



Written by [R. Cort Kirkwood](#) on September 3, 2018

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Evidence of American POWs in the Soviet Union

In May, Pentagon officials claimed they had no evidence showing that Korean War-era U.S. soldiers were imprisoned by the Soviet Union — a statement that was a lie.



A little more than a month after President Donald Trump met with North Korea's Kim Jong-un, the communist dictator's regime sent home 55 coffins supposedly containing the remains of American MIAs from the Korean War (shown; AP photo). On August 1 at Pearl Harbor, Vice President Mike Pence received the fragments of what presumably are American GIs, Marines, and aviators, who now await identification.

At least some of the families of America's missing men from the Korean War hope they might finally bury, 65 years later, long-dead loved ones on American soil.

But identification won't be easy, if what is past is prologue. As the *New York Times* reported, forensic examiners have identified only a little more than one-third of 50 sets of remains that came home in the past. "The rest sit in storage."

Bones are mixed together, the *Times* reported, and the "208 coffins delivered in the 1990s turned out to include remains from at least 400 people." The "remains" of a British aviator sent home to his family were dog parts.

Yet no matter how many remains the forensic gumshoes do identify, a sad fact remains: Some of the remains of the nearly 8,000 men missing in action might never come home, at least until Russia and the United States admit that American POWs in Korea were packed off to the Soviet Union.

No "Evidence"

And on that note, hope dims. As the *Washington Free Beacon* reported just after President Donald Trump was elected, U.S. officials have denied to Soviet officials having any evidence that the Soviets took Americans during the Korean War:

Pentagon officials leading efforts to recover missing American service members told their Russian counterparts in May there is no evidence that U.S. prisoners of the Korean War were brought into the Soviet Union, dismissing intelligence reports and eyewitness testimony compiled over the last two decades.

American officials made the claim during a May meeting of the U.S.-Russia Joint Commission on POW/MIAs, and experts say it could undermine the Defense Department's efforts to recover further information about the more than 7,800 military personnel still unaccounted for from the Korean War of



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the 1950s.

Michael Linnington, who until recently directed the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, or DPAA, told Russian officials participating in the forum that the Pentagon has “no evidence” that missing troops ended up in the Soviet Union by way of China.

Linnington’s comments angered experts who say the move will signal to the Russians that the U.S. government is no longer interested in pursuing a lead that it has chased for decades.

Another official said families are susceptible to “survivor myth” as a “coping mechanism” to handle the emotional and psychological difficulties of having lost a loved one who never returned.

The problem with that claim is that it contradicts hard evidence to the contrary. In other words, the evidence refutes the claim that the government has no evidence.

As the POW Investigative Project website states, “According to former senior Soviet military officers, prisoners released from the Gulag, and multiple declassified wartime reports from the U.S. CIA and other intelligence organizations, numerous Americans captured during the Korean War were sent to the Soviet Union. Some, such as pilots, were shipped directly to the Soviet Union. Others went via ship or through China in rail cars, which were reported by a number of witnesses along their route.”

In 1954, the US State Department even asked the Soviet Union to return these American POWs: “The United States Government has recently received reports which support earlier indications that American prisoners of war who had seen action in Korea have been transported to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and that they are now in Soviet custody. The United States Government desires to ... arrange their repatriation at the earliest possible time.”

According to Mark Sauter, who has written three books on missing Americans, the latest being 2013’s *American Trophies and Washington’s Cynical Attitude*, the government is “still classifying some info on US POWs in Korea.” This writer collaborated with Sauter and James Sanders on *Soldiers of Misfortune: Washington’s Secret Betrayal of American POWs in the Soviet Union*.

“We know for sure,” Sauter explained in an e-mail to me, “the CIA is refusing to release files on KGB defector Yuri Rastvorov, who in the 1950s told the White House about shipments and whom we believe told the CIA more, and the agency is keeping classified despite fact that the information is over 60 years old and Rastvorov is long dead.”

That information, Sauter explained, is one reason one family is suing the government to get information about POW shipments from the Korean theater to the Soviet Union. And the CIA isn’t the only agency trying to keep this information a secret. The Soviet government, he says, refuses to release its decades-old files.

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The Evidence

The obvious question is why the government, in 1954, would ask for its military personnel to be repatriated if it didn’t have good reason — meaning good *evidence* — to ask.

