

Who Interrogated American Electronic Warfare Specialists in North Vietnam During the War?

The Riddle of the Task Force Russia 294 Report

By Merle L. Pribbenow

During the course of Senate hearings more than two decades ago, a major controversy erupted around allegations that a small number of Vietnam-era American prisoners of war (POWs) might have targeted by the Soviets for interrogation/exploitation—namely, POWs who had specialized in highly technical operations such as electronic warfare and electronic intelligence-gathering activities. It was even alleged that some POWs may have been spirited away to the Soviet Union so that the Soviets could take advantage of their technical knowledge and expertise. Yet, despite the sensational testimony before the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIAs in the early 1990s, and a number of books and articles published on the subject, in the end public debate subsided among all but the most fixated POW/MIA activists.[\[1\]](#)

Ironically, one of the most telling documents surfaced after the controversy was all but over. In June 1994, just one year after the Select Committee on POW/MIAs issued its [final report](#), an American investigator conducting interviews in the former Soviet Union obtained a [remarkable document](#) from a former Soviet air defense officer who had served in North Vietnam for a year (1966-1967) as a senior advisor to the North Vietnamese Air Defense Command. The investigator was working for Task Force Russia (TFR), a Department of Defense organization formed in the early 1990s to find information about American personnel missing in action (MIA) from the Korean, Vietnam, and Cold Wars. And the document he uncovered consisted of several pages of hand-written notes from the retired Soviet officer's personal notebook that recorded the results from the interrogation of Americans captured from two US aircraft shot down over North Vietnam in February 1967. The aircraft were an EB-66C, an electronic reconnaissance/electronic counter-measures aircraft that conducted long-range electronic jamming of North Vietnamese air defense radars, and an F-105F "Wild Weasel" aircraft assigned to locate and attack North Vietnamese surface-to-air missile (SAM) sites using sophisticated anti-radar Shrike missiles. The EB-66C had been shot down on 4 February

1967 and the F-105F on 18 February 1967; three of the six EB-66C crewmen were captured by the North Vietnamese, as were both of the F-105F crewmen.[\[2\]](#)

The notebook covered only 15 days in February 1967, and was just a small part of a massive journal that the Soviet officer had kept during his two-year tour in North Vietnam. The Soviet officer told the TFR investigator that he had destroyed all the other portions of his journal at the end of his tour; this particular notebook had survived purely by chance. Even then, the officer refused to give the entire notebook to the American investigator, agreeing to part only with those pages that described the take from the interrogation. The pages were translated into English and disseminated to Pentagon analysts as the "[Task Force Russia 294](#)" report or TFR 294. Eventually the translated TFR 294 document and associated cables describing the investigator's interviews with the source were declassified and posted on a Library of Congress website where they became available to the general public.[\[3\]](#)

The pages do not provide the names of the US airmen who underwent interrogation, or the identity/nationality of the interrogator. But in the initial interview of the Soviet officer and during several follow-up interviews, the Soviet officer insisted that the information had been given to him by the North Vietnamese in response to questions that the Soviets had submitted. The Soviet officer further claimed that neither he nor other Soviet officers were ever allowed to participate in interrogations of American POWs.

The TFR 294 report clearly indicates that whoever conducted the interrogations of the American prisoners must have been not only fluent in English but also very well-educated and proficient in specialized electronics/electronic warfare technical terminology. TFR 294 contains a listing of the various types of electronic warfare/electronic intelligence equipment carried on the EB-66, including the technical designation and function of the different pieces of equipment; information on the EB-66's effective jamming ranges against different types of Soviet-made radars; the different types of jamming used by the Americans (pulse, or false target jamming, targeted jamming, noise jamming, etc.); a description of the EB-66's jamming orbit pattern; and the flight formation flown by the EB-66 and its escort fighters. Similarly, the notes from the interrogation of the F-105F crewman/crewmen provide a brief description of training in the United States; a description of attack tactics and launch methods for a Shrike missile strike against a radar site; launch parameters for firing the Shrike missile; description of the composition, flight formation, and armament of the four aircraft in F-105 "Wild Weasel" flights targeted against surface-to-air missile sites; and even a brief mention of the new QRC-160 electronic jamming pod that was just starting to be used on US attack aircraft. The information is very detailed, appears to be almost entirely accurate, and would have been of considerable value to both the North Vietnamese and Soviet air forces and air defense commands. If nothing else, the TFR 294 report is clear-cut evidence that the Vietnamese shared with their Soviet liaison officers very detailed information from their interrogations of captured Americans. And this information was undoubtedly reported back to Moscow.

