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The Missing POWs

The time has come to ask a dreadful question: Did we really get all our POWs back from Indochina?

Or has the enemy secreted some away? And if so, has our own government acquiesced in this deceit?

A Pentagon spokesman says there is no reason to believe there are any more prisoners alive anywhere in Indochina and conjecture to the contrary does a disservice to the families of the missing.

He also says that except for three instances early in the war, there is no evidence that any POWs were executed while in captivity.

If that is the official position of our government, the figures on the prisoners and the missing become virtually impossible to explain.

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WHEN THE CEASE-FIRE went into effect, the Vietnamese Communists listed 587 U.S. prisoners, military and civilian, whom they were holding in both the north and south and 68 who had died in captivity.

At the time American officials expressed astonishment at the brevity of the POW lists, which were only about 40 percent of what they had expected.

They promised to press the enemy for a fuller accounting. But except for an occasional stray, the enemy figures haven't changed.

It is our own government's attitude toward those figures that has undergone a transformation. From indignation and disbelief it has switched to resigned acceptance, with tongue-clucking toward anyone who doesn't go along.

The end-of-war accounting fell into three categories. First were the prisoners — and most of the men whom the enemy released had been confirmed as captured beforehand.

Next were the men confirmed as killed

in action but whose bodies were never recovered. The U.S. listed some 1100 in that category.

In the third category were 1328 men listed simply as missing in action.

These are the question-mark men. Many of them are dead, of course. But it defies logic to believe that all 1328 were killed — that none was taken prisoner.

Yet that is what we are obliged to believe if we accept the official Pentagon statements — not only that all 1328 were killed — but also that neither the U.S. nor the enemy knows what become of their bodies.

Other aspects of the POW lists were puzzling too. For one thing, they were terribly short on infantrymen, the bulk of the fighters in any war. We had a 600,000-man army committed in South Vietnam, and yet the majority of the POWs were fliers shot down in the north.

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THE MEKONG DELTA produced its own puzzle. It was the most populous Viet Cong hotbed, and for years we had a large staff of military advisers there ranging all the way down to patrol level. In the late '60s and early '70s the U.S. Ninth Division campaigned actively there.

Yet the Viet Cong acknowledges capturing only one American in the Delta.

The North Vietnamese listed no prisoners taken during our foray against their bases in Cambodia in the spring of 1970.

And then there's the prize puzzle of Laos, where we listed 322 men missing and the Pathet Lao returned only 10.

Even more incredible, the Pathet Lao listed no one who died in captivity.

Unless a better accounting is forthcoming, it will be difficult to avoid the conclusion that "peace with honor" involved swallowing some peculiar scorekeeping where the counters were human lives.