

U.S. KNEW OF POWS CAPTURED BY SOVIETS, VIETNAM VET SAYS



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U.S. KNEW OF POWS CAPTURED BY SOVIETS

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U.S. military intelligence officials often knew when and where American prisoners of war were taken from Vietnam and Cambodia to the Soviet Union but were powerless to prevent it, said a former combat photographer who now lives in Gloucester County.

Charles C. Benkert III said he helped gather and process information about U.S. POWs headed for the Soviet Union while he worked with a naval intelligence unit in Vietnam and Cambodia in 1969.

“We called them ‘MBs’ – Moscow bound,” Benkert said.

Russian president Boris Yeltsin, in the United States for a summit meeting with President Bush, said Tuesday there is a possibility some American POWs are still alive inside the former Soviet Union.

During the Vietnam War, the Soviet Union often offered cash bounties for U.S. aviators with specific skills or technical knowledge, Benkert said.

Benkert said he helped gather leaflets distributed by the Soviets. Written in Chinese, Lao and Vietnamese, they showed diagrams of specific U.S. military planes and offered cash rewards for pilots from those planes.

For example, an aviator from an A-6 Intruder – an attack jet still flown by the Navy – would have been worth up to \$5,000 if he had knowledge of the Navy’s latest radar-jamming equipment, Benkert said.

He said he developed intelligence photos that showed U.S. POWs being loaded onto a Soviet Union-bound ship in the port of Hanoi.

Other POWs were taken out of Vietnam by Soviet aircraft that had been sent in with supplies for the North Vietnamese, Benkert said.

“We had the means to stop it because we knew what the pipeline was,” Benkert said. “Nothing was ever done about it.”

Military forces were told not to intercept the POWs because officials feared an international incident with the Soviets, he said. Like others in his unit, Benkert said he assumed the issue of POWs would be taken care of once the war ended.

“We never, in our wildest dreams, imagined our government would desert these people,” Benkert said.

The Defense Department has investigated reports of American POWs in the Soviet Union in the past, but “there was no evidence found that supported those reports,” said Pentagon spokeswoman Susan Strednansky on Tuesday.

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