



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

Published in the September 3, 2018 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 34, No. 17

Evidence of POWs From Vietnam

After the end of the Vietnam War, it was widely accepted that the United States had left many POWs behind, but high-ranking members of government said no, despite the evidence.



For the last 25 years — most recently in November 2016 — Pentagon officials have claimed the United States does not have evidence that American POWs captured during the Korean War were sent to the Soviet Union.

Yet as *The New American* shows (in a [related article](#)), the evidence for such transfers is credible and convincing. The Pentagon claims similarly about Vietnam, and has spent years trying to dismiss POW sightings, electronic intelligence, and even messages from POWs themselves.

Lieutenant General Eugene Tighe, former head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, described the government's denial as a "mindset to debunk." Perhaps the saddest result is that many of the men reportedly alive as late as the 1990s could have been brought home. The chances are remote, but perhaps some are still alive who could be.

But like the claim that it has "no evidence" of Americans in the Soviet Union, the government, most notably Senator John McCain (R-Ariz.), has steadfastly refused to acknowledge what, again, everyone knows: We left men behind to rot in the jungles of Southeast Asia.

One of the most compelling media reports came from the late Sydney Schanberg, whose book *The Death and Life of Dith Pran* was turned into the film *The Killing Fields*.

Schanberg investigated the work of the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs in 1991 and 1992, of which McCain was a member. In a lengthy piece for the leftist *The Nation* magazine, subsequently republished in the *American Conservative*, Schanberg proved beyond all doubt what everyone suspected: American POWs languishing in Vietnam were not merely the stuff of movies such as *Uncommon Valor* and *Rambo II*.

Readers can digest Schanberg's full account to find out why McCain wanted to discredit those who believe POWs were left in Vietnam. Here, it suffices to explain what McCain did, as told by Schanberg in his article:

McCain has insisted again and again that all the evidence — documents, witnesses, satellite photos, two Pentagon chiefs' sworn testimony, aborted rescue missions, ransom offers apparently scorned — has been woven together by unscrupulous deceivers to create an insidious and unpatriotic myth. He calls it the "bizarre rantings of the MIA hobbyists." He has regularly vilified those who keep trying to pry out



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

Published in the September 3, 2018 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 34, No. 17

classified documents as “hoaxers,” “charlatans,” “conspiracy theorists,” and “dime-store Rambos.”

Not only that, but McCain “browbeat expert witnesses,” while family members who “pressed him to end the secrecy also have been treated to his legendary temper. He has screamed at them, insulted them, brought women to tears.”

The Evidence

Schanberg, who died in July 2016, was not exaggerating. I know because I was there, covering the story as well. McCain’s bitter feud with POW activists aside, in his article Schanberg offered 10 key pieces of evidence to prove, definitively, that the Nixon administration left POWs in Vietnam.

Here are a few examples:

- Former defense secretaries Melvin Laird and James Schlesinger testified under oath to the Select Committee that the POWs were left behind, Schanberg wrote, and “said they based their conclusions on strong intelligence data — letters, eyewitness reports, even direct radio contacts.” And Schanberg wrote,

Under questioning, Schlesinger chose his words carefully, understanding clearly the volatility of the issue: “I think that as of now that I can come to no other conclusion.... Some were left behind.” This ran counter to what President Nixon told the public in a nationally televised speech on March 29, 1973, when the repatriation of the 591 was in motion: “Tonight,” Nixon said, “the day we have all worked and prayed for has finally come. For the first time in 12 years, no American military forces are in Vietnam. All our American POWs are on their way home.” Documents unearthed since then show that aides had already briefed Nixon about the contrary evidence.

- The Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) collected 1,600 firsthand and 14,000 secondhand reports of live American POWs. Schanberg elucidated:

Some of the witnesses were given lie-detector tests and passed. Sources provided me with copies of these witness reports, which are impressive in their detail.... Yet the DIA, after reviewing all these reports, concluded that they ‘do not constitute evidence’ that men were alive.

- Reports from Thai communications officers that American POWs were moved from one camp to another were ignored as not credible because they were from a “third party” — a third party, Schanberg noted, trained by the United States:

Here, from CIA files, is an example that clearly exposes the farce. On Dec. 27, 1980, a Thai military signal team picked up a message saying that prisoners were being moved out of Attopeu (in southern Laos) by aircraft “at 1230 hours.” Three days later a message was sent from the CIA station in Bangkok to the CIA director’s office in Langley. It read, in part: “The prisoners ... are now in the valley in permanent location (a prison camp at Nhommarath in Central Laos). They were transferred from Attopeu to work in various places.... POWs were formerly kept in caves and are very thin, dark and starving.” Apparently the prisoners were real. But the transmission was declared “invalid” by Washington because the information came from a “third party” and thus could not be deemed credible.

