

U.S. Has Cautious Hope of Finding More P.O.W.'s

by Steven V. Roberts

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Los Angeles, Feb. 25 - American officials believe that the list of prisoners supplied by the Communists in Indochina may not be complete.

They are being very cautious about the possibility of more prisoners, and do not want to raise false hopes among the families of more than 1,300 men whose fate is still unknown. The officials believe that the large majority of those men almost certainly are dead, but they are not yet ready to give up hope that a few more men might somehow return.

[At the four-party Joint Military Commission meeting in Saigon Sunday, neither the North Vietnamese nor the Vietcong produced a new list of prisoners to be released, Reuters reported. Another meeting is scheduled Monday.]

Henry A. Kissinger, President Nixon's adviser on national security affairs, appearing tonight on

night on the National Broadcasting Company's television program "A Conversation With Henry Kissinger," said:

"I cannot really believe that the North Vietnamese would hide prisoners on us. I see nothing they would gain from keeping prisoners that they could not acknowledge in jails in North Vietnam. But we won't rest on this theoretical supposition. We will make a full investigation and we will insist on an accounting."

Fifty-four men who were thought by American officials to be prisoners did not appear on the list of 562 confirmed P.O.W.'s held captive in North and South Vietnam and Laos.

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Nor were they listed as having died in captivity.

But since the official list was released last month, the families of several of the 54 have received telephone calls from the Pentagon telling them that there is enough evidence to keep their men on P.O.W. status for the time being.

"The North Vietnamese are holding out, we know this," insisted E. W. Teague of Harrisburg, Ark., one parent who received such a call. His son, Lieut. James Teague, was shot down in 1967 and was classified as a P.O.W. after a North Vietnam news agency announced his capture, but he was not listed among the P.O.W.'s identified last month. Others among the 54 were sighted alive on the ground after ejection from their planes, and some were even photographed in captivity, but no record of them has yet appeared.

In addition, well-informed sources say that returning prisoners have reported seeing a few men in prison camps who have not been acknowledged by the North Vietnamese. The former P.O.W.'s are now undergoing intensive debriefings with intelligence officers, who hope to find out more about the 54 men in question and about 1,274 others still listed as missing and unaccounted for.

Many Lost in Laos

The best chance appears to be in Laos, where 317 men have disappeared over the years. Only seven have been identified as prisoners thus far, and reports from Southeast Asia have speculated that those seven are held by the North Vietnamese. It is possible, according to the reports, that more men are in the hands of the Pathet Lao, the indigenous guerrilla army, which did not participate in the Paris talks and did not sign the peace accords.

Two difficult questions remain, however, particularly in regard to North and South Vietnam: Why would enemy forces deliberately withhold the names of American prisoners? And if they have, what will make them decide to give the men back?

As a result, officials and families are reluctant to discuss the missing men. The Paris accords provided that both sides would repatriate all prisoners within 60 days and provide information on the missing, and until that period is up on March 28, no one wants to rock the boat.

"We don't want to scream foul before we're sure a foul has been committed," explained Col. John Scott Albright, a board member of the National League of Families of Prisoners of War and Missing in Action whose son is a missing pilot.

When the official list was released, the league did say that its "worst fears" had been confirmed because so many men were unaccounted for. But Colonel Albright said last week: "None of us are willing to admit that the lists we've seen are final lists."

Major Campaign Planned

Accordingly, the league and other groups are already preparing massive publicity campaigns to focus attention on the issue after the 60-day period is over.

Because they refuse to accept the published lists as final, many M.I.A. families continue to suffer a particularly frustrating uncertainty. But their

refusal is rooted in two basic emotions that are not easily erased.

One is a deep suspicion of Communists. Almost every family involved knows that 389 Americans were never accounted for after the Korean War, and many do not trust the enemy to turn over all prisoners.

"It's not unlike putting the cat in charge of the canary," said Thomas Nellist, director of Concern for Prisoners of War Inc., a nonprofit organization in San Diego devoted to the prisoner issue.

More significantly, many simply cannot believe that their men are dead.

"There's just something in human nature," said Iris Powers, a leader of the league and the mother of a missing helicopter pilot. "As long as there is a little thread there, you hold out a little bit of hope." Or as Colonel Albright put it: "Each of us who has an M.I.A. 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?"

Some young wives, who have waited in a limbo for many years and now want to get on with their lives, have accepted the recent lists as final and consider their husbands dead. But for many parents, in particular, there is no alternative—they cannot marry another son.

Families who refuse to accept death were encouraged recently when Pfc. Ronald Ridgeway, who had been declared dead in 1968, appeared on the P.O.W. list. "I always had a feeling my boy would turn up," his mother insisted.

Psychiatrists say that without firm evidence of death, most families will not be able to complete the natural process of mourning they must eventually endure.