Before going into just how strong the evidence is, consider a lengthy account in the *New York Times* by James Brooke, on July 19, 1996.



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The headline? “Decades Later, Tales of Americans in Soviet Jails.”

Brooke wrote about Vladimir Trotsenko, a Russian whose “memories are as clear as his cobalt blue eyes: the American flyer, his right arm in a new cast, in a Soviet military hospital ward. The American, he recalled, would slowly repeat, ‘America — San Francisco, Cleveland, Los Angeles, Chicago.’”

The year was 1951, and the place was Military Hospital 404 in Novosyoyevka, 300 miles south of here. Stalin was in his last years, the Korean War was raging and the cold war with the United States was on.

Trotsenko not only saw Americans at the hospital, but also had a job — to watch them:

Often asked to “keep an eye on the Americans” by the Soviet Army guard, Mr. Trotsenko said, he saw four men in five beds. A fifth American apparently died of ejection injuries a few days before Mr. Trotsenko was admitted. One American was so badly burned he could take sustenance only intravenously. Two others, who seemed to have reasonable chances of survival, were spoon-fed by a nurse. The fourth, with the broken arm, fed himself with his good arm.

At the time of Mr. Trotsenko’s release, in mid-November 1951, the Americans were still in the hospital, he said.

And that is just one eyewitness account. Several Russians reported similar encounters in responding to an advertisement from American researchers looking for evidence of American POWs — like the evidence our own government has long had but now claims doesn’t exist.

Reams of government documents have surfaced thanks to the hard work of reporters and researchers such as Sauter, hard on the trail of American POWs inside the former Red Empire.

Three reports published in the 1990s confirmed their suspicion. *The Transfer of Korean War POWs to the Soviet Union*, published by the Pentagon in 1993, concluded that “U.S. Korean War POWs were transferred to the Soviet Union and never repatriated.” According to that report, “This transfer was a highly-secret MGB [Ministry of State Security, a forerunner to the KGB] program approved by the inner circle of the Stalinist dictatorship”:

The rationale for taking selected prisoners to the USSR was:

- To exploit and counter U.S. aircraft technologies;
- To use them for general intelligence purposes;
- It is possible that Stalin, given his positive experience with Axis POWs, viewed U.S. POWs as potentially lucrative hostages.

The range of eyewitness testimony as to the presence of U.S. Korean War POWs in the GULAG is so broad and convincing that we cannot dismiss it.

The Soviets were particularly interested in F-86 Sabre jets and B-29 bombers, along with their pilots and crewmen, given their technical abilities, the report said. The report includes multiple sightings of American POWs, and not just by Russians:

A Japanese POW from World War II repatriated from POW Camp No. 21 at Khabarovsk, stated that (1) he had heard from a camp guard that two Americans had been brought to Khabarovsk prison and were being investigated as spies; (2) he had heard from Soviet guards, prisoners, and laborers



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in April and May 1953 that 12 or 13 Americans crew members of a military plane shot down by the Soviets were in a Khabarovsk prison; (3) he heard from prisoners in 1951 or early 1952 that an American fisherman, captured in the Gulf of Alaska was brought to the Magadan region; and (4) he heard from a guard on a Soviet prisoner train at No. 2 station, Khabarovsk, in about June 1952 that there was a prison camp in the USSR for Americans only. Another Japanese reported that he had heard from the chief of the POW camp at Debin in October 1953 that an American Air Force officer was in a military hospital 500 miles north of Magadan (location unlocatable due to phonetic rendering). He reported that the officer had been sentenced to 25 years in prison ... as a suspected spy.

A particularly compelling account is that of Colonel Gavril Ivanovich Korotkov. He told American officials that the Soviet intelligence agency, the MGB, controlled American POWs, and that he interviewed two of them in Khabarovsk.

Generally, military interrogators had only a few hours with the Americans, although they sometimes had up to a few days, depending on the nature and perceived value of the information or source. While the POWs were at Khabarovsk, the MGB controlled them when they were not being interrogated. Once the process was completed, the POWs were returned to the control of the MGB. Therefore, Korotkov stated, he had no direct knowledge of the fate of these personnel. Although Korotkov did not know the exact number, he felt that the number of Americans processed through Khabarovsk was in the hundreds....

