special Forces had staged a rescue attempt on the North Vietnamese prison at Son Tay, then thought to be the main concentration point of American POWs. While technically spectacular, featuring among other things the deliberate crash-landing of the main assault helicopter within the prison walls to effect the fastest and most violent-possible entry, that raid was unsuccessful as the North Vietnamese had evacuated the prisoners days before.\textsuperscript{431} Despite their best efforts, the “good guys” had lost, as had their counterparts almost ten years later, over the Iranian deserts.

Roberts was not alone in seeing the ghosts of Vietnam interwoven with that more recent crisis. Many Americans saw the failed rescue not just as an international embarrassment but also as a symptom of a more troubling disease that stretched back to Vietnam itself. In this understanding, America’s humiliation at Iranian hands was just the latest evidence of a larger national decline that began with the failure to win in Southeast Asia. Kathleen Kennedy, wife of a retired Air Force officer, told Roberts that, ”We should have gone in a long time ago, a strong

\textsuperscript{430} Ibid., 30.
\textsuperscript{431} Michael Allen, Until the Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Unending Vietnam War, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 2009), 49.
President and a strong Government wouldn’t let Iran get away with that.”  

Her husband Frank voiced similar, bitter sentiments:

“I’ve lived all over the world, and years ago when I went into the service, the United States had respect in foreign countries. Then along came Vietnam, and we fought a pitiful war—we wouldn’t really let the military fight—and we ended up losing. I agree with Teddy Roosevelt. Walk softly but carry a big stick. And club the hell out of them if you need to. Our stick is down to a toothpick.” (Emphasis mine)

Though the Kennedys were not part of the POW/MIA community, they spoke with words that many that were had been using for years. In that viewpoint, Iran’s seizure of the US embassy staff would not have been possible if America had not been so humiliated and diminished by the Vietnam War. Indeed, their language was part of a growing chorus that reimagined the US not so much defeated by Vietnam, but rather as defeated by cowards and traitors within.

Some such voices went even further than simply seeing POW parallels, and linked the Iranian crisis specifically with the secret camp myth. In February 1980 the Los Angeles Times published an op-ed from MIA father Wallace S. Wiggins argued that the two crises were entirely connected and that he could not understand why everyone was so keen on the fifty Iranian hostages while at the same time they ignored the much-larger number of missing Americans in Vietnam. Wiggins claimed that those men, including his son, were being held in secret captivity by Hanoi, and that the League, “has obtained sufficient evidence to prove that American prisoners (alive) are being held in Southeast Asia.”

The League in particular saw in this shift a clear opportunity to bring their cause back to the forefront of the American consciousness. New York State League coordinator Gladys Brooks

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433 Frank Kennedy, in ibid, p. 63.
noted that publicity on the Iranian crisis resulted in, “a great surge of interest in our POW/MIA issue.”

What is more, family members of the Iranian hostages quickly organized their own advocacy group, the Family Liaison Action Group (FLAG). Commentators at the time noted that groups close resemblance to the early League, both in form and function. Among others, President Reagan referred to the just-returned hostages as “prisoners of war” in his first cabinet meeting in 1981. To be sure, the Iranian Hostage Crisis existed on its own terms in American politics and popular culture, and was not just an extension of half-buried Vietnam neuroses. Nevertheless, those who wished to force POW/MIA issues from that war back to the forefront of the national conversation found it a useful tool in that regard.

**Them Bones: Remains of the Fallen, Rumors of the Missing**

The Iranian hostage crisis reawakened American interest in matters of captive Americans abroad generally, but other specific events appeared to cast new light on the idea of Americans being held in Southeast Asia more explicitly. Refugees had reported any number of supposed live prisoner sightings, but by 1979 there was still no credible evidence confirming their existence. However, late that year one particular refugee came forward with seemingly explosive news of Vietnamese duplicity in the accounting process. Tran Vien Loc, a refugee from Hanoi, testified at the League’s 11th annual conference that he had been a mortician in North Vietnam during the war. He claimed to have processed the remains of American personnel through 1975, and to have seen POW/MIA corpses as late as 1977. Only 26 of these latter sets of remains were ever reported to US officials, though he claimed more had subsequently been put into long-term

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435 Gladys Brooks, in Allen, 205.
storage as future diplomatic bargaining chips. Tran had more sensational news than this, however. While taking questions at that same meeting, he affirmed that he had seen live POWs in his Hanoi office as late as 1974, one year after the supposed return of all live prisoners.

What made Tran’s account more believable than prior live sightings, from which nothing useful had been gleaned so far? Unlike those reports here at last was a first-hand account, not some half-remembered viewing-at-a-distance refugee tale told at one or more removes. Tran himself was more compelling a witness as well, not just some penniless refugee but an actual former functionary of the enemy government, albeit one who had operated at a very low level. Whereas Joint Casualty Resolution Center officials like Paul Mathers had despaired in the 1970s of ever getting closer than two or three steps from a live-sighting claim, here was the man himself, in the flesh.

This is not to say that everyone within the League believed what he had to say, of course. Most prominently, Dermot Foley, outgoing legal counsel of the League alleged that Tran was, in fact, a member of the Vietnamese secret police purposefully spreading disinformation. Foley based this claim on information he had from his client Robert Garwood, the notorious wartime deserter who had only recently returned to the US and was then standing trial for his desertion and collaboration.

Most of the League was nevertheless far more receptive than Foley. Carol Bates, who had expressed belief in MIA survival following the Montgomery Committee report, now took such a belief to its logical conclusion and claimed that Tran’s evidence finally proved the existence of secret prison camps: “Over the last 18 months, the abundance of reports of live Americans have

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439 Ibid., p.4.
440 Hirsley, p.4.
been enough to convince us that there is substance to our longstanding beliefs there are men held against their will.”

Going further, Bates argued that there were over, “300 first-hand sightings of Americans in captivity,” which she considered “overwhelming” evidence of the existence of secret prison camps.

Unfortunately for POW/MIA activists and secret camp advocates, Tran’s story broke right at the height of the Iranian Hostage Crisis, in particular just as the daring escape of six American diplomats via a joint US-Canadian operation made headlines. The Washington Post spent many pages discussing the hostage rescue but limited its coverage of Tran’s supposed revelations to a very modest story occupying a corner of page A13. Even in that small space, the Post made no mention of his claim of having seen living prisoners postwar, but rather focused on charges leveled by New York Congressman Lester Wolff that Hanoi had been warehousing US POW remains. The article also contained a statement from California Congressman George Danielson who, with Wolff, had recently returned from an official trip to Vietnam, and was less than convinced of the reliability of Tran’s testimony. Danielson believed Tran had, “a variety of motives in presenting his account.”

Trans’s story did gain some momentum, eventually. In June 1980 the San Francisco Chronicle ran a story about his 27 June appearance before a House subcommittee chaired by Wolff. Tran wore a helmet with an opaque face-shield throughout his testimony, which added more than a touch of spy-thriller sensationalism to the proceedings. This was supposedly a

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442 Ibid.
defensive measure to prevent sinister Vietnamese agents from being able to identify him.\textsuperscript{445} His actual testimony was less exciting, as Tran merely repeated his earlier claims to have processed as many as 400 sets of US remains by 1977, and identified the facility where this supposedly took place as “the citadel” or “the plantation.” Congressman Wolff added that his delegation had been barred from visiting a particular former POW complex when they had visited Hanoi in January, heavily implying that that location could also be used to warehouse unreturned remains.\textsuperscript{446}

More importantly for secret camp advocates, Tran crucially also reaffirmed that he had seen live Americans in Vietnam after the end of direct US involvement “I saw three Americans who came into the military law division jurisdiction area,” he claimed, as well as giving brief, fairly generic descriptions of the men in question.\textsuperscript{447} Though he had not met these alleged prisoners face to face, he claimed they were given “special care” by the Vietnamese administrators and that he had personally seen them “many times” in the body processing area, most recently in 1974.\textsuperscript{448} Tran made no mention of how he knew these men to be Americans specifically, and neither did anyone on the committee ask him to clarify that assumption.

Tran’s testimony reinforced a core element of the secret camp myth: the fundamental dishonesty and inherent cruelty of the Vietnamese regime. Pentagon Director of East Asia and Pacific affairs Brigadier General T. C. Pinckey said that Tran’s testimony was further evidence of how the Vietnamese “have stonewalled any meaningful resolution of the [MIA] question.”\textsuperscript{449} MIA father Charles Walker went further and argued Tran’s testimony helped reawaken the

\textsuperscript{446} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{447} Tran Vien Loc, in Hirsley, p.4.
\textsuperscript{448} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{449} T. C. Pickney, in “Story of POW Bodies in Hanoi,” 6.
POW/MIA issue in the American public consciousness as it, “exposes that claims by the Vietnamese have been absolutely unreliable.”