- Government satellite photos show U.S. military distress signals on the ground even in the late 1980s and early 1990s. “Not a single one of these markings was ever deemed credible,” he wrote. “To the layman’s eye, the satellite photos, some of which I’ve seen, show markings on the ground that are



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

Published in the September 3, 2018 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 34, No. 17

identical to the signals that American pilots had been specifically trained to use in their survival courses — such as certain letters, like X or K, drawn in a special way. Other markings were the secret four-digit authenticator numbers given to individual pilots.”

No matter. The Pentagon called them “shadows and vegetation”:

On one occasion, a Pentagon photo expert refused to go along. It was a missing man’s name gouged into a field, he said, not trampled grass or paddy berms. His bosses responded by bringing in an outside contractor who found instead, yes, shadows and vegetation. This refrain led Bob Taylor, a highly regarded investigator on the Senate committee staff who had examined the photographic evidence, to comment to me: “If grass can spell out people’s names and secret digit codes, then I have a newfound respect for grass.”

The late Billy Hendon, who represented North Carolina’s 11th District before he became a full-time champion of the missing POWs and their families, supported this aspect of Schanberg’s claim. He featured one of those photos on the cover his book, *An Enormous Crime: The Definitive Account of American POWs Abandoned in Southeast Asia*. That book was the result of Hendon’s long quest to bring those POWs home. The image in the photo? “USA,” followed by a classified code.

- The government also collected information, Schanberg reported, from a classified program called PAVE SPIKE that, once again, showed live POWs seeking help.

PAVE SPIKE used devices that were “motion sensors, dropped by air, designed to pick up enemy troop movements. Shaped on one end like a spike with an electronic pod and antenna on top, they were designed to stick in the ground as they fell.” An aircraft flying above collected the information from the spikes. However, a downed airman — or escaping POW — could manually enter data and send it. Said Schanberg:

In 1974, a year after the supposedly complete return of prisoners, the gathered data showed that a person or people had manually entered into the sensors — as U.S. pilots had been trained to do — no less than 20 authenticator numbers that corresponded exactly to the classified authenticator numbers of 20 U.S. POWs who were lost in Laos.

POW activist Dolores Alfond, who died a few years ago, gave that information to the committee, apparently without anyone contesting her claims. And that’s where McCain comes in:

McCain attended that committee hearing specifically to confront Alfond because of her criticism of the panel’s work. He bellowed and berated her for quite a while. His face turning anger-pink, he accused her of “denigrating” his “patriotism.” The bullying had its effect — she began to cry.

After a pause Alfond recovered and tried to respond to his scorching tirade, but McCain simply turned away and stormed out of the room. The PAVE SPIKE file has never been declassified. We still don’t know anything about those 20 POWs.

- When National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger negotiated the Paris Peace Accords in 1973, the North Vietnamese Communists pulled a fast one, telling the administration that it had only 591 prisoners, but U.S. officials knew they were lying.

Kissinger commented on a transcript found in Soviet archives of a briefing from a North Vietnamese general to the politburo in Hanoi. The general told the communist leadership that 1,251 Americans were in captivity, and that the regime planned to withhold them to squeeze war reparations out of the



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

Published in the September 3, 2018 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 34, No. 17

United States. Just 591, again, came home.

Said Kissinger, as Hendon's book reports, "If that document is authentic, and it is hard to imagine who would have forged it, for what purpose, then I think an enormous crime has been committed." Indeed it would have been an enormous crime. The Vietnamese likely believed the United States reneged on the promised booty. As Schanberg reported, "The North Vietnamese tied the prisoner issue tightly to the issue of reparations":

They were adamant in refusing to deal with them separately. Finally, in a Feb. 2, 1973 formal letter to Hanoi's premier, Pham Van Dong, Nixon pledged \$3.25 billion in "postwar reconstruction" aid "without any political conditions." But he also attached to the letter a codicil that said the aid would be implemented by each party "in accordance with its own constitutional provisions." That meant Congress would have to approve the appropriation, and Nixon and Kissinger knew well that Congress was in no mood to do so. The North Vietnamese, whether or not they immediately understood the double-talk in the letter, remained skeptical about the reparations promise being honored — and it never was. Hanoi thus appears to have held back prisoners — just as it had done when the French were defeated at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and withdrew their forces from Vietnam. In that case, France paid ransoms for prisoners and brought them home.

- Schanberg offered other examples, continuing at some length: a Delta Force commando who stated he trained for abruptly aborted POW rescue missions; confirmation testimony by Admiral Thomas Moorer, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; a plan during the Reagan administration to buy the POWs for \$4 billion, and the story of Colonel Millard Peck.

Peck was a highly decorated combat veteran who quit his job as chief of the DIA's POW branch, accusing the government of a "cover-up" and reiterating Tighe's conclusion that the government had a "mindset to debunk." Wrote Peck in his resignation letter:

From what I have witnessed, it appears that any soldier left in Vietnam, even inadvertently, was, in fact, abandoned years ago, and that the farce that is being played is no more than political legerdemain done with "smoke and mirrors" to stall the issue until it dies a natural death.

