

Abandoned In Laos

Roger Hall

American POWs known to have been held captive by the communist Pathet Lao (PL) were abandoned in Laos in 1973. When the United States withdrew the last of our fighting forces from Vietnam on March 28, 1973, Americans then prisoners from secret operations in Laos during the Vietnam War were abandoned to the Lao Patriotic Front (LPF), the political group of whom the Pathet Lao were the fighting forces. This was the result, not the intent, of withdrawing U.S. troops under the Paris Peace Agreement (PPA) to secure the release of the named POWs; it is also the result of not negotiating with the LPF for prisoners they held, in the mistaken belief that North Vietnam would deliver them to us.

The Laotians have made proving that Americans are in captivity there difficult at best and seemingly impossible under international law. The communists were and are masters at keeping and hiding American POWs. They have it down to a science. At the suspicion that a location was known or would become known because of an escape or for any other reason, American prisoners would be moved. Prisoners were held in the most secure areas where they were under heavy guard by troops. They were usually held in caves that also served military functions where they could be hidden, controlled and protected from recovery. No one captured by the Pathet Lao during the war was ever released. Only two Americans escaped and were recovered from the Pathet Lao during the Vietnam war. Navy Lt. Charles Klussman, shot down on June 6, 1964 over the Plain of Jars, Laos, had the fortunate distinction of being the first POW to escape from the Pathet Lao. Navy Pilot Dieter Dengler, shot down on February 2, 1965, was captured by the Pathet Lao and held prisoner with two Americans; Gene Debruin, a civilian, and Lt. Duane Martin, a helicopter pilot. Martin was reported by Dengler as possibly killed while evading after the escape.

President Nixon was, in 1973, under great pressure from the U.S. Congress, the POW/MIA family members and the public to bring the war to an end and have the POWs released. Congress had passed the Cooper-Church Amendment that cut off all funding for further military action, which prevented enforcement of the Paris Peace Agreement.

Due to the public's demand to end the war, delayed release of the known POW's was not a risk that the administration decision makers were likely to take. No one informed the Congress or the American people that there were captives that had not been released from Laos. America withdrew its forces from Southeast Asia and turned its back on the POWs in Laos. As the years passed from 1973, the fate of these individuals seemingly became less and less important.

The Secret War in Laos

The United States fought a secret war in Laos against the communist Pathet Lao in support of the Royal Laotian Government (RLG) from 1962 through 1973. Laos was in the North Vietnamese (DRV) theater of operations, where the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao fought battles against the U.S.-supported non-communist Laotians. Under the 1962 Geneva Agreement, both the U. S. and the North Vietnamese were obliged not to be in Laos.¹

This secret war was managed by the military role of the CIA out of the American Embassy in Vientiane, Laos, under the authority of the U. S. ambassador. Presidential authority authorized the ambassador to manage and conduct military operations that included U.S. military aircraft and personnel, but excluded the U. S. military from any decision-making in their use. The separate though interrelated bombing of the Ho Chi Minh trail that bordered Vietnam, Hanoi's pipeline of supply to their forces in South Vietnam, was under the control of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV).²

The Paris Peace agreement was signed on January 27, 1973 and the names of POWs captured in Vietnam were given to U.S. representatives. On February 1st U.S. negotiators exchanged a letter from President Nixon agreeing to pay the Vietnamese \$3.25 billion in reconstruction aid in return for the unnegotiated "Laos list" of names of American POWs captured in Laos who were to be released. The \$3.25 billion was for reconstruction in Vietnam; there was no consideration for Laos.³

Although North Vietnamese forces controlled over 85% of the territory in Laos where Americans were missing in action and had advisors attached to

all Pathet Lao units, the list handed over by the North Vietnamese contained the names of only nine Americans and one Canadian POW captured in Laos and held by the DRV in Hanoi.⁴ These were the only POWs from Laos to be released. There was "a firm and unequivocal understanding that all American prisoners in Laos will be released with 60 days of the signing of the Vietnam agreement."⁵

The U.S. knew that the Pathet Lao had information on many of the American POW/MIAs in Laos.⁶ Of the 10 POWs released under the Vietnam agreement, none were from Pathet Lao POW camps, and the Pathet Lao insisted that they held prisoners in Laos that would be released by themselves. The fighting between the Royal Laotian Government and Pathet Lao ended when the Laos cease-fire was signed by the Laotian Parties in Vientiane on February 21, 1973. The agreement stated that 60 days after the coalition government was formed all POWs would be released. This was the fall-back agreement the U.S. hoped to use to have U.S. POWs, held in Laos, released. This was in addition to the Paris Peace Accords.