Nevertheless, both were seeing in Tran’s testimony what they wanted to see, and giving it much greater weight than it deserved. The majority of what Tran had to say was more focused on POW remains rather than live prisoners. He was right that Vietnam did use the return of remains as diplomatic leverage from time to time, and so that might seem to lend credence to his live POW claims. However, the Vietnamese have never denied holding or delaying the return of some American remains, though they have on occasion obfuscated just how long they have had this or that set on hand. On the other hand, they have never once acknowledged, and have repeatedly denied, having live prisoners nor made any offers of returning live POWs in exchange for anything.

Tran was also not that dissimilar from the standard model of “live sighting” witnesses, despite his uniqueness as an alleged first-hand witness of live POWs. He had emerged from within the Southeast Asian refugee community, and had parlayed his supposed knowledge of missing Americans for his own ends. His claims were more plausible than the usual live-sighting report but ultimately just as unconfirmable, and he never did substantiate his live prisoner claims.

Regardless of whether Tran had fabricated his story about seeing live POWs, one cannot avoid the fact others who made similar claims had done so. As was the case in the 1970s, live-sighting witnesses in the 1980s usually came from refugees from the former war zone, and more often than not their motivation was primarily or exclusively financial. Former Royal Laotian officer and Neutralist Khambang Sibounheuang was a prime example of this more self-interested type of live-sighting witness. Khambang settled in the US after the war and made repeated

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450 Charles Walker, in ibid.
attempts to capitalize on continuing POW/MIA investigations. He approached the Defense Intelligence Agency in 1985, offering to assist in POW/MIA accounting in exchange for four thousand dollars, which he claimed would be used to fund Neutralists within the Laotian anti-communist resistance. The DIA considered his usefulness suspect and did not take him up on this offer upon learning he had been expelled from the Neutralists for malfeasance. Undaunted by this rejection, Khambang resurfaced periodically throughout the late 80s and into the 1990s, usually in connection with various sensational MIA survival claims. He provided supposed photographic evidence of a survivor to secret camp advocate Senator Robert Smith (R-New Hampshire), which eventually turned out to be instead of an aged Laotian highlander, and subsequently provided a wealth of alleged live POW evidence, all of which the DIA debunked after cursory examination. Not everyone who reported a live-sighting was as unreliable as Khambang, but even sincere witnesses failed to provide anything more substantial.

A War Someone Else Lost: Hollywood Refights of Vietnam

Though the Iranian hostage crisis may well have reawakened the American consciousness to Vietnam-era POW/MIA issues, and the mortician’s report excited and reinvigorated those within the movement, Hollywood provided the final element necessary for the popular articulation of the secret camp myth. No one who paid the slightest attention to the movies of the 1980s can be unaware of the “Vietnam POW Rescue” sub-genre of action films. Most big-name action heroes of the period starred in one at some point, from less-likely castings such as Gene Hackman in Uncommon Valor, to Chuck Norris in Missing in Action and its two

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452 Ibid.
sequels, to probably the most well-known of them all, Sylvester Stallone in *Rambo: First Blood, Part II.*

As archetypes of the subgenre, these movies all share common plot elements seemingly taken directly from POW/MIA activism, with the existence of putative secret camps being only the most prominent example. Their heroes are invariably veterans and usually from Special Forces or some other sort of elite unit. These gritty protagonists are invariably disillusioned with the bureaucratic foot-dragging and cover-up that typifies US officialdom in such films, particularly with regards to live POW allegations. In *Uncommon Valor,* this contrast manifests when CIA agents intercept and disarm Colonel Rhodes’ (Hackman) team just as their mission begins. The Agency is concerned chiefly with preventing Rhodes from causing any international incidents, and does not care whether there are any POWs to rescue or not. Undaunted by the loss of his team’s state-of-the-art gear, Rhodes’ then rears his men at bargain-basement rate with Second World War cast-offs and goes on to find and liberate a secret camp anyway. The better-armed, villainous but incompetent Vietnamese guards fall by the dozen before the swaggering heroics of Rhodes’ team, who suffer some casualties but win the day regardless. Not only is Rhodes able to liberate the secret camp, and thus prove that the US abandoned living prisoners in its rush to cut and run, the manner in which he does so demonstrates another key genre element: even at a disadvantage, big strong Americans can always beat the evil Vietnamese communists, if they are only allowed to do so.\(^{453}\)

In *Rambo* all of these elements reach their apex. The “sinister yet cowardly bureaucrat” archetype inhabits a larger and more directly antagonistic role in the character of Marshal Murdock (Charles Napier), a slimy Congressman who radiates insincerity and duplicity.

\(^{453}\)Uncommon Valor, VHS, directed by Ted Kotcheff, (1983; Los Angeles, CA; Paramount Pictures, 1984).
Murdock sends Rambo (Stallone) back to Vietnam to get evidence of any living POWs, expecting he will gather none. Murdock secretly knows the camps he is sending Rambo to photograph are empty, and has no intention of really learning the truth about the MIAs. His plan is to “prove” no Americans were left behind, and thus provide cover for the government to ignore calls for future searches and rescue attempts. Despite being thus set up for failure, Rambo finds living prisoners anyway, and in defiance of orders attempts to extract one against all odd. However, the cravenly Murdock aborts a helicopter rescue just when it has come within feet of reaching the imperiled hero. Importantly, Murdock betrays Rambo not out of some villainous conviction, but rather from the craven fear that rescuing American POWs will have political consequences when America learns those men had been abandoned in 1973.454

*Uncommon Valor* and *Rambo* both contains the subordinate theme of rescue as validation of American martial prowess and as symbolic victories denied by bureaucratic interference during the actual war itself, as do all other movies within the subgenre. Upon being recruited for the mission by his wartime superior and holdover character from the original *First Blood*, Colonel Sam Trautman (Richard Crenna), Rambo initially responds sarcastically with “do we get to win this time?”455 This sentiment, coupled with Rambo’s unstoppable fury even when under-armed/unarmed and outnumbered, served to further reinforce the same “stab-in-the-back” trope present in *Uncommon Valor* that had long been popular within POW/MIA activist circles, and which was gaining broader acceptance by the 1980s. The POW rescues that occur at the climax of these movies symbolically demonstrate how brave American soldiers could have won the actual war itself, if Washington had not tied their hands. It is no accident that POW rescue

455 Ibid.
movies treat cast the rescue of MIAs as the symbolic re-fighting of the war, with America emerging victorious this time around.

1984’s *Missing in Action* portrays this concept even more blatantly than *Rambo*. During the final scene, weak-willed and conciliatory State Department civilians prepare to sign off on an agreement with the oily, villainous Vietnamese communists that the POW/MIA question has been satisfactorily resolved. At the last second, headbanded Colonel James Braddock (Chuck Norris) bursts into the negotiating room with just-rescued POWs beside him, sweeping aside the armed-but-ineffective Vietnamese door guards in a triumphant and redeeming display of unfettered American might.\(^{456}\) The viewing public was not slow to recognize, and sympathize with, this cinematic reimagining of the reality of the War. William Broyles, who had served with the Marines in Vietnam, mentioned this redemptive theme in a 1985 article about his postwar return visit to that country,

> The thought preys on the mind: there may still be some Americans there. Did we commit the soldier's cardinal sin—did we leave comrades on the battlefield? Two recent movies, *Uncommon Valor* and *Missing in Action*, have played upon that nagging doubt and, in bursts of satisfying action, sent their heroes in to save American POWs and, belatedly, our honor.\(^{457}\)(emphasis mine)

There is an uglier side to both these movies, and the new Vietnam narrative they represent. Race plays an uncomfortable role throughout them, with even the “good” Asian characters being subordinate if not downright submissive to the American hero, who tower over them both metaphorically and often literally.\(^{458}\) The Vietnamese enemies are invariable vicious, cruel to the fettered POWs, yet unable to stand up to unrestrained American valor and firepower.

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\(^{456}\) *Missing in Action*, DVD, directed by Joseph Zito, (1984; Los Angeles, CA; MGM, 2000)


\(^{458}\) *Rambo: First Blood*, Part II
They lack any real martial prowess when it comes to actual combat, despite being brutal sadists in the seemingly mandatory torture scenes. This disparity reinforces the trope that America’s real-world defeat came primarily from traitors and weaklings at home, rather than the enemy in the field. Vietnamese camps and hamlets are almost uniformly squalid and backward, and their cities are seedy and run-down in those rare urban scenes, such as in *Missing in Action.*\(^{459}\) Taken together, this heavy-handed subtext exists to suggest to the audience that it should have been easy to defeat such an enemy, so why exactly did America lose? The POW/MIA rescue movies thus demonstrate a unique feature of the American secret camp myth: Not only are American POWs the heroic victims of the war, but also those heroes could have easily won the war had someone not tied their hands, and subsequently abandoned them. The racialized reimagining done in these movies dovetailed with secret camp paranoia of imagined US government complicity in covering up the existence of the secret camps. Though duplicitous and sneaky, the Vietnamese communists surely could never have kept such a matter secret, had not cowardly bureaucrats done much of the obfuscation for them.