One reason the TFR 294 report is notable is that it represents one of the few contemporaneous documents in a sea of evidence that is otherwise mostly oral, anecdotal, or based on less than primary sources. The latter is why the elements of the intelligence community that have studied the problem remain sharply divided. Analysts in the Pentagon's Defense Prisoner of War/Missing Personnel Office (DPMO) have maintained since the Senate hearings in the early 1990s that the North Vietnamese did not allow Soviet personnel to directly participate in the interrogation of American POWs, with the exception of a single case involving a captured American civilian government employee in early 1973. However, Russian specialists assigned to the Joint Commission Support Directorate (JCSJ), a DPMO section responsible for supporting the US-Russia Joint Commission on POWs and MIAs (the direct successor organization to Task Force Russia), have consistently insisted that there is credible evidence from Russian sources, as well as from debriefings of returned American POWs, that Soviet officers did on at least a few occasions take part in the interrogation of American POWs. These conflicting views have never been resolved.^[4]

A recent JCSJ analysis, done at the author's request, names two former Soviet officers who told Task Force Russia/JCSJ investigators that they had personally interrogated POWs in North Vietnam during war. And a former Soviet officer who served in Moscow's Hanoi embassy for four years told JCSJ interviewers that he knew of two cases during the early years of the war (1965-67) when Soviet military officers were at least physically present during the interrogation of American POWs. Most significantly, a partial JCSJ review of the 1973 debriefings of former POWs after their repatriation revealed that a small but significant number reported "contact with Soviet officials during interrogation sessions."^[5]

The TFR 294 report, however, just might tilt the discussion. The first question it raises is whether the North Vietnamese ever possessed the technical competence and English-language capability to have conducted the kind of detailed technical interrogations that are evident from the report. The content does not fit into the standard description provided by released POWs, who almost universally ascribed a low level of English-language expertise and a poor educational background to their Vietnamese interrogators. Many POWs have said their captors were so ignorant and uneducated they thought US aircraft carriers had swimming pools and pens for raising live pigs and chickens to feed the ship's crew. They would also accept as true almost any false statement a prisoner provided about his aircraft, unit, or mission.^[6]

These public descriptions of North Vietnamese interrogators, however, have to be balanced against an US Air Force (USAF) study published in December 1973. This report, which reported the results of a survey of former USAF POWs, stated that the vast majority of interrogations about electronic counter-measures (ECM) operations, which would include operations involving EB-66 and F-105F "Wild Weasel" aircraft, were conducted by competent or even highly-competent North Vietnamese. If that is true, it would appear that at least some North Vietnamese interrogators had the level of expertise required to conduct the TFR 294 interrogations. This conclusion is further supported by a 1975 CIA analysis, which revealed that at least one senior interrogator, a career military

intelligence officer named Mac Lam (true name Phan Mac Lam), was not only fluent in English, but had taken courses in electronics and radar at Hanoi University's School of Engineering during the mid-to-late 1950s.[\[7\]](#)

Another piece of evidence that supports the view that the Vietnamese were capable of conducting such highly-technical interrogations is to be found in a new book published in Vietnam in 2014. This memoir, written by General Phan Thu, North Vietnam's leading electronics warfare officer during the war, includes several pages that discuss the 4 February 1967 shoot-down of an American EB-66C and information he says the North Vietnamese obtained from its captured crew. This is the same EB-66C discussed in the TFR 294 report. In addition, an official history of the North Vietnamese Air Defense Command notes that the information on US "electronic warfare" that North Vietnam obtained from the downing of this EB-66C was so important that the shoot-down was officially viewed as the Air Defense Command's "most important victory" in the first three months of 1967. The missile battalion that shot down the EB-66C was awarded North Vietnam's Combat Achievement Medal, First Class, for its accomplishment.[\[8\]](#)

General Phan Thu's memoir does not specifically refer to the interrogation of the F-105F crewmen described in TFR 294; he only alludes to the fact that information gleaned from the captured airmen helped North Vietnam analyze the capabilities of the Shrike missile and devise effective counter-measures.[\[9\]](#)

One way of resolving the question of who, in fact, conducted the interrogations described in the TFR 294 report would be to review the post-release debriefing statements provided by the five captured crewmen from the EB-66C and the F-105F aircraft. What did the crew members say about their interrogators? Unfortunately, these debriefing statements are still closely held and so highly classified that even DPMO analysts with the highest security clearances have great difficulty gaining access to them.