The Pathet Lao were under the direct military supervision of their communist North Vietnamese cadres, even more so than the South Vietnamese and the Royal Laotian Government were under the influence of the United States. During the peace negotiations Henry Kissinger had insisted that the Vietnamese be responsible for all prisoners in Southeast Asia. This had been one of the points Le Duc Tho the North Vietnamese negotiator would not agree to, claiming that Laos was a sovereign nation and would be responsible for their own prisoners. Although the North Vietnamese did then and possibly now influences the POW/MIA policy of Laos, efforts for the release of known POWs from the Pathet Lao failed.

Record Tracking of U.S. POWs in Laos

Vietnam War-era CIA reports state that American POWs captured in Northern Laos are "escorted to prisons in Houa Phan/Sam Nuea/province where they are detained on a semi-permanent basis or transferred to North Vietnam."⁷ What follows here are reports of Pathet Lao-held POWs in the Laotian theater of operations and this does not include the MACV area of operations in Laos.

The Pathet Lao held American POWs in numerous locations, including the Pathet Lao Headquarters at Sam Nuea and at more than one location at Ban Nakay. Declassified CIA documents from 1967-1972 show that there were up to 60 or more U.S. POWs held by the Pathet Lao during the Vietnam war who were never released.

Reports entitled "Enemy Prisons in Laos,"⁸

"Estimated Enemy Prison Facilities in Laos,"⁹ and "Estimated Enemy Prison Order of Battle in Laos"¹⁰ provide information from sources on communist Pathet Lao POW camps holding prisoners described as pilots, Caucasian and American. Reports were updated as new intelligence was obtained.

There is also a 1969 Seventh Air Force report "POW Camps Listing for Laos," describing "all locations listed have been validated for inclusion by appropriate authority at the U.S. Embassy in Vientiane in coordination with the Joint Personnel Recovery Center (JPRC)."¹¹ The JPRC was responsible for the reporting and tracking of all missing and captured Americans under the code name "BRIGHT LIGHT." Another report, the "1972 Fleet Intelligence Center Pacific, Laos Prisoner of War Camp Study," is a compilation of overhead photographic imagery of all known POW Camps in Laos.¹² These two reports incorporated the CIA intelligence products, and were backed up with the original source reports.

Known and Suspected American POWs Under Pathet Lao Control:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Organization</u>	<u>Number of POWs</u>
1966	CIA	8 American POWs
1967	CIA	15 American POWs
1968	CIA	13 American POWs
1969	CIA	45 American POWs
1969	USAF	61 American POWs
1970	CIA	28-30 American POWs
1971	CIA	24-30 American POWs

1972 NAVY high altitude photography of known and suspected POW Camps in Laos, was not released.

CIA POW/MIA reporting decreased after 1969. This was at a time when the military was still losing aircraft and pilots, and others both civilian and military were being lost on the ground. Many POW camps had been observed for long periods of time, some for years.

On March 11, 1968 the communists attacked a U.S. Tactical Air Navigation System (TACAN) and a TSQ 81 RADAR bomb facility at Phu Pha Thi, also known as Lima site 85, in northern Laos. General Singkapo, the former commander of all Pathet Lao Forces during the war is quoted in an August 21, 1990 interview with Dr. Timothy Castle, author of *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam*, as saying that "About 100 Pathet Lao and more than 200 North Vietnamese...attacked" Lima Site 85 and that "Some two or three Americans were cap-

tured at the site and sent to North Vietnam."¹³

Also in 1968, reports were received by the CIA in Laos that all American POWs were being sent to Hanoi for a prisoner exchange. Twenty-seven Americans that were held prisoner by the Pathet Lao in four different POW camps were moved to Ban Hang Long, Houa Phan Province, and were supposed to represent all Americans held by the Pathet Lao.¹⁴ CIA POW reporting shown above indicates not all were sent.