Hollywood helped to popularize POW/MIA activism and the secret camps myth in other ways, as well. Prominent figures in Hollywood were involved in a series of bizarre private rescue efforts that took place in 1982. Retired Special Forces officer and Vietnam veteran James “Bo” Gritz, a larger than life figure who had devoted himself entirely to rescuing any live POWs that might exist, led these two missions, which he rather melodramatically named “Operation

\(^{459}\) *Missing in Action*
Lazarus.” Gritz argued that he alone could lead any rescue attempts since, “both Teddy Roosevelt and John Wayne are dead.”

One can only describe his efforts as badly botched. Gritz’s team was disorganized and poorly equipped to begin with, and had barely made it across the border from Thailand to Laos when they blundered into rival Laotian anti-communist guerillas, whom Gritz mistook for Pathet Lao troops. The guerillas quickly sent Gritz’s team running for their lives under a hail of gunfire. More embarrassingly, Gritz may have had to pay a ransom of $17,500 for one of his own men captured by those guerillas, though Gritz himself denied any such ignominy befell the team. It should come as no surprise that no live POWs were encountered during this brief affair, as none were either in a second, equally ineffective attempt Gritz made several months afterward. He delivered none of the photographic evidence he had previously, loudly promised to Congress, but he did produce a small collection of remains he claimed were from a dead American POW. Laboratory analysis later determined those bones were actually a mismatched collection from two different Asians, and several animals.

There is a deeper connection between Gritz’s rescue attempts and the POW rescue movies. Almost as if reading from an early draft of Rambo, for which Gritz later claimed to have been the direct inspiration, Gritz himself characterized his actions not just as rescuing prisoners,

462Ibid.
but ultimately redeeming American martial pride. In his own words, Gritz answered criticism of his private rescue missions by arguing that, “We are the gladiators—not the arm-chair critics, bureaucrats, politicians and pot-bellied has-beens…There may be better than us—but where are they? Let them either lead, follow, or get out of the way.” Gritz spoke here not just along similar lines as the movies, but also in the language of the secret camp advocates who argued craven politicians had abandoned live prisoners in the first place.

Tempting as it is to dismiss Gritz’s efforts as fantastical and marginal to the larger POW/MIA story, his story has larger connections to the popularization of the secret camp myth, and like the movies that connection runs through Hollywood. According to Gritz, William Shatner paid $10,000 for the film rights to the mission and Clint Eastwood contributed $30,000. Though both men prudently made themselves unavailable for comment during the immediate aftermath of the Lazarus fiasco, the media has since confirmed their involvement. More significantly, Gritz subsequently claimed to have been in indirect communication with President Reagan with Eastwood acting as intermediary. According to Gritz, the president spent the raid waiting breathlessly for any evidence of live POWs so he could then inaugurate some non-specific but presumably overwhelming official military response. In Gritz’s version of events, the President had assured Eastwood, who had subsequently passed word along to Gritz, that “if you bring out one U.S. POW, I will start World War III to get the rest out.”

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464 James “Bo” Griz, “Rebuttal to unsigned, undated accusations on NSC letterhead,” 12 December 1989, in Records of the United States Senate, 102nd Senate, Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs, Minority Staff Files—Tracy Usery, Box 20, Bo Gritz File.
466 Gladstone and Meyer, pg. 4.
467 Patterson and Tippin, 206.
Whether or not Reagan ever made so grandiose a promise is unclear, but he did meet with Eastwood prior to the Lazarus raid. According subsequent White House statements, Eastwood made the President aware of Gritz and his plans. Administration officials advised Reagan not to get involved with anything as flaky as what Gritz had proposed, and the president agreed that the official position on the matter should remain that, “These cross-border forays and other independent efforts were discouraged.”

Though Reagan may not have endorsed the actions of an unbalanced character like Gritz, he had been connected with POW/MIA activism for years before reaching the White House. As a whole-hearted supporter of the war itself, he was one of the key architects among those seeking to recast the quagmire of Vietnam as a noble cause cravenly betrayed by liberal peaceniks. Speaking at the Veterans of Foreign Wars’ national conference on 18 August 1980, he expressed ideas very similar to those on display in Rambo and the other movies. Candidate Reagan claimed that the Vietnamese enemy,

had a battle plan, it was to win on the city streets of America and in our news media what they could not win on the field of battle…There is a lesson for all of us in Vietnam; if war does come, we must have the means and determination to prevail or we will not have what it takes to preserve the peace. And while we are at it, let us tell those who fought in that war that we will never again ask young men to fight and possibly die in a war our government is afraid to let them win. (Emphasis mine)

Reagan also was a firm believer in MIA survival, and spoke frequently while in office of his belief that live Americans were still being held in Southeast Asia, according to his National


Security Advisor, Richard Allen. Reagan did not limit such expressions to private conversation. During the official unveiling of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on Veterans Day, 1984, he spoke of the remaining unaccounted-for men from the Vietnam War, saying, “some [of them] may still be saved.” He repeated such sentiments in his 1988 Veterans Day remarks, following his comments about ongoing MIA accounting with, “And we have told Hanoi that it must prove to the American people through its cooperation whether men are still being held against their will in Indochina. Otherwise we will assume some are, and we will do everything we can to find them.” Reagan’s default state here is clear: live prisoners presumably existed in Southeast Asia until Hanoi proved otherwise to his satisfaction.

One can trace the genesis of this belief to his acting career in the 1950s, specifically when he played the lead in 1954’s *Prisoner of War*, a lurid war drama about the experiences of American prisoners during the Korean War. Reagan himself acknowledged the impact that role had and continued to have upon him when addressing a group of former POWs in 1984, saying that the movie was, “the only experience I had that was in keeping with what you have gone through.” Considering the president by his own admission occasionally confused past movie roles for reality, one wonders how much of an influence that movie had had on his belief in secret camps.

Reagan had long been a vocal supporter of the League and a member of VIVA since the war years, and his connection to activism and the secret camp myth is hardly surprising. Moreover, his prominence typifies a trend towards that style of new conservatism that had been

470Allen, 216-17.
473 Reagan, in Allen, 217.
growing within POW/MIA since the Nixon years. The at-times paranoid rejection of government present within that emerging ideology married well with suspicions within secret camp advocacy that live MIAs had been intentionally abandoned after the war. Similarly, Reagan’s oft-expressed sentiments on how government itself was a problem resonated with those within POW/MIA who suspected previous administrations were intentionally dragging their feet on POW/MIA accounting.\textsuperscript{474}

**We Are That Close! Knaves, Charlatans, and 1980s POW/MIA Hysteria**

POW/MIA activism and the League both revived greatly in the 1980s with the help of rousing movies and a sympathetic president, but it must also be said that that activism unintentionally encouraged less savory elements with distinctly less admirable reasons to keep the secret camp myth alive and well. Specifically, individuals and shady organizations claiming to provide services locating and rescuing MIAs preyed upon the more desperate among the families of the missing through the 1980s. A prime example of these sorts of groups is Operation Rescue, one of a number of smaller groups that were less concerned with ascertaining the final fate of the missing, and more with cashing in on the distress of MIA families and their supporters. The following mailer sent out by Operation Rescue founder Jack Bailey is typical of this sort of group and how they operated:

\begin{quote}
Right now an American serviceman is caged like an animal in Southeast Asia...I have spent all of my time and all of my own finances trying to find our POWs. Because time is running out for these men. They suffer from malnutrition and all kinds of disease. Brave American POWs are mistreated and tortured and worked at hard labor from dawn to dusk. They deserve better!..That is why I refuse to give up!..But I can't do it alone. And frankly, I can't afford to do it much longer. I'm exhausted. I'm broke. And I'm reaching
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{474} H. Bruce Franklin, *MIA or Mythmaking in America*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 1992), 133.
end of my rope. But, I believe we are very, very close to getting our first POW out. I can't give you any more details. But you may wake up tomorrow morning and hear that the first American POW has been rescued. We are that close!475

The emotion-drenched language Bailey employed is common among such groups, who regularly evoked bedraggled Americans POWs in tiger cages, brutally exploited by their vicious communist captors, as the reason why it was so important that people donate as much as they can, as frequently as they can. This specific letter appears hand-written and hastily jotted down, and Bailey claims he has only just returned from some unspecified but no doubt dramatic effort at locating living prisoners, which is why he lacked time for a more prepared missive.476 In reality, the mailer was penned in West Virginia, not the most promising location from which to launch secret missions in Southeast Asia. Similarly, Bailey's “headquarters,” the supposed rescue ship Akuna III, never left dock in Thailand, and there is little to suggest that he was even on board or in Asia all that frequently. Far from patrolling the coast of the former war zone in search of covert POW camps, local fishermen sarcastically referred to Bailey’s vessel as “the ship that never sails.”477 Virtually all of his efforts, and nearly 90% of funds raised, were directed toward further fund raising.478

Such efforts could be quite lucrative. There was a considerable amount of money to be made in fostering hopes for survival of missing men in secret camps. Bailey claimed he needed from $20,000 to $40,000 a month to keep the Akuna III afloat, though the specific sums he

475 Jack Bailey, Untitled Letter, 1986 in Records of the United States Senate, 102nd Senate, Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs, Investigator Files – Hilton Foster, Box 8.
476 Ibid.
mentioned seem to shift arbitrarily, and he appears to have had few problems getting it despite supposedly being exhausted, broke, and desperate. Eugene “Red” McDaniel’s American Defense Institute was another organization that operated along similar lines, and reported collecting $1.85 million in donations between 1983 and 1984. Yet another was Operation Skyhook II, founded by former Congressman and secret camp advocate John LeBoutillier, which managed half a million a year by the mid-80s, largely from repeat donors. Despite all that money, none of them ever rescued a single American POW from Southeast Asia, or provided credible evidence that any even existed.