Even the government's Select Committee report published in 1993 amazingly told the truth. One just had to read the whole thing, which, as Schanberg noted, most journalists didn't do:

The Executive Summary, which comprised the first 43 pages, was essentially a whitewash, saying that only "a small number" of POWs could have been left behind in 1973 and that there was little likelihood that any prisoners could still be alive. The Washington press corps, judging from its coverage, seems to have read only this air-brushed summary, which had been closely controlled.

But the rest of the 1,221-page Report on POW/MIAs was quite different. Sprinkled throughout are pieces of hard evidence that directly contradict the summary's conclusions. This documentation established that a significant number of prisoners were left behind — and that top government officials knew this from the start. These candid findings were inserted by committee staffers who had unearthed the evidence and were determined not to allow the truth to be sugar-coated.

Documentation about surviving POWs in Vietnam was abundant: Sixteen-hundred eyewitness reports. Electronic intelligence with airman authenticator numbers. Distress signals on the ground as late as the 1990s. Two defense secretaries who say American POWs were left in Southeast Asia. And even more



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

Published in the September 3, 2018 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 34, No. 17

definitive evidence: that document found in Soviet archives showing the Vietnamese withheld more than 700 POWs.

That's about as much "evidence" as most rational Americans would need to draw something of a conclusion about POWs retained by Vietnam — but the government disagreed.

One Investigator's Experience

The government's official resistance to admitting the truth didn't begin with the Select Committee's efforts or McCain's angry attacks on "hoaxers," "conspiracy theorists," and "dime-store Rambos."

Before the Senate empaneled the Select Committee in the early 1990s, Tracy Usry, a senior criminal investigator in the U.S. Army specializing in white-collar crime, was detailed to the staff of the late Senator Jesse Helms, ranking Republican of the Foreign Relations Committee.

Today, 25 years later, Usry remembers three key areas that he and his colleagues on the committee staff examined: "Did we leave military people behind? Did the government lie about No. 1? Did the government initiate any action against the POW activists?"

The answer to all three, he told me, "was yes!"

Recalled Usry in an e-mail, "We published our first report regarding Vietnam. Essentially we stated that available evidence indicated we left people behind, lied about it, and initiated harassment of one sort or another against family members of those missing or activists."

And what type of harassment was it? According to Usry, "We found a greater percentage of IRS audits as well as harassment by federal agencies. [We] even found where a federal agency prohibited by law to conduct activities in the U.S. did so against POW activists."

In the end Usry told me, "American personnel were knowingly left behind after the end of the Vietnam war." The probe found likewise for POWs after the Korean War and World War II.

The government buried the truth, Usry said, because it's "politically advantageous to do so. Simply move on!"

Usry also observed, correctly, that "with the exception of the Vietnam war, all this was played out in the media at the respective times of each war. It had short term traction and went away."

Sadly, Usry's experience left him somewhat cynical. "In all honesty, this whole issue while I was still in the service soured me regarding the system," he wrote. "I listened to a general officer lie to a congressman regarding this issue. I interacted with two commanders of the DIA POW/MIA office who lied about the issue. I challenged investigators within DIA who either lied or were incompetent!"

Like Schanberg and many others, Usry, who spent much of his life in military service, sadly concluded that the government lied about the POWs abandoned in Southeast Asia.

Some questions: How many POWs were alive in the 1990s when Usry gathered evidence, were any alive when Schanberg wrote, and, finally, are any alive today?

In response to that second question, Usry says no. Once Vietnam received the diplomatic recognition it sought in 1995, it likely executed any remaining Americans. Beyond that, 25 or so years have passed since the influence of POW activists peaked in the 1990s. And now, many of the activists and family members who spoke for the American boys left in Southeast Asia have died. And so the voices for those



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

Published in the September 3, 2018 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 34, No. 17

men have died, too. The Pentagon, Usry observed, simply waited for the inevitable.

One last note. As reported in our main story, Helms' staff issued a report claiming American POWs were held in the Soviet Union. That report ended in a mass firing, including Usry, in January 1992, yet before the year was out, Russian President Boris Yeltsin admitted that American POWs were there, some of them from Vietnam possibly languishing in psychiatric hospitals.

Photo: 400tmax/iStock Unreleased/Getty Images

This article originally appeared in the September 3, 2018 print edition of The New American. The New American publishes a print magazine twice a month, covering issues such as politics, money, foreign policy, environment, culture, and technology.



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

Published in the September 3, 2018 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 34, No. 17

Subscribe to the New American

Get exclusive digital access to the most informative, non-partisan truthful news source for patriotic Americans!

Discover a refreshing blend of time-honored values, principles and insightful perspectives within the pages of "The New American" magazine. Delve into a world where tradition is the foundation, and exploration knows no bounds.

From politics and finance to foreign affairs, environment, culture, and technology, we bring you an unparalleled array of topics that matter most.



[Subscribe](#)

What's Included?

- 24 Issues Per Year
- Optional Print Edition
- Digital Edition Access
- Exclusive Subscriber Content
- Audio provided for all articles
- Unlimited access to past issues
- Coming Soon! Ad FREE
- 60-Day money back guarantee!
- Cancel anytime.