On October 11, 1969 overhead photography taken by an air-breathing drone reconnaissance aircraft [Project Buffalo Hunter] of Ban Nakay Teu revealed "20 non-Asians accompanied by Pathet Lao guards near caves at Ban Nakay Teu." (See photo, pg. 13). CIA analysis of the prisoners determined them to be Caucasian. There had been numerous ground reports identifying these people as Americans both prior to and after the overhead reconnaissance.¹⁵

In 1971 Secretary of Defense Laird was not satisfied with the limited information he was receiving on POWs in Laos.¹⁶ He sent General Vessey to Laos to assist in operations there and offer military intelligence assets¹⁷ in the gathering of POW/MIA information.¹⁸ Ambassador Godley refused the offer of military intelligence assistance and informed DoD that all POW reporting requirements could be handled by the embassy.¹⁹

President Nixon was notified by Henry Kissinger at the White House on March 19, 1973 that "The U.S. Embassy in Vientiane has been told by the Pathet Lao that the U.S. prisoners of war in Laos will be released by the Lao Communists in Laos and not by the Vietnamese in Hanoi."²⁰

On March 22, Ambassador Godley cabled the Secretary of State and the White House that "We believe the LPF holds throughout Laos more prisoners than are found on the DRV lists... We do not believe it is reasonable to expect the LPF to be able to produce an accurate total POW list by March 28; the LPF just has not focused on the POW repatriation and accounting problem until very recently and probably cannot collect in the next few days, the information we require."²¹ It was realized, based on the number of people known to have been alive on the ground and captured, that additional prisoners should be released from Laos. Admiral Moorer, on President Nixon's authority, ordered a halt to the troop withdrawal because the Pathet Lao had not released any of the expected POW/MIAs.

The next day the Four Party Joint Military Commission (FPJMC) informed the White House of the DRV position that the U. S. "must bear full responsibility for any delay in return of POWs."²² Ambassador Godley advised the State Department

and the White House to get the nine out now and we would get the rest later, that "a bird in the hand was worth two in the bush." President Nixon reversed his decision and the troop withdrawal was resumed.

The White House memorandum for the President of March 24, 1973 from Henry Kissinger included the statement of the Chief North Vietnamese Delegate that "The question of military personnel captured in Laos can in no way be associated with the Paris Peace Agreement and withdrawal of U.S. troops."²³ This should have been noted as a sign that the North Vietnamese were not going to adhere to their responsibility for all POWs in Southeast Asia as the President and the public had been informed.

Although the Pathet Lao had insisted that "prisoners captured in Laos would be returned in Laos," the nine Americans and one Canadian whose names were on the Laos list were released at Gia Lam Airport in Hanoi on 28 March 1973. The Head of the Pathet Lao delegation, Lt. Col. Thong Sing, was present for the release of the POWs. The LPF must have been amazed, if not offended, at the refusal of the United States to seriously negotiate with them.

The withdrawal of U.S. troops was also completed on March 28th. Our military strength was down to 5,300 troops as of March 22nd. The North Vietnamese had left 10 divisions in South Vietnam and had been bringing a continuous flow of troops and supplies down the Ho Chi Minh Trail in violation of the Paris Peace Accords.²⁴

Ambassador Godley had never spoken to the Pathet Lao spokesman Sot Petrasay, who had the rank of Ambassador. He had repeatedly stated the Pathet Lao were not to be believed and were just lackeys of the Vietnamese, a very severe approach to have taken with those who were holding American prisoners.

Ambassador Godley accepted the Pathet Lao statement that all POWs captured in Laos had been released to suit his requirements for the troop withdrawal and POW release under the Paris accords. The quick acceptance of the new Pathet Lao claim was in complete contradiction of the American embassy's stated 10-year position that the Pathet Lao could not be believed and would make political statements to suit their needs.