To its credit, the League considered Operation Rescue and other secret camp organizations like it to be detrimental to legitimate POW/MIA activism. The League’s official position on the subject might well have been a broadside directed squarely at Bailey, but applied equally well to the others:

Numerous legitimate POW/MIA organizations are helpful to the process; however, emotionally charged, inaccurate information is disturbed by a few to gain public support. Some financial appeals graphically portray the alleged captivity environment and imply that the rescue of a live POW is imminent. Distribution of false or misleading information undermines the credibility of the issue which is compelling on its own, requiring no elaboration or distortion. It is important to note that no valid information has ever been provided by these groups. The League urges all concerned Americans to seek the facts and support responsible efforts to return our missing relatives.

More than just an example of the exploitative nature of POW/MIA activism’s shadier fringe, Bailey’s fundraising letter also serves to illustrate a crucial element of the secret camp myth itself: Vietnam’s motive. This lack of plausibility was always a major stumbling block for

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479 Crawford, p.412.
secret camp myth adherents. Why would the North Vietnamese, or anyone else in Southeast Asia for that matter, want to keep secret prisoners once the war was over? A common response with roots in the 1973 Paris Peace Accords was that Hanoi had held some prisoners back as insurance against the US weaseling out of its promised reconstruction aid. This concept was pervasive enough an idea to make it into *Rambo* itself, where Colonel Trautman angrily proclaims, “We were supposed to pay the Cong $4.5 billion in war reparations! We reneged! They kept the POWs!”  

Of course, this argument had seen the light of day back in the 1970s when President Nixon had gone back on his secret commitment of reconstruction aid as soon as he could find reason so to do. Many secret camp advocates believed that since the US had failed in its aid obligation, it made sense to assume the Vietnamese had held back some prisoners against such an eventuality. Indeed, the “MIAs as secret hostages” hypothesis remained a popular one, despite the lack of any offer by the Vietnamese to repatriate living Americans in exchange for the promised aid.

While the “hostages” idea dominates secret camp motive discussions, Bailey’s letter contains a second motivation attributed to the Vietnamese: POWs as slave laborers. Much like the reparations idea, this was a common plot element in the POW rescue movies, with both *Uncommon Valor* and *Rambo* prominently featuring POW slaves in tiger cages. Though there is little evidence for the concept outside of silver screen creativity and vivid imaginations, it was a popular idea second only to the hostages hypothesis. Hollywood’s support for the “slaves” idea came not only from within movies, but also from celebrity activism on behalf of secret camp

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481 *Rambo: First Blood, Part II*
myth advocates. Actor Charlton Heston recorded a telephone message for use in Operation Skyhook II’s 1984 donation drive. Heston was by the mid-80s increasingly involved in conservative political and cultural causes, and chose to associate with Skyhook II since he thought it “defied logic” not to believe that American prisoners survived in secret camps across Southeast Asia. In this recording, Heston spoke as only he could, arguing that,

Many of our men were held behind, they’re still there to this day. Locked in bamboo cages in the jungle or in caves in the mountains. Some of our men are used as slaves, forced to drag plows in rice paddies…America can’t forget these men. We have to bring them home, all of them…They’re ours and they’re heroes, real heroes.

The emotional weight of Heston’s recording came from how he seamlessly used the “POWs as slaves” idea to promote the “POWs as hero-victims” narrative that had come to dominate POW/MIA activism generally and secret camp advocacy in particular. So too, Heston held that Skyhook II’s sort of private action was necessary as both Democratic and Republican administrations had been far too timid on the live MIA. Heston argued that those prior administrations feared the potential for embarrassment should live American prisoners surface in Southeast Asia. Such an accusation that the government feared how “destructive to international relations” such a discovery might be could well have come from the rationale for abandonment and cover-up espoused by the oily Murdock in Rambo itself.

Heston’s Skyhook II recording has much else in common with Jack Bailey’s written appeal. Lurid imagery and emotive appeals lay at the heart of each message, and each used the weight of urgency to manipulate their intended audience into donating. Over and over, these

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484 Ibid.
485 Paul, p.19.
direct mail and phone solicitations pressed home two points: American POWs are suffering unbelievably, and we are so very close to finally rescuing them, if only your dollars keep coming! So too, these sorts of appeals had much in common with the Rambo-esque fantasies and ersatz heroics of Bo Gritz, particularly in how they often described in vivid, unrealistic detail the plan to bring the boys home. This example from a Skyhook II mailer is representative of such militaristic daydreams:

Late one evening, as prison-camp guards kick and flog a group of our boys along the trail back to their cages, the last - few Communists in line might be swiftly and quietly dragged into the jungle. Then, a few seconds later, the bedraggled American POWs they were guarding might also vanish suddenly from the rear of the plodding group. The Americans, of course, would now be in friendly hands. (we won’t talk about the guards’ fate.) In a matter of just a day or two, the rescued Americans would be smuggled across the border to our SKYHOOK II Project group in Thailand. . . . In just a few weeks-for a relatively few thousands of dollars-six, ten, perhaps dozens of these abused and forgotten American servicemen could be brought back to America and allowed to tell their story to the world!486

As exciting as this plan sounds, and as compelling as Heston’s recording likely was, there was little reason to believe any suffering prisoners to actually existed. Retired Marine Corps Colonel and former Director of Field Operation in Laos of USAID Loren E. Haffner wrote to Senator Daniel Inouye in 1986, adding his voice to those who expressed skepticism on the possibility of MIA survival. Haffner had spent the war years in Southeast Asia and was intimately familiar with the terrain and climate of that region. Citing the inhospitable environs and sparse population of that country, he argued it was exceptionally unlikely that any American prisoner survived in covert captivity. More to the point, he also stated that in the Laotian case in

486 John LeBoutillier, in Crawford, 413.
particular, that nation’s very basic economy had no need for slave laborers, and thus was even less likely to retain live American prisoners after the war.487

While advocates offered the “hostages” and “slaves” hypotheses to justify belief in secret camps most frequently, they had others as well. As with much else concerning secret camp advocacy, one finds more than a few conspiratorial and at times downright crazy ideas. To give only a few examples, there was the racist idea that the Vietnamese had retained POWs with technical knowledge to translate operational manuals for them and repair captured US military equipment for their postwar use, since they were too backward and inferior to manage it on their own.488 Another rationale, sometimes interwoven with the more-popular “hostages” concept, was that the Vietnamese had handed some POWs over to the Soviets for intelligence purpose, who later returned them to Vietnam months or years after the end of the war. Moving from the implausible to the downright paranoid, there was a companion theory that the missing men had been transferred to Soviet brainwashing facilities, presumably deep in Siberia, for conversion into “Manchurian Candidate”-style sleeper agents for communism.489

Black Flags over Washington: The Political Zenith of the Secret Camp Myth

Regardless of why they believed in the secret camps, adherents of the myth were undeniably very dedicated to the cause. They rode the rising tide of POW/MIA activism and its cinematic popularity to once more put their issue on the forefront of American politics. President Reagan was already a longtime ally of the League and other groups, but he was not alone among politicians who supported the idea of live Americans in Southeast Asia. Other officials found

487Lt. Colonel Loren Haffner to Senator Daniel Inouye, 22 January 1986, in Records of the United States Senate, 102nd Senate, Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs, Investigators' Case Files – William LeGro, Box 1.
488 Unsigned letter attached to Memo Dan Perrin to Jesse Helms, 3 May 1990, in Records of the United States Senate, 102nd Senate, Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs, Minority Staff Files – Tracy Usry, Box 7.
489 Robert Buck, jr. to Senator Jesse Helms, 1989, in Records of the United States Senate, 102nd Senate, Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs, Minority Staff Files – Tracy Usry, Box 4
ways to express their solidarity with activists and secret camp advocates, usually through legislation focusing on displays of the black POW/MIA flag. In 1988 that flag was raised for the first time over the White House on National POW/MIA Recognition Day, and the following year it was displayed in the rotunda of the US Capitol Building. Congress easily passed legislation authorizing such a display, House Congressional Resolution 28 and its analog Senate Congressional Resolution 9, each with strong bipartisan support.