Colonel Korotkov also stated that while he was assigned to the project of interrogating Americans in the Far East during the Korean War, he also interrogated Japanese POWs, captured in World War II, and still held in Soviet custody. Here is an admission that foreign POWs were part of an overall system of exploitation.

Korotkov's interrogating Japanese POWs reinforces the report from a Japanese POW who said he saw Americans.

Korotkov recanted his testimony and changed his story at times, presumably under pressure from Soviet authorities, yet what he reports conforms with what other Soviet officers said, who in turn verify what researchers in and out of government were trying to establish: that American POWs landed in the Soviet Union during the Korean War and did not come home.

A second report, *1992-1996 Findings of the Korean War Working Group* (1996), concluded likewise. That report, which also contains the Korotkov account and details his shifting claims, contains Trotsenko's eyewitness report of Americans in a Soviet hospital in 1951.

Trotsenko, a sergeant, was there with four Americans whom he remembered in detail. The slightly-built Patient Number 1, for instance, had light hair and blue eyes. He was in his 20s and had two kids and lived in Cleveland. He had a back injury.

Patient Number 2 was a heavysset fellow of about 40, laid up with his arms in traction. The faces of Patients Numbers 3 and 4 were bandaged; 4's face was burned, and he was unconscious. A fifth American had died.

And two Soviet air force officers, a colonel and a captain, interrogated the men in English, Trotsenko said.



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Forty-five years later, he led American investigators to the cemetery where, he said, the American was buried. No remains were there, but U.S. and Russian officials adjudged his testimony credible.

The second report contains the recollections of another Soviet colonel, Pavel Grigorevich Derzskii, who knew that about 30 Americans went to the Soviet Union. He received “direct orders ‘to transfer American pilots to China for further travel to Moscow’” from “two very senior officers,” and helped arrange those transfers.

According to Sauter, Derzskii told U.S. investigators that he helped capture a downed American aviator in North Korea, gave him first aid, and “then had him sent to processing for shipment” to the Soviet Union.

A Soviet general reported that “at least 30-40 American POWs were placed in a separate and closely guarded carriage, attached to a goods train, and sent to the USSR.”

Another account that appears in both reports is that of a Russian whose description of an American POW was so clear — the dark hair and complexion of a Greek or Italian and a round or oval scar on his cheek — that American officials verified the POW’s identity: Captain Ara Mooradian. An American airman of Armenian descent, Mooradian went down in October 1951. Officials showed the Russian 16 photographs of American MIAs. The Russian chose three closely matching the man he saw. One of them was Mooradian.

Finally, Paul Cole, at the time an analyst for the Rand Corporation, looking at a broad array of U.S. and Soviet reports and eyewitness accounts, concluded in a three-part report published in 1994 that about 50 American Korean POWs landed in the Soviet Union.

As Cole told the *New York Times* for its account that opened with the Trotsenko story, “Clearly, there were a lot of Americans washing around the gulag, but it is unimaginable that any of the World War II prisoners are still alive,” Cole said, referring to American POWs from World War II who also wound up in Soviet captivity.

Sauter says the number is much higher. “Combined intel,” he wrote, “indicates at least 800 went to the USSR.”

And where did the Soviets keep their American treasures?

Sauter’s POW Investigative Project, which seeks the public’s help in locating these missing men, notes that Americans landed in at least 15 camps, from Sinda and Magadan Oblast on Russia’s east coast, to Yakutsk, Krasnoyarsk, and Novosibirsk in Siberia, to Kirov, Perm, and Moscow.

In Sinda, less than two hours from Khabarovsk, where Korotkov claimed to have interrogated our men, “five alleged Americans reportedly arrived in 1952. One was a pilot and another was called ‘Poll,’ a guard at the camp later told his grandson, who contacted US investigators. The men were kept in their own barracks and did not have to work. One of them died in the late 1950s and was buried in the local cemetery.”

And “during a 1993 interview, a witness in Lithuania said he met two American pilots at Novosibirsk Transit Prison around June 1952. The Americans said they had been shot down in Korea. They wore khaki shirts and trousers with no belts. One American, tall with red beard, said he was captain in the US Air Force.”