General Secord stated in his testimony before the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs (SSC) in 1992 that CIA and other prison camp reports were not considered in Ambassador Godley's attempts to inquire of American POWs in Laos. The tracking by the CIA of Americans believed held captive in Laos was an ongoing task at the Embassy. The fact of Americans being held

was known; the problem was where, for prisoners were moved. Although some prisoners were held at a specific location, it may not have been possible to identify specific individuals at each site.

In spite of the known captivity of POWs such as Hrdlicka, Shelton, Debruin, and the POW camp reporting of 20-60 captive Americans, the lack of positive identification of POWs at specific coordinates was the deciding factor to accept the 10 POWs from Laos held in Hanoi and proceed with the prisoner exchange and troop withdrawal.

David Hrdlicka, shot down on May 18, 1965, had made public statements that were published in Pathet Lao newspapers and broadcast on Pathet Lao radio. Charles Shelton was downed on April 29, 1965. These two men were known to be held together in a cave southeast of Sam Nuea, Laos. In a rescue attempt of the two, one of them made it to a recovery area before being recaptured. Eugene Debruin escaped with Dieter Dengler but was separated and his fate remains unknown.

The war had been fought to decide who would rule in Laos. A U.S. decision, after the signing of the Lao cease fire, to "not complicate" Lao negotiations with the U.S. POW issue proved wrong. Since March 1971 "The United States Government has scrupulously refrained from introducing complicating issues such as American POWs" into the Lao internal talks.²⁵ The U.S. requested in 1972 that Souvana Phouma inquire about our POWs, but the RLG was having negotiation problems of their own and the Pathet Lao used such inquiries to indicate that the RLG were just the lackeys of the United States "interventionists."²⁶

Admiral Moorer informed the chief delegate of the FPJMC in Saigon on March 23rd that "we intend to pursue the question of other U.S. personnel captured or missing in Laos following the release of the men on the 1 February List."²⁷ Unfortunately, the LPF were not members of the Commission for the recovery of American MIAs as were North Vietnam, South Vietnam, and the Viet Cong.

The captives held by the Pathet Lao in Laos were left without further efforts for their release because Congress had cut off funding for further action in Southeast Asia. There was no way to enforce our demands and the communists knew it. Congress was not informed of the captive Americans from the secret war who were thought to have been sent to fight in Vietnam.

President Nixon on March 29, 1973 stated on national television that "All of our POWs are on their way home." On April 12, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Roger Shields announced that "DoD had no specific knowledge indicating that any U.S. personnel were still alive in and held

prisoner in Southeast Asia."²⁸ These two announcements signaled the end of the release of POWs under the Paris Peace Accords.

On May 18, Admiral Zumwalt, the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), informed Admiral Thomas Moorer, the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), that the Laotians' inability to reach political agreements "has effectively arrested any movement toward an environment in which the status of Americans missing in action in Laos can be resolved. I am informed that the Central Intelligence Agency is pursuing a 'highest priority effort' directed at specifically determining what has happened to US MIAs in Laos...In view of the direct and personnel interest the Services have in this matter, I recommend that the JCS receive a briefing from the CIA on their effort in this area so that we may be confident this important humanitarian issue is receiving appropriate attention."²⁹

Lt. Gen. Deane, Jr., USA Acting Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency [DIA], advised Admiral Moorer at the time that "the CIA collection effort in Laos is carried out by the [CIA] assets, and within the organizational structure, of the CIA station in Laos... DIA is collaborating closely where appropriate with CIA in regard to the current situation in Laos. A summary of the present POW/MIA situation in Laos as held in DIA files is as follows: (a) At present there are approximately 350 U.S. military and civilians listed as missing in action in Laos. Of this total, approximately 215 were lost under such circumstances that the Patriotic Laotian Front (PLF) probably has information regarding their fate. (b) Previous PLF mention of U.S. POWs detained in Laos includes a statement on 3 October 1967 by the Pathet Lao Radio that, between 17 May and 16 September 1967, the Pathet Lao had 'captured about a dozen U.S. pilots.'³⁰ Furthermore, on 2 February 1971 PLF spokesman Sot Petrasay commented that "quelques dixaines" ("some tens") of prisoners were being held by the Pathet Lao... the PLF has provided no accounting for U.S. personnel in its custody." The DIA was the lead POW/MIA agency and recommended that the JCS not be briefed on the covert CIA activities. The briefing never occurred.³¹