Solidarity with POW/MIA activism appears to have mostly cut across partisan lines, at least when it came to symbolic expressions of support. However, Congressional support for secret camp advocacy tended to come from the political right. Representatives Robert Dornan (R-California) and William Hendon (R-North Carolina) both lobbied Reagan in 1985 on the grounds that he was being fed false information about the existence of live POWs, in whom they both believed. A year later, POW Task Force of six Congressmen, headed by Hendon and Dornan, wrote to the President that, “Our analysis of data is now complete. Based on the extensive classified briefings we have received and clarity of information we have seen, we write to inform you that American POWs remain captive in communist prisons in Southeast Asia.” Those Congressmen used other language also common to secret camp advocacy by concluding that, “We are firm in this belief and have not been, nor will be, dissuaded by the arguments to the contrary made by bureaucrats who have handled this issue since the end of the Vietnam war.”

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493 Ibid.
Five of the six comprising this task force were Republican, with Indiana Congressman Frank McCloskey being the sole Democratic voice.\textsuperscript{494}

Indeed, by the 1980s the POW/MIA lobby had grown considerably from the wives’ support group it had been during the war years, and wielded considerable influence on Capitol Hill. Representative Paul McCloskey (R-California), a member of the House Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia, predicted this ascension back in 1976 when he commented, “No one’s got the guts to tell these people there’s no \textit{rational} basis to believe any of these men are still alive.”\textsuperscript{495} Though McCloskey was a few years early, he was nevertheless entirely correct in describing why POW/MIA activism was so powerful in the 1980s: Despite lacking any solid basis for their claims, their constituency had grown so large, and wielded a message of such emotional impact that opposing it was more trouble than it was worth.

Moreover, their message dovetailed easily with those who wished to redefine the Vietnam experience into something positive, and redemptive. During the 1976 Congressional Session Representative Leon Panetta sponsored legislation that would require US diplomatic and consular posts to display the POW/MIA flag. Panetta argued that requiring that flag so to fly would act as both a symbol of the nation’s continuing commitment to the missing and also serve to lessen any feelings of abandonment felt by their families.\textsuperscript{496} His bill died in the House Foreign Affairs Committee following unfavorable comments from the State Department, but it was an early example of the growing popularity of the POW/MIA flag, and prefigured its emergence as a dominant symbol of the war itself.\textsuperscript{497} To be clear, Panetta was not a secret camp advocate

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{494} “U.S. POWs May, A10.
\item \textsuperscript{496} Representative Leon Panetta, in Matthews, 26.
\item \textsuperscript{497} Bill Summary & Status, 100th Congress (1987 – 1988) -- H.R.5226, viewed 6 November 2013, at http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/z?d100:H.R.5226:
\end{itemize}
himself, but his championing of the POW/MIA flag demonstrate how the promotion of POW/MIA causes generally unintentionally served secret camp advocacy.

Congressional discussions surrounding POW/MIA activism in the late 1980s illustrate how symbols of POW/MIA affairs and the secret camp myth were making that transformation, while other, less comfortable aspects of the war, either slid into the national subconscious or were been forgotten entirely. The language used in those debates shows how potent secret camp imagery was at the end of that decade:

I think the placing of a flag in the Capitol rotunda today will be a very fitting and proper Reminder to all Americans that we in Congress and we as a nation have not forgotten the POW’s and MIA’s and will not forget them as long as they remain missing and unaccounted for.498

It is a symbolic reminder that we have not forgotten those men who are still missing in action over a decade after the end of the war in Indochina, and it will enable us to serve notice to the Vietnamese that so long as we have not received a full accounting of the fate of those men it will be difficult to actually formalize our relationship with them.499

…and to see that black flag with that handsome symbolic face, head bowed because of the tragedy of the issue, not because the spirit of any fighting man that may be alive is broken, the 400 boxes of our heroes bones in some couple warehouses somewhere in Hanoi or the outskirts thereof, someday those remains of our heroes will come home.500

Admittedly, some of this rhetoric surely derives from that instinct present within the souls of all legislators to grandstand, but it would be a mistake to dismiss it merely as such. Though these pronouncements all speak solely about accounting for the missing and bringing the bodies home, they nevertheless feed into a narrative necessary for the existence of the secret camp

499 Representative Robert Michel, in Ibid., 24299.
500 Representative Bob Dornan, in Ibid., 24300.
myth: Vietnam has not fully accounted for the missing, and the war could never be fully laid to rest without it having done so.

By the early 1990s it is undeniable that the POW/MIA lobby and its secret camp advocates had restored any influence lost during the early-mid 1970s. According to a Wall St. Journal poll, 69% of Americans then believed that live prisoners were being held in secret camps, and three-fourths of those asked thought the government was not doing enough to bring them home.\textsuperscript{501} With such popular belief behind them, secret camp advocates were only waiting for an excuse to explode once again onto the national scene. They found their moment in 1991 when President George H. W. Bush announced a “Road Map” for normalization of relations between the US and Vietnam. This plan consisted of four separate stages, with each stage contingent on Vietnam making “satisfactory” progress on the cases of men still unaccounted for, but even the mere idea of normalization was enough to provoke reaction from the POW/MIA lobby as a whole, and its Congressional supporters in particular.\textsuperscript{502}

Specifically, a cabal of Republican senators led by Jesse Helms released a document entitled \textit{Examination of US Policy Toward POW/MIAs} under the official heading of the Foreign Relations Committee on which Helms sat but for whose permission he somehow forgot to ask.\textsuperscript{503} This sensationalist screed had been constructed largely by Helms’ staffers and purported to contain reams of apparently overlooked evidence of POW/MIA survival, not merely from Vietnam but also from any number of other conflicts in which the US had fought during the twentieth century. Going much further than any Defense Department estimates, that report

\textsuperscript{503} US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Republican Staff, \textit{Interim Report on the Southeast Asian POW/MIA Issue}, 29 October 1990, Folder 96, Box 27, Investigator’s Case Files – Hilton Foster, RG46.
alleged that thousands of American prisoners survived in secret camps. Finally, it fully
embraced the conspiratorial mindset pervasive among the fringes of POW/MIA activism by
claiming that the government was actively covering up evidence of surviving prisoners, for
reasons as provocative as they were vague.504

Upon sober reflection, the Examination proved to be almost entirely groundless. It
contained evidence that was circumstantial at best, and was riddled with errors and outright lies
at worst.505 Testifying under oath, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Carl Ford stated of
the hundred-plus page document that, “There are numerous other factual inaccuracies throughout
the report. To catalog the inaccuracies would require a document of equal length.”506 Helms later
attempted to disavow his own involvement in the Examination once he could no longer deny the
flaws in his staffers’ work, going so far as to sack longtime aide James Lucier and POW
investigator Tracy Usry.507

Such repudiation took time of course, and the initial, sensational impact of the
Examination was more than enough to provoke a media circus. Allies of POW/MIA activism
were quick to capitalize on such publicity. Senator Bob Smith sensationally released three
photographs of several alleged live US POWs, John Robinson, Albro Lindey, and Larry Stevens,
shortly after the publication of the Examination. Two more, supposedly of Daniel Borah and
Donald Carr, appeared subsequently. Taken together with the Examination, these photos created

504 US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Republican Staff, Examination of US Policy Toward
506 Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Carl Ford, in Hearings Before the Senate Select Committee on
507 Bryant, A3
more than enough public pressure to ensure passage of Smith's resolution creating a Senate Select Committee. 508

That committee’s hearings proved to be the high water mark of POW/MIA activism and the secret camp myth in America. Chaired by Vietnam combat veteran Senator John Kerry, and including other veterans and POWs such as Senator John McCain, the Senate committee examined material from the earlier Montgomery Committee hearings and also new evidence that had surfaced in the meantime. This included both material that the Examination purported to have uncovered, and from other sources as well. Much of the Examination had been debunked, in the months between its release and the convening of the Senate Select Committee, and most of what remained withered under close examination.