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And finally, here is what the POW Investigative Project reports about Perm:

Numerous reports of Americans here and in other regional towns such as Gubakha, Kudymkar and Chermos. Americans were seen starting December 1951. One shipment arrived by train around April 5, 1952 wearing Soviet-type cotton padded tunics and civilian caps called “Sibirki,” according to a CIA report. “They spoke among themselves in English, and they knew no other languages, except a few words of Russian.” A group of US officers called the “American General Staff” were kept in an office of the Military District of Molotov.

Why Reprise the History?

One must approach the question of POWs in the Soviet Union from the Soviet standpoint. The Soviets were heavily involved in the Korean War, the 1996 report noted, with 26,000 men “directly engaged in combat operations against American aviation.” Thus, “there is no doubt that the Soviets shot down, killed and possibly captured American airmen.”

So the question isn’t whether the American POWs in Korea were taken to the Soviet Union. The question, rather, is why the Soviets wouldn’t have done so, particularly given their interest in acquiring American technology and the know-how to use it. And indeed they did, as “evidence” of remarkable specificity shows.

Thus, the claim of the Pentagon official quoted in the *Free Beacon* must be called what it is: either a lie, or a demonstration of woeful ignorance.

As Sauter wrote, “The Soviets kept millions of German, Japanese and other POWs after WWII and exploited them for all sorts of intelligence, engineering and weapons development and other purposes. This was done by Soviet intelligence agencies (and personally by Yuri Rastvorov, who had information on Americans from the Korean War). They still had many of these German/Japanese POWs — and obviously Latvians, Poles, etc — in the Gulag system in 1950, when the Korean War started, and had been working with North Korea to send Korean prisoners to the Gulag. Given all this, how could Soviet intel NOT been involved with US POWs?”

Beyond all this, our Pentagon official might have forgotten one piece of evidence.

In 1992, when staff members of Senator Jesse Helms issued a report concluding that American POWs were in the Soviet Union, such was the uproar that Helms fired them. That was January. Later that year, as the *New York Times* reported, Russian President Boris Yeltsin admitted the truth:

Mr. Yeltsin acknowledged for the first time to a Senate committee that is examining the prisoner issue that the Soviet Union had imprisoned Americans during World War II, when Washington and Moscow were allies, and had sent to labor camps and psychiatric wards an unknown number of Americans who were shot down during the Korean War or who were on aerial reconnaissance missions during the cold war.

He also admitted that some “Americans captured during the Vietnam War were apparently transferred from Hanoi to labor camps in the Soviet Union. He added that some of them may still be alive, possibly in psychiatric hospitals.”

That November, the *Los Angeles Times* reported, he admitted that the Soviets had executed American POWs after World War II, and that some were forced to renounce American citizenship and might still be alive. That was 47 years after the war ended.



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The late Lieutenant General Eugene Tighe, former head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, famously said the government had a “mindset to debunk” reports of POWs left behind in Vietnam. But his evaluation pertains to the Korean War as well.

It might be that we will never account for these men. But the government must at least be forced to admit the truth plainly and clearly and without equivocation: The Red Empire took our men and never gave them back.

And the U.S. government knew it.

Sidebar:

Here’s Your Evidence

In November 2016, a Pentagon official stated that the United States did not have evidence that Korean War POWs were shipped to the Soviet Union.

That statement, reported in the *Washington Free Beacon*, contradicted three reports a quarter-century old that concluded the opposite, yet it is consistent with what the Pentagon has always said: no evidence. A U.S. Navy admiral, a deputy director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, even made that claim in testimony to Congress 25 years ago, when this writer was working with two colleagues on *Soldiers of Misfortune: Washington’s Secret Betrayal of American POWs in the Soviet Union*.

We settled on a way to provide such evidence: prove that sightings of Americans in the Soviet Union were reliable. What if we showed that the courageous souls who reported seeing those Americans were telling the truth? What if we tracked down an American, whose name appears in a government document, to validate a witness’ claim to have seen and spoken to that American?

Major Thompson

Major Wirt Elizabeth Thompson, whose name appears in a dispatch dated February 18, 1954 from U.S. Army Headquarters in Heidelberg, was a good candidate. Thompson’s plane went down after departing Myitkyina, Burma, in WWII for a mission to Kunming, China. Rescuers could not reach the crash site.