On Wednesday May 23, 1973, Kissinger and Le Duc Tho agreed that, while not stating acceptance on the U.S. statement that Article 8 (b) [POW/-MIAs] applied to all of Indochina, Le Duc Tho would not contradict him publicly either. In return, the U.S. would not hold Vietnam to this because Vietnam had to cooperate with their Lao friends. This side-agreement has complicated negotiations in Laos to this very day.³²

Then a June 9th White House memorandum

from the situation room informed Henry Kissinger that "The Pathet Lao chief representative in Vientiane... told our Embassy officer that further information on two... acknowledged POWs (Hrdlicka and Debruin) must await the formation of a new coalition government in Laos."³³

In June 1973 a White House message from Henry Kissinger to the American Embassy Charge d'Affairs Dean stated "Le Duc Tho complained to me last week that you had mentioned US-DRV understanding regarding U.S. prisoners captured in Laos in your talk with Phoumi Vongvichit. We obviously cannot afford to give Hanoi this sort of grounds on which to abort their understanding with us."³⁴

The evidence that Americans were held in Laos was known at the time; however, it just wasn't considered in negotiations. The National Security Council, Washington Special Action Group (WSAG), headed by Henry Kissinger received POW information from the CIA, the State Department, and the DoD, who were all members of the WSAG. But the U.S. government had a time table to keep for withdrawal of American fighting force from Southeast Asia by March 28th under the Paris Peace Accords, and the recovery of the reported Americans was put off for possible later efforts that never materialized.

The accepted loss of captured members of the U.S. armed forces and civilians by members of the U.S. government is almost beyond comprehension, but it did happen. The 27 American prisoners and other American POWs reportedly sent to North Vietnam seem also to have disappeared. They were not among the POWs on the February 1, 1973 Laos list who were returned. Those who were returned had been captured from 1965 through 1972 and most were moved to North Vietnam at different times; the rest were withheld.

There were unusual situations in the 1968-69 time frame that could have a bearing on the POWs' fate. A possible prisoner exchange may have been in process and these men were never put into the known Vietnamese prison system. That year, Richard Nixon became President and Ho Chi Minh died. The POWs could have been executed. However, they could also have been sent to the U.S.S.R. for third-country internment and/or technical exploitation.

There are reports of prisoners being transferred to other communist countries throughout the war period. One source of such reports was Jerry Mooney, a former Air Force/NSA analyst who tracked POWs moved through Vietnam and Laos and sent to Russia. The NSA had tracked POWs in Laos throughout the war and until 1975 when U.S. intelligence assets were pulled out.³⁵

Former Czech General Jan Sejna, who defected from communist Czechoslovakia [and now works for DIA], has first-hand knowledge that close to 100 Americans in good physical condition were transferred from Vietnam to Russia via Czechoslovakia. He monitored the program that processed them and observed their arrival and temporary confinement there.³⁶

Post-1973 declassified documentation includes live-sighting reports and satellite imagery of pilot distress signals. Though most live-sighting cases of American POWs in Laos have been debunked, some cannot be dismissed even though the information was often dated and the follow-up slow, requiring cooperation from Laotian officials.³⁷ Satellite imagery from 1973 through the present of Laos reveals pilot distress signals of the form our servicemen were trained to display to signal their location and situation.³⁸ Some identification codes do correlate to missing Americans.³⁹

Did the Laotians in their "humanitarian way" spare the lives of those they captured? Are these men still serving some indeterminate sentence doomed to remain in Laos for following orders as a result of a "secret war?" Laos today is a sovereign nation and the leaders in charge of the country are those who took power in 1973. The POW question in Laos requires special handling, due to our past errors incident to our exit from Southeast Asia in 1973. The U.S. negotiating position must be changed to reflect the fact that there is substantive proof that American captives were alive in 1973. Joint U.S.-Laotian-Vietnamese negotiations could prove rewarding if decision-makers could be involved. A late but true settlement could yield much information and even some survivors.