The sensational photos allegedly of Robinson, Lindsey, Stevens, Borah, and Carr turned out in short order to be completely fraudulent. Notorious POW/MIA con man Jack Bailey, founder of “Operation Rescue,” was responsible for their creation. Bailey faked the “Robertson, Lundy, and Stevens” photograph by altering an image he found in a 1989 issue of Soviet Review, and the man he claimed was Donald Carr was in fact an East German rare birds dealer, who was himself doing time for fraud at the time of the Senate hearings. 509 In addition to the discredited photographs, no one ever confirmed any of the new “live sightings,” in those instances the committee did not dismiss them out of hand. The committee found that live sightings were troublesome for the same reason as had earlier investigators. Such reports suffered from the unreliability of refugee memories as had early live sightings, and also a new complication: by the

509 Bill Codhina to Alex Greenfeld, 31 March 1992, in “Select Committee on POW/MIA Issues, Records of the US Senate, 102nd Congress, Investigator Files – Hilton Foster, Box 4, RG46
early 1990s European and American tourists were much more common in Vietnam, and were even more easily mistaken for POWs than had been the Soviet bloc visitors of the 1970s.\textsuperscript{510}

It is perhaps less than surprising the Senate Select Committee had to debunk any number of frankly ludicrous ideas and conspiracy theories throughout the hearings, in addition to the more serious work it performed. Committee Chairman Kerry personally felt the need to refute claims of of something called, “Operation MIA Hatchet Squad.” This shadowy organization supposedly operated within the government to prevent the rescue of live POWs, or to brainwash those that did make it back to keep their story under wraps.\textsuperscript{511} While such an idea sounds more like something taken from a bad spy thriller, such concepts were part and parcel of the POW/MIA activist fringe by the early 1990s. In 1987 self-proclaimed special operations hero Scott Barnes made a very similar claim in his book \textit{BOHICA}, with considerable innuendo but little convincing evidence. Barnes was by all accounts dishonest even by the standards of the conmen who lurked around the edges of POW/MIA activism, and at times claimed to have been a secret agent of the CIA, DIA, DEA, and FBI, among other things. In \textit{BOHICA} he claims to have personally found live POWs only to be stopped from rescuing them by sinister Agency men. Needless to say, this owes less to actual experience in Southeast Asia than to craven opportunism, and a particularly active imagination.\textsuperscript{512}

More prominent figures than Barnes made similar arguments, though none managed to substantiate their claims with any greater success. Senator Bob Smith claimed to have

\begin{footnotesize}

\textsuperscript{511} Senator John Kerry to Congresswoman Patsy Mink, 23 October 1992, in “Select Committee on POW/MIA Issues, Records of the US Senate, 102\textsuperscript{nd} Congress, Investigator Files – William E Le Gro, Box 1, Benge File, RG46

\textsuperscript{512} Colonel Joseph Schlatter to Louise Van Hoozer, 26 July 1988, in “Select Committee on POW/MIA Issues, Records of the US Senate, 102\textsuperscript{nd} Congress, Foreign Relations Committee Minority Staff Files, Box 7, Bohica Folder, RG46
\end{footnotesize}
accumulated evidence over fifteen years that proved the existence of an undisclosed compound in Hanoi that contained about 200 live American POWs. According to Smith, this prison was dug deep underground, right next to Ho Chi Minh’s tomb, which he acknowledged sounded like, “something out of a Tom Clancy novel,” but nevertheless insisted was true.\textsuperscript{513} He ultimately offered little new evidence on the subject, however, and the DIA wrote off such claims as the Hanoi water table would not permit such excavations such a structure would require.\textsuperscript{514}

More serious testimony significantly damaged both such conspiratorial claims about secret camps and also the longstanding League argument that Vietnam was not living up to its obligations in accounting for the missing. Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Reagan-era special presidential emissary to Hanoi John W. Vessy Jr testified that the accounting efforts he had overseen were moving well apace, and League claims that Vietnam was hoarding vast amounts of POW remains were at best greatly exaggerated.\textsuperscript{515} League President Ann Mills Griffiths’ attempts to deflect this assertion met with little success, as the committee sided with, “the guys in the field, on the team doing the work who do not believe they are holding remains.”\textsuperscript{516} To Kerry, the League seemed to “not want to see progress.”\textsuperscript{517}

To their dismay, the League and other groups found that the Senate hearings did not differ substantively from the House hearings of 1975-76, despite what seemed on first impression to be a mountain of explosive new evidence of MIA survival. Unlike the Montgomery Committee, the Senate Select Committee did admit that, “There is evidence, 

\textsuperscript{514}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{515}Allen, 274-75.
\textsuperscript{517}Kerry, in Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs, \textit{Oversight Hearings: Department of Defense, POW/MIA Family Issues, and Private Sector Issues}, 1282-84.
moreover, that indicates the possibility of survival, at least for a small number, after Operation Homecoming.” So too, it paid requisite tribute to the sacrifice of the missing and their families and couched its conclusions in less definitive language than had the Montgomery Committee.

On first inspection, this would otherwise appear to be a modest win for POW/MIA activists, who had campaigned so long against the idea that the missing ought be presumed dead in the absence of other evidence. However, those statements were merely prelude to the Committee’s larger conclusions, which were far less favorable. Even on their own terms, the Committee’s language—use of the phrase, “indicates the possibility of survival,” was conditional in the extreme, particularly as it only even granted that possibility for “a small number,” of POWs, not the hundreds or thousands. What is more, the committee’s report went further in dashing any hopes that might otherwise be raised. Like their House colleagues before them, the senators who sat on the select committee had hoped to discover evidence of surviving American MIAs, but:

Unfortunately, our hopes have not been realized. This disappointment does not reflect a failure of the investigation, but rather a confrontation with reality. While the Committee has some evidence suggesting the possibility a POW may have survived to the present, and while some information remains yet to be investigated, there is, at this time, no compelling evidence that proves that any American remains alive in captivity in Southeast Asia. (emphasis mine)

Hardcore believers argued that this second official negative result only further confirmed the existence of a government cover-up. Senator Smith, who had reluctantly signed off on the committee’s findings, still argued that, “I believe that there is evidence that people survived after

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518 Senate Select Committee, Report of the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs, 7.
519 Senate Select Committee, Report of the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs, 9.
1973 and may be alive today. There is evidence, but not enough to prove it.\textsuperscript{520} Smith would, later that same year, take to the floor of the Senate to accuse DIA witnesses of perjury, much to the consternation of his former committee colleagues.\textsuperscript{521} However, for the most part mainstream America accepted the committee’s findings and turned its back on the hysteria that had brought the whole matter into public view in the first place. This is not to say that the League, POW/MIA activism, or even the secret camp myth itself died out following the conclusion of the Senate Select Committee hearings, however. Indeed, all three are still very much alive, but none are as powerful within the American public narrative as they once were. They owe a large part of this decline to those hearings, as well as the unfortunate involvement of POW/MIA activism in League patron H. Ross Perot’s quixotic and at times entirely bizarre 1992 presidential campaign. Proving some things are too crazy to fade away, Scott Barnes resurfaced during this campaign and claimed that members of George H. W. Bush’s staff planned to ruin the wedding of Perot’s daughter by circulating doctored photographs of her. Perot was somehow convinced by Barnes’ claims, and temporarily suspended his campaign as a result.\textsuperscript{522} Perot was a long-time supporter of POW/MIA activism, and association with his much-publicized odd behavior on the campaign trail made that activism seem even less serious than had the various conspiratorial claims aired during the Senate hearings.

\textbf{You Are Not Forgotten: Persistence of the American Secret Camp Myth}

While Vietnam-era POW/MIA activism and the secret camp myth no longer claim nearly the national prominence they once did, both do survive to this day, and show little sign of

\textsuperscript{522} Allen, 277-78.
disappearing entirely. Both have achieved this remarkable longevity by becoming virtually synonymous with that war itself, at times even coming close to obliterating all other aspects of Vietnam. There are few better symbols of this transformation than that of the POW/MIA flag, as potent an image today as it was when it first appeared back in 1971. The following advertisement ran in the 20 October 2013 issue of Parade Magazine: “Get your FREE Vietnam War 50th Anniversary Coin,” reads the ad’s headline.

![Image of the ad](image)

It should be emphasized that this ad ran not in some POW/MIA-specific magazine or newsletter, but as a supplement to the Sunday edition of the Boston Globe. In that ad’s own words, the POW-MIA image now stands without qualification for the war itself and “pays tribute” to all “the men and women who served” during the Vietnam war, not merely that small
minority that were captured or lost. All other aspects of the war are subsumed behind the black silhouette of a soldier imprisoned behind the wire, all other experiences of the war overshadowed by that of the forever prisoner and the eternally missing man. While those men, “are not forgotten,” the larger realities of the Vietnam War disappear in this retelling. By focusing on America’s reminted hero victims, such emphasis necessarily diminishes all the others who fought in that conflict. Other American veterans now play a secondary role and the Vietnamese themselves are almost entirely absent, save as the villains responsible for the suffering of those POWs and MIAs. By inflating the real suffering of POWs, and conflating it with the entire war experience, secret camp advocates thus appropriate the actual victimization of the Vietnamese and recast the US as victim of its own war. At the same time, by connecting the continued existence of the secret camps with refusal by their own government to rescue surviving MIAs, those advocates not only reject American responsibility for the war, they also reject the reality of the defeat itself.