The dispatch, which is based on a report from the British Army, reads as follows:

THOMPSON told source [a German held in the Soviet Gulag] that after a forced landing in 1944 he was arrested by the Russians and subsequently sentenced to 25 years’ imprisonment for alleged espionage. From 1944-1948, he had been incarcerated in the BUDENSKAYA prison in Moscow and had then been transferred to the TAYSHET camp (compound 26). The only other information source could give concerning THOMPSON was that he once mentioned that his home had been in San Antonio, Texas. Description: Age about 38, height 1.85 meters [6 feet], slim build, thin features, fair hair, blue eyes.

The dispatch called him William and mentioned two other Americans in Soviet captivity.

Putting a face on that description was easier than one would have thought, particularly in the era before the Internet.

Figuring that Thompson graduated from a high school in San Antonio, I called the city’s public-school headquarters. I asked a spokeswoman if she could help locate Thompson in her records, telling her to look around the years 1936 or 1938. Within an hour or two, she had found Thompson’s yearbooks and



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faxed me his high-school photographs. She also went to the public library and found his address in an old phone book. Thompson lived at 123 Eleanor Street, as we reported in *Soldiers of Misfortune*, and attended high school in Italy, Texas.

I spoke to Thompson's sister and his daughter, a therapist in Oklahoma. The family never knew Thompson was seen alive in the Soviet Union, or that the government, based on the source's report, concluded that "there is a strong likelihood that the man in the Soviet Union is Major Wirt Elizabeth Thompson." Nor did they know that the government had asked for his return.

Why Thompson Matters

Thompson's story is important for many reasons.

First, it shows that eyewitness testimony about Americans in the Gulag is generally accurate and reliable. The German man, described as "intelligent and cooperative," divulged details about Thompson he could not have manufactured, not least where Thompson was from and went to high school. Thus, we easily found that the source could not have concocted his story for personal gain.

Second, it is one of many other sightings of Americans in the Gulag, and those sightings are contained in one government report after another.

Third, the government's denying that it has evidence about missing POWs, and claiming it knows nothing about unreturned POWs, affects real people, most notably their families. Claims of "no evidence" are, obviously, ridiculous for those who know the government does indeed possess such evidence, and reams of it. It would be laughable were it not such a serious matter. This isn't, after all, a dispute over whether the Clintons really did steal the White House china. Nearly 8,000 Americans who served in Korea are unaccounted for. If any landed in the Soviet Union, the families have a right to know that. The same, of course, holds true for POWs from World War II or Vietnam.

Fourth, continuing to deny what everyone who has studied the matter knows undermines faith in the government and its employees, energizing the belief that government officials lie to the taxpayers who support it, to the citizens it is charged with defending, and even worse, to the men it sends into battle.

— R. Cort Kirkwood

Never Again

Of two things about the Korean and Vietnam Wars we can be certain. First, we didn't win. Otherwise, communist tyrants would not still sit astride the North Korean and Vietnamese people. Second, American officialdom left POWs behind in both wars and lied about it. Some POWs remained in-country, and some landed somewhere across the 11 time zones of the Soviet Union. Either way, more than a few Americans died in captivity long after the wars were over.

Those truths occasion an observation or three to stop such a crime from ever happening again.

Americans must stop their politicians from embarking on foreign military adventures without a declaration of war. Only Congress can declare war, as the Constitution provides. And wars the country enters should not be ones enacted to be the world's policeman, but to protect America from aggression.

But that isn't enough. Americans must accept that politicians will lie if that is the easiest route to take, and then demand that every known survivor is accounted for. An undeclared war makes such accountability a lot harder.



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Beyond that, one government agency must be assigned responsibility for recovering POWs, with someone of unimpeachable character at its head, who has the power to inspect all classified records related to POWs. U.S. POWs were left behind, Army criminal investigator Tracy Usry said, because they “were an inconvenience,” so the Pentagon tried to “hide everything about them.” The Pentagon could only get away with abandoning more than 700 men because government officials colluded to stop relatives of POWs — and possible future recruits — from learning the truth.

Stopping the abandonment of soldiers won’t happen until we insist the government be aboveboard in all its activities and stop elected officials from using American blood and treasure to pursue the global geopolitical aims of the anti-American Deep State establishment, and instead restrict war-fighting to occasions of national survival, with the objective of winning the wars.

— R. Cort Kirkwood

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