Roger Hall is a pre-Vietnam veteran and an information researcher. He has been involved in POW/MIA research since 1993 and is a graduate student at the University of Maryland, University College. This is his first article to appear in *Conservative Review*.

FOOTNOTES

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ROGER HALL
8715 First Ave., Apt. 827
Silver Spring, MD 20910
301-585-3361

Look Ups from Laos

Roger Hall

A member of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) Studies and Observation Group (SOG), the highly classified special operations teams that ran covert reconnaissance missions and raids into Laos, was an eyewitness to American Prisoners of War (POWs) who were not among the ten POWs returned by the Vietnamese. The communist Pathet Lao never released any Americans they captured. (See the article in *Conservative Review* Nov/Dec 1996.)

In April 1969, Special Forces M/Sgt. Norm Doney was aboard a single engine O-1 (Birdog) reconnaissance plane piloted by Lt. Bruce C. Bessor of the 219th Aviation Co., to locate pipelines that the Vietnamese were running into south central Laos, northeast of Attopue. The Air Force had taken high altitude photos showing pipelines; Doney's job was to find them and find out what was in them.

They went up to locate landing zones for a ground reconnaissance and did not have a camera to photograph irrigation pipelines they found on a plateau. On return, M/Sgt. Doney reported they found only water pipelines. The next day they were given a 35mm camera with a telephoto lens and returned on a different track to get on the plateau to avoid the enemy anticipating their approach. While photographing the area from 150-200 ft. they flew over a single person in black pajamas who shouldered an AK47 and started shooting at them from a kneeling position. M/Sgt. Doney kept taking pictures.

The plane came under anti-aircraft fire and the pilot had to maneuver into a 1/4 mile-long depression off the plateau to avoid being hit. This depression turned out to be approximately 150 ft. deep and 200 ft. wide and heavy with trees and vegetation leading into a 1,000 ft. high canyon off the plateau. The aircraft came in below the anti-aircraft fire and 100 ft. above people, caves and animals. Some caves were camouflaged; there were pipelines running off the shelf of the plateau steps into some caves with people outside the caves looking up at the aircraft. The sergeant kept on clicking and the O-1 returned to SOG Command and Control Central in Kontum, Vietnam. The camera and film were turned over to intelligence and sent to MACV Headquarters (HQ). That evening the pipeline mission was cancelled.

On returning from another mission two weeks later M/Sgt. Doney reported to MACV HQ in Saigon. A Navy LT. Cmdr. in MACVSOG intelligence told M/Sgt. Doney that "you took pictures of American POWs and the pictures ended up on President Nixon's desk." No further missions were run and that area was put off-limits, and labeled a no-fire zone. That designation also eliminated overflights. Locations known or suspected of holding POWs were carefully kept from operational harm but the site is not shown in any POW camp listing for Laos.

Lt. Bruce C. Bessor was reported missing in Laos on 13 May 1969 and is still listed as MIA. The commanding officer has died but M/Sgt. Doney's executive officer Lt. Col. Clyde Sincere remembers the mission and said the POW photography would be filed as pipeline photography, and that Norm Doney is one of the three best reconnaissance men he has ever known. Laos was mainly the CIA's domain and SOG reported to the CIA and the Joint Chiefs. The analysis that revealed the POWs were Americans would be at the CIA and it has not been acknowledged or released. To the best of my knowledge, that particular site has never been investigated nor were any inquiries made about those POWs.

Roger Hall is a pre-Vietnam veteran and an information researcher. He has been involved in POW/MIA research since 1993 and is a graduate student at the University of Maryland, University College. This is his second article to appear in *Conservative Review*.