

Ex-Green Beret Says U.S. Still Hides Actions in War

By SEYMOUR M. HERSH
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WASHINGTON, July 26—A former Green Beret sergeant accused the Pentagon today of continuing to cover up the extent of secret United States military operations in Laos and Cambodia. He also charged that Government officials had deliberately understated the number of Americans killed on those operations.

"Now that the cat's out of the bag," said Thomas J. Marzullo of Stamford, Conn., who served with the Army Special Forces in Southeast Asia from 1969 to 1971, "Why in the hell can't we at least be honest?"

Mr. Marzullo, 24 years old, was referring to the Pentagon admission Tuesday that 81 American servicemen have been killed in action while on intelligence or rescue missions in Laos and Cambodia since 1965. It was explained that the deaths had been reported to the victim's families as taking place in South Vietnam—a cover story parallel to that used to hide the secret bombing of Cambodia by B-52's in 1969 and 1970.

Jerry W. Friedheim, the Pentagon spokesman, said subsequently at a news briefing that "these intelligence operations, which involved joint teams of U. S. and usually South Vietnamese personnel, were involved in gathering information in the sanctuary areas" along the border between Laos and Cambodia.

Secret Missions Described

In a series of telephone interviews, Mr. Marzullo, now a college student, told of participating in or learning of scores of clandestine Green Beret missions involved kidnappings, ambushes and planned attacks on enemy supply and intelligence outposts as far as 40 miles inside Laos.

As many as 10 Americans, accompanied by equal numbers of United States trained mercenaries, participated in the operations, he said, and they often wore North Vietnamese, Vietcong or Chintse uniforms.

Casualties were frequently heavy, he recalled, but only those whose bodies were returned and identifiable were officially listed as killed in action. The dead who were left behind, he added, were listed as missing.

"What I'm trying to say is that the figure of 81 Americans killed cannot compensate for all the casualties I saw and heard about in my brief time over there," he asserted. "And that war was going on for a hell of a lot longer than my tour of duty. Eighty-one is simply not a feasible number."

At a news briefing today Mr. Friedheim conceded that "it's entirely" that some of the 1,300 men listed as missing in action could have been involved in the secret operations in Laos and Cambodia. But he minimized that possibility in effect, by noting that American ground troops had been in overt operations during the 1970 Cambodian invasion and the similar penetration of Laos in 1971 and that the men could have been listed as missing in those actions.

Comment by Gen. James

Asked about Mr. Marzullo's comments, Lieut. Gen. Daniel James Jr., of the Air Force, another Pentagon spokesman, said that 1,100 men were listed as killed in action in the Vietnam war although their bodies had not been recovered. In those cases, he said—they apparently did not include intelligence operations—the victims were reported dead by colleagues on the scene but either escaped or were rescued.

"I can't respond to the rest of his story," General James said. "I'm not aware of some of the things he talked about. We're going to have all kinds of stories coming out after this."

Mr. Marzullo told of an

operation during the summer of 1971 in which a secret Green Beret radio-relay outpost in Laos was overrun by North Vietnamese troops. The outpost, known as Sugar Loaf, was also manned by Air Force personnel who provided guidance for fighter-bomber operations.

"We know that one of the Green Berets was dead when last seen, and another was seen crawling into a mortar pit with a wound," the former sergeant recalled. The North Vietnamese eventually withdrew, he said, but no movement was sighted and the facility was saturation-bombed in an attempt to deny the enemy any undamaged radio equipment.

"Chances are they're both dead," Mr. Marzullo said of the Green Berets, "but they're both listed as missing."

I'm Quite Mad About This

"I'm quite mad about this," he continued. "Dammit, these people put their lives on the line just like a lot of other people. Don't they deserve at least to have their families told that they're dead so they don't expect them to come walking through the door?"

"There's got to be at least 40 or 50 people who are listed as missing and actually are dead or captured," he added.

"In order to get someone reported as a K.I.A. [killed in action]," Mr. Marzullo said, "You had to find an identifiable portion of the body and bring it home. If you could find his leg or his foot, the hell with it."

In early 1972, he said, he and his colleagues became convinced that a Green Beret lieutenant had been captured by the North Vietnamese in Laos, but the officer is still listed as missing in action. "His people don't know where the hell he is or where he was," Mr. Marzullo said. "On the off-chance that he's still alive, I feel that I must speak up."

Query to Congressman

With the release of American prisoners of war due early this year, Mr. Marzullo said, he wrote his Congressman, Representative Stewart B. McKinney, Republican of Connecticut, urging him to inquire about the officer. A spokesman for Mr. McKinney confirmed Mr. Marzullo's letter and added that the Pentagon subsequently reported that the lieutenant was missing in action in "Southeast Asia."

Pentagon officials said they would make public a list of those killed on the secret operations as soon as their immediate families had been informed of the true circumstances of their deaths.

Information about the classified operations was made public, the officials said, after it was learned that the Senate Armed Services Committee as well as the families had been told that the deaths took place in South Vietnam.

Falsified statistics about the secret bombing of Cambodia have become a focal point of the Senate inquiry into the raids. That inquiry will continue Monday with Gen. Earle G. Wheeler, retired, who was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff when the raids were approved by President Nixon in 1969, as witness.

At a White House news briefing former Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird described the forwarding of the false bombing statistics to Congress as a foul-up. Mr. Laird, now a Presidential adviser, also said that President Nixon was apparently referring to invasion by ground combat troops when he told the American public on April 30, 1970, the day before the Cambodian invasion and 14 months after the secret bombing began, that Cambodia's neutrality had been respected for five years.