

UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL
3 March 1986

Who are those men

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WASHINGTON

Two men dressed in combat fatigues hunkered down in a Laotian jungle in 1981 and aimed their sophisticated cameras and listening devices at "two white, older, skinny men" walking inside a camp.

One of those watchers said later the older men are under armed guard and the sophisticated microphones picked them up speaking American English.

Are they POWs, as the men in combat fatigues believe?

Or are they, as another theory goes, U.S. intelligence agents, possibly even involved with drug smugglers who captured them or turned them over to the Laotian army?

Scott Barnes, 32, now living in northern California, swears that he was one of the men who saw the prisoners, and he presented his written testimony to the Senate subcommittee on veterans affairs.

In a telephone interview, he repeated the story but also said he has been threatened by "U.S. government agencies" and has decided that if asked to testify, he will either refuse or plead the Fifth Amendment.

He said his film and tapes of the two older men were destroyed on order of the CIA and he quit the mission when told the POWs were to be "liquidated" along with any evidence that they existed.

Pentagon officials reject that as absurd and insulting.

Assistant secretary of state Paul Wolfowitz, in Senate testimony, did not directly refute or support Barnes' story, but merely noted, "Barnes had misrepresented himself as a congressional staff member in Southeast Asia," a charge that Barnes admits.

"That was our cover," Barnes told United Press International. "We all had ID cards that said we were members of the House POW-MIA Task Force."

The Barnes case and its connection with some other allegations by former members of military Special Forces teams illustrate a fact about the MIA issue that has anguished and angered everybody who has gotten involved in it: It is a hall of mirrors where every government involved has been guilty of some deception or dereliction.

It is a subject that attracts psychopaths and heroes.

One old Asian hand, who has extensively checked Barnes' story -- and even was with him when Barnes passed a truth serum test -- says, "Some of these people are rogues, liars, adventurers and may be more interested in the possibility of scoring some drugs. But some of them also care passionately about getting the MIAs out."

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Other people are attracted by greed and there are cases where Indochinese smugglers have tried to sell POW families monkey bones as human remains; where GI dog tags have been fabricated, and in one case where a human cranium was sawed in half on the theory that two sets of bones would fetch a higher reward than one complete set.

The events around Laos, in addition to attracting all kinds of cross-border adventurers such as Barnes and his employer "Bo" Gritz, are especially susceptible to speculation and wishful thinking.

Some Americans were prisoners of war in Laos, but none were ever returned -- although nine Americans held in Laos were returned through Vietnam in 1973.

The government strongly opposes the private missions, if only because they make Laos and Vietnam less willing to deal with legitimate MIA search operations.

Richard Hebert, president of POW-MIA Accountability Inc. said in January that people involved in the free-lance forays "suffer from the Walter Mitty syndrome in pursuit of their own self-serving interests."

"Most often it is for personal financial benefit at the expense of (MIA) family members and a naive public," he said.

But those motives do not apparently explain the stories of former Special Forces Maj. Mark Smith and Lt. Col. Robert Howard. They have testified that they were assigned to such a cross-border operation by their Army superiors, and then were ordered off the assignment when Smith said he came up with evidence of Americans held in Laos.

Lt. Gen Leonard Perroots, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, has denied under oath that there was such an operation or a coverup.

But the allegations are not easily dismissed. Smith, now retired after he was passed over twice for promotion, is a former POW himself. Howard, still on active duty, holds the Medal of Honor, a decoration that he won on an attempted POW rescue mission.

The Senate subcommittee, which has been trying to chop its way through the jungle of conflicting testimony, is troubled about the direct contradiction between highly decorated combat veterans, such as Howard, and high-ranking professionals such as Perroots.

To find their way, panel members decided to have a face-to-face confrontation -- with Howard, Smith and other Special Forces men as well as the high-ranking officers -- in the next two weeks.

Now that the administration has put its weight behind the MIA issue, the Rambo raids across the borders are an embarrassment, a distraction, an obstruction to government cooperation and -- worse -- they put to risk any prisoners who might be there.