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524 Ibid.
Conclusion

What ultimately do these two examples reveal about the secret camp myth itself? Both are examples of postwar reconceptualization of morally ambiguous defeats. West Germans and Americans found the idea of secret camps useful, for reasons both personal and national. Personally, belief in secret camps constituted an escape hatch for those trapped in the no-man’s land of grief. Civilians who could not bring themselves to mourn missing men in the absence of positive proof of death clung to the idea of MIA survival in those secret camps. Nationally, POW/MIA activism transformed prisoners and the missing into nationally redemptive heroic figures by emphasizing their victimization at enemy hands. Secret camp advocates within POW/MIA activism took this trend to its logical conclusion by asserting that the missing still survived, and still suffered, in those secret camps. The process by which these individuals and organizations transformed prisoners and the missing into hero-victims also served to recast the nature of the war and mute, even reject, the verdict of defeat. All the while, they also appropriated the suffering of wars they started onto their POWs, and especially the men purported to be alive in the secret camps.
For all the commonality between the two examples, it is undeniable that only one of them persisted long beyond the end of its war. More interestingly, it was the less plausible example that lasted, while the more believable one faded from public consciousness in a relatively short period of time. Here, the differences between the German and American cases best illustrate why the one disappeared, and the other survived.

Both the US and Germany fought their respective wars with draftee armies, and in both cases that practice had been the norm for years. However, despite this similarity each nation’s missing came from very different segments of their overall populations. Germany’s POWs and MIAs came from a broad spectrum of German society and from the many ranks within the German military, with the majority of those men coming from the working classes. America’s missing from Vietnam came largely from officers in the air services, and as a resulted tended to be career men from at least the established middle class. As a result, America’s missing mostly came from a demographic used to political prominence, and to receptiveness from its government.

The two examples diverge as well with regard to casualties, both in absolute number of men lost and ratio of POWs/MIAs. As of the end of direct American involvement in Vietnam in 1973 there were 1,290 men unaccounted-for in one way or another following Operation Homecoming. These men constituted a tiny fraction of overall American casualties, and an

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527 Michael Allen, Until the Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Unending Vietnam War. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 2009), 210
even smaller one of the over three million Americans who served in one capacity or another in Southeast Asia during the war. Contrarily, somewhere between 540,000 and 1.3 million Germans were either Soviet prisoners or missing on the Eastern Front in May 1945 according to their own estimates, and over double that according to the Soviets.\footnote{Michael Clodfelter, *Warfare and Armed Conflicts: A Statistical Reference to Casualties and Other Figures, 1500 – 2000*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co, 2002), 515.} This difference in numbers of prisoners, both real and imagined, contributes to another distinction between the two examples: plausibility of MIA survival. There was little to suggest American MIAs could survive long in the Southeast Asian jungles even if they escaped their aircraft uninjured, particularly given the hostility of the environment. As Marine Corps pilot and jungle survival instructor Lt. Colonel Pat Caruthers observed, “If a man's not found within 10 days, he's got a real personal problem.”\footnote{Lt. Colonel Pat Caruthers in Danforth Austin, Jack Kramer, and Eric Morgenthaler, “Missing—or Dead? Some Relatives of POWs say US Misleads Them,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 20 September 1971, 4.} This is not to say that survival for missing men in the vast spaces of the Soviet East was particularly easy, of course, especially during the winter, but here another factor comes into play that allowed missing Germans greater chances of surviving to go into captivity: the different nature of the wars in question. The Second World War in Europe was a conventional conflict fought primarily on the standard Western model, with large armies maneuvering against one another across the European continent. As a result, German MIAs tended to go missing in areas where those armies operated and had correspondingly better chances of being located by one side or the other. Of course, the genocidal behavior of German armed forces made capture that much riskier for Germans soldiers, particularly if they fell into partisan hands, but this was a risk that American fliers ran as well, with any number being killed
upon reaching the ground by either NVA or NLF troops, or enraged Vietnamese civilians. Unlike their German counterparts however, those American fliers were much less likely to be found in the first place, as they fought their war for the most part in the remote, heavily jungled regions of Southeast Asia, with much sparser populations and fewer, if any, regular military formations in operation.

Of course, none of this would have mattered if not for one of the most important similarities shared by the two examples: for both the United States and Germany, their wars were nationally traumatic defeats. What is more, both wars did not create satisfactory war hero figures among their returning veterans. In the American example this was largely due to the unpopularity of the war within the shifting social narrative of America’s tumultuous 1960s and early 70s, and in the German case due to how the military was tarnished by Nazism. This is not to say that the American military had not compromised its own image in Vietnam, of course. Massacres and atrocities marked its long engagement in Southeast Asia, of which My Lai is merely the most well known. Indeed, Americans at the time even compared it, and by extension other such atrocities, to Nazi behavior. An eyewitness described part of that incident as, “They had them in a group standing over a ditch-just like a Nazi-type thing. ...One officer ordered a kid to machine-gun everybody down, but the kid just couldn’t do it. He threw the machine gun down and the officer picked it up...”, clearly echoing the style of mass killings practiced by SS-Einsatzgruppen and others on the Eastern Front.

Atrocities of this nature were not practiced systemically in Vietnam, and were never part of official policy as they were for the German military on the Eastern Front. Nevertheless, such

crimes left irreparable stains on both militaries, making returning veterans unsuitable figures for national veneration, regardless of personal complicity. As a result, civilians in both nations turned to POWs and MIAs to find suitable substitutes for the traditional war hero. Recasting such men as hero-victims allowed their advocates to re-conceptualize the larger meaning of the wars, and so by proxy move themselves from the ranks of the perpetrators, to those of the victims.

POW returnees and the alleged live MIAs also shared another important characteristic that made their transformation that much easier in both examples. Unlike the traditional war hero, who won acclaim via daring deeds and heroic achievement, advocates considered POWs and MIAs heroic not for what they did, but for what they endured. Their suffering and passive resistance redeemed not only whatever wartime sins they might have committed, but also those of their larger nation. Ideology undeniably played a role in this as well, as both Americans and West Germans lauded their POW returnees for holding strong and not falling prey to insidious communism while behind the wire. The American case demonstrates this ideological angle in how the POWs themselves were on guard during their captivity against “rat finks” selling out their comrades to the North Vietnamese in exchange for lighter treatment.\footnote{James and Sybil Stockdale, \textit{In Love and War: The Story of a Family's Ordeal and Sacrifice during the Vietnam War}, (New York: Harper Row, 1984), 252.} West Germans if anything went even further in both celebrating POW’s resistance to enemy ideology, and in punishing those thought to have violated acceptable norms of prisoner behavior via the Kameradenschinder trials in the late 1940s.\footnote{Frank Biess, \textit{Homecomings: Returning POWs and the Legacies of Defeat in Postwar Germany}, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2006), 154.}

Both examples demonstrate the conceptual transformation of POWs/MIAs into war heroes in how each nation treated its returning POWs, as opposed to other veterans. In both examples, POW returnees experienced celebrations upon their repatriation, although in the
German case this only applied to later returnees. Such behavior manifested itself in legislative efforts such as the 1950 Heimkehrergesetz that granted economic and transitional assistance to returnee. Since it was passed after veterans and POWs had come home from all other theaters, as well as after the end of regular repatriations from the USSR, that law clearly targeted those remaining prisoners in Soviet custody, including the live MIAs supposedly surviving in the silent camps. \(^{534}\) Similarly, Operation Homecoming lavished benefits and reintegration assistance upon 591 returnees far beyond anything offered to ordinary Vietnam veterans. \(^{535}\)

Despite such managing and glad-handing of returning POWs, both West Germans and Americans found those men to be occasionally inconvenient or imperfectly suited to their prescribed roles as redemptive figures. Even though these men had successfully resisted political contamination for the most part, on occasion they displayed other behavior incompatible with what was expected of them. Not for nothing had Operation Homecoming officers gone out of their way to spin returnee press appearances, and to warn family members not to push too hard about what their man had actually gone through, thus to keep inconvenient realities from intruding upon the constructed triumph of POW repatriation. \(^{536}\) Similarly, West Germans feared the dystrophic affects of prolonged imprisonment on their returnees, from whom they expected a restoration of traditional morals, and sought to minimize exposure of any potentially embarrassing behavior on the part of returned POWs. \(^{537}\)

POW returnees did serve the purposes laid out for them despite these potential handicaps, but both Americans and West Germans considered MIAs to be better figures for heroic

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\(^{535}\) “Home at Last!” Newsweek, 26 February 1973, p.18


\(^{537}\) Walter Schulte, *Hirnorganische Dauerschäden nach schwerer Dystrophie*, (Munich: Urban & Schwarzenberg, 1953), 45-6
transformation. The very ambiguity of their missing status made them blank canvases, ideal for crafting this new heroic archetype. Presumed alive in the secret camps, surely their suffering was worse than even the known POWs, which served a redemptive role in advocates’ telling. However, unlike POWs they never came home, never revealed personal shortcomings or contrary political opinions, never forced any uncomfortable confrontations with the realities of war.

The American example of this sort of behavior went much further than the German one, though, as indeed did belief in the secret camps overall. The German secret camp myth helped West Germans think of themselves as victims of the Second World War, but the American version took such a belief to its logical extreme and instead denied the very reality of defeat. By the time the American myth reached its apex in the late 1980s, it treated the return of the missing as the symbolic refighting of the war itself, only with America “being allowed to win this time,” to paraphrase the myth’s most prominent cinematic avatar. Moving beyond snappy action movie one-liners, President Reagan allegedly said he would, “start World War III” to bring out any live prisoners, if anyone could prove their actual existence. The source of this alleged statement is admittedly less than reliable, but it speaks to sentiments among American secret camp advocates regardless by demonstrating how they viewed POW rescue as a way to win, “a war someone else lost.”

Unlike the German myth, the American secret camp myth and indeed American POW/MIA activism generally had always carried within it the idea of prisoner repatriation as

540 Rambo: First Blood, Part II.
marker of victory. The actual POW return in 1973 was tailor-made to encourage feelings of accomplishment and triumph. It built upon the Nixon Administration’s careful work that treated POW return and MIA accounting as the justification for continued American involvement in the war itself. Operation Homecoming attempted to take this justification to its conclusion and treat the 1973 repatriation as a victorious moment, signaling the culmination of Nixon’s “peace with honor” and thus engineering a triumphant exit from the quagmire of Vietnam. Since that manufactured victory was short-lived, with Nixon shortly thereafter exiting the White House in disgrace and South Vietnam collapsing a mere two years later, those who sought to redeem the war turned to the remaining MIAs. Going further than German secret camp advocates ever had, American advocates equated the return of those men, whom they argued were alive in secret camps, with symbolically winning the lost war.

The manner in which each nation’s POW/MIA movement developed also contributed to the differences in each myth. In Germany, POW/MIA activism did not emerge until very late in the war, and relatives of the missing were unable to act collectively until afterward. German civilians lacked the social and political space to seek information on the missing during the war, and were hardly encouraged so to do by a totalitarian regime that considered living German POWs in the east contrary to Nazi hero cult ideology. Even if they had enjoyed the political freedom to act, Germany was increasingly under direct attack from strategic bombing and advancing fronts as the war went on, and as a result personal survival became more and more a concern for civilians, further inhibiting the development of German POW/MIA activism during the war. This did not prevent individuals from doing what they could to discover what had happened to their missing relatives, but it severely restricted their avenues so to do and entirely

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541 Biess, 23.
inhibited the creation of advocacy groups. By contrast, American civilians enjoyed the twin luxuries of First Amendment freedoms and an inviolate home front during the Vietnam War. Unlike their German counterparts, those Americans were able to organize well before the end of that war, as indeed they did with the formation of the National League.

Though beginning at different times, both examples of POW/MIA activism do have a common starting motivation. Both American and West German early activism was informational and centered mainly on discovering the actual status of the missing. Whether furtively and individually as in the German case, or openly and collectively as in the women of the League of Wives of American Prisoners in Vietnam, relatives of the missing sought to discover their fates. In both cases, they at least initially received little if any assistance from official sources. German family members had to contest with WASt’s intentional obstruction and obfuscation during the war, which was designed to get around the ideological problem of live POWs by denying their existence, as well as with the chaos of defeat and occupation afterward. American family members had similar though less trying difficulties dealing with US military sources who kept them at arms’ length, due both to the Johnson Administration’s decision to downplay POW/MIA issues, and also due to a traditional military culture which tied officers wives’ status to that of their husbands. As MIAs existed in an ambiguous non-space somewhere between KIAs and known POWs, those wives were therefore both starved of information on their missing husbands and socially isolated. Unlike their German counterparts however, they had the social space and resources necessarily to organize on their own initiative.

The ambiguity that lies at the heart of the MIA status is another key commonality shared by both examples, which motivated proponents of both secret camp myths. Specifically, both German and American relatives of the missing found themselves trapped by a “refusal to
mourn."542 Caught in the no-man’s land of grief, these family members endured incredible stress and, in some instances, embraced any possible justification to keep hope alive. The pleading nature of information requests sent to the BMVT after the war and the well-publicized accounts of their American equivalents both demonstrate how traumatic this could be. As Life Magazine reporter Loudon Wainwright perceptively commented, “‘The Grief Cycle’ can only end for many of them with knowing what happened, and that information is often tragically elusive. The slightest glimmer of hope sets off the Yo-Yo of anguish and expectation.”543 Many of those so trapped found the possibility of secret camps almost irresistibly alluring, as they allowed believers to avoid having to face the unendurable: mourning a loss they could not accept as real.

In both examples as well, the POW/MIA activism that spawned secret camp advocacy only really gained national significance when prominent political figures embraced them, and in both the relevant figures did so as a way to harness those movements’ potential to their own causes. In West Germany, Chancellor Konrad Adenauer found POW/MIA activism as useful tool in cementing the legitimacy of Christian Democracy in the political landscape of his new country, as well as in service of his foreign policy toward the Soviet Union. In the US, President Richard Nixon found in the League a way to peel support away from the anti-war movement, and also a sympathetic bloc whose POW/MIA interests could be seconded to his war plans. In trumpeting how important POW return and MIA accounting were as loudly and frequently as possible, Nixon perceived a “safe” way to prolong the war he was determined not to end on peacenik terms.

However, only one of the examples persisted well beyond the end of its war. The crucial difference lies in how the politicization of both myths reached their natural conclusions: one was able to satisfy its constituency, while the other was not. West Germans always knew that there were some live prisoners in Soviet custody, if for no other reason than the Soviets openly admitted to retaining convicted war criminals after the end of repatriations in 1949. What they did not know was how many MIAs were among them, as well as who all these prisoners were, and where they were kept. The “secret” of the Soviet secret camps lay in the silence about their number and population, not in their existence. Even though the hoped-for hundreds of thousands of live MIAs never materialized, substantial numbers of these remaining prisoners did come home in 1953-54, and 1955-56. The return of these men validated the basic premise of the German secret camp myth, satisfied its adherents that they had done their bit for suffering heroes, and by so doing validated what could be redeemed from the war experience for Germany itself. Coupled with the larger economic recovery of West Germany and re-admittance of the state to the community of Western Europe, this success allowed for any remaining question of MIAs and indeed the war itself to slide quietly from the forefront of German national consciousness, not to revive until the cultural clashes of the 1960s, and again with the Wehrmachtsausstellung of the early 1990s. Even with those later re-examinations of the war and role of Germany’s military in the Nazi state, discussions of secret camps and MIAs did not revive, as prior late repatriation had allowed West Germans to stop hoping for impossible resurrections, admit that remaining MIAs were indeed dead, and move on to mourn at last.

Contrarily, the American secret camp myth did not find a satisfactory conclusion. Operation Homecoming only returned a comparative handful of the thousands of MIAs whom

POW/MIA activists believed potentially still alive, due to manipulation of casualty reporting and overrepresentation of the missing by the Nixon Administration. Evidence from Watergate revealed how that administration had inflated the number of potential live POWs and lied about where and when servicemen had been lost, but this did not convince POW/MIA activists that the core idea of large scale MIA survival was a hoax. Rather, they concluded that though the men were clearly still alive, Nixon had just been lying to them about his desires to bring them home. This entrenchment of distrust came precisely at the moment that the more reasonable among American POW/MIA activists, who might have moderated such paranoia, were leaving the cause. Those who got their men back during Homecoming, or were able to accept that the missing were likely dead, largely departed the League and other advocacy groups just as those who were too desperate or self-interested to accept the likelihood of MIA death came to the forefront. Supported in such beliefs by opportunistic politicians, parasitic conmen, and Hollywood hysteria, secret camp advocates survived not one but two Congressional inquiries that found no reason to believe there were any live prisoners left in Southeast Asia. In spite of what should have been decisive conclusions for the American secret camp myth that myth persists, if perhaps less stridently than it once did, as the Vietnam generation ages and the American population moves on to new wars and new mythologies.

Nevertheless, the black POW/MIA flag still flies prominently in many American communities, a reminder of how fully POWs and MIAs dominates American national consciousness and memory with regard to the war in Vietnam. No German equivalent has appeared outside of museums for over half a century. Ultimately then, these two parallel cases of national trauma over prisoners and the missing demonstrate how wars can breed mythologies
that, if not satisfied, can take on lives of their own and come to dominate national conversations on the history of warfare, aftermath, and defeat.
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