Informally, one of the five former prisoners involved in these two incidents has provided a possible answer to this question. Shortly after his return to the United States in 1973, one of the crewmembers of the downed F-105F, Electronics Warfare Officer Jay R. Jensen, wrote a book describing his experiences as a POW in North Vietnam. Several editions of the book, *Six Years in Hell*, have been published by Horizon Publishers in Bountiful, Utah, with the first edition appearing in 1974 and a final revised edition published in 1989 (Jensen died in 1998).

Jensen wrote that when he first arrived at Hỏa Lò Prison, the infamous jail that American POWs dubbed the "Hanoi Hilton," he was subjected to long hours of brutal physical torture by the North Vietnamese, torture that finally forced him to begin talking. Jensen wrote that when he told his North Vietnamese interrogator he had previously served with the North American Air Defense Command (NORAD), a new interrogator arrived to question him in more detail on this subject. In the early editions of his book, Jensen wrote (e.g., on page 50 of the 1978 edition) that he thought the new interrogator "might have been a Russian;" in the 1989 edition, Jensen wrote (on page 44) that the

North Vietnamese called in “an interrogator who was, I believe, a Russian.” In the earlier editions, Jensen also wrote only that the presumed Russian asked him questions about NORAD. But in later editions, Jensen provided the following additional information:

Another question they asked was about our F-105 missions. How could we find and attack their SAM sites? What electronics equipment did we have? [\[10\]](#)

These are the same questions covered in the interrogation notes that comprise the TFR 294 report. It should be emphasized that nowhere in his book(s) does Jensen ever say that he gave his interrogators the kind of detailed information conveyed in the TFR 294 report. Jensen writes only that “. . . they didn’t know very much about what they were asking for, and from then on I gave them very evasive and general answers.” He then adds, however, that “. . . the questioning went on for many more hours.” [\[11\]](#)

The fact that the US government obtained from a Soviet officer detailed notes in Russian on the interrogation would seem to constitute strong evidence, when juxtaposed with Jensen’s memoir, that at least on one occasion a Soviet officer functioned as the chief interrogator of an American POW.

The next question that must be answered is how to reconcile the TFR 294 report with extensive information about strained relations between the North Vietnamese and their Soviet military counterparts. There is ample documentation of official Soviet complaints that North Vietnam was not cooperating with Moscow’s efforts to obtain captured US military equipment, and that the North Vietnamese refused to share intelligence information they had gleaned about US military forces. Indeed, DPMO analysts often cite these tensions to support their rejection of JCSD’s contention that Soviet officers participated in the interrogation of at least a few POWs. [\[12\]](#)

While it is true that Hanoi’s relations with Moscow were strained through much of the war, beginning in late 1966 and through 1967, North Vietnam’s air defense forces experienced severe difficulties caused by new US jamming equipment. The electronic interference was blanking out North Vietnam’s Soviet-supplied radar screens and rendering its surface-to-air missiles and radar-controlled anti-aircraft guns impotent. At several points, the North Vietnamese had no choice but to request instant Soviet assistance in the development of effective counter-measures. We now know that in April 1967 North Vietnam’s Minister of Defense, General Vo Nguyen Giap, made an urgent appeal to the Soviet Defense Minister for electronic intelligence (ELINT) equipment and personnel to alleviate this problem. And a similar appeal had to be made at the end of 1968, when a new type of American electronic jamming equipment temporarily made North Vietnam’s surface-to-air missiles almost totally ineffective. [\[13\]](#)

Thus, and despite the evident strains in the relationship, the Vietnamese desperately needed Soviet assistance at times. Logic dictates that notwithstanding Soviet and Vietnamese claims to the contrary, Hanoi must have shared with Soviet specialists every scrap of actionable intelligence, down to and including what might be gleaned from

American POWs under duress. The TFR 294 report provides rather convincing evidence to support this conclusion.

It now seems highly likely that somewhere in Russia's vast trove of Soviet-era archives, information about the interrogation of American POWs exists, information that might help to resolve a number of still-unresolved MIA cases, or at least cases dating from the general period of the TFR 294 report, when the need to acquire information about US electronic warfare was particularly acute. The unresolved cases of Navy Lieutenant Michael J. Estocin, shot down on 26 April 1967, and Navy Lieutenant James K. Patterson, shot down on 19 May 1967, immediately come to mind. And even if a review of the Soviet documents failed to help resolve these MIA cases, they might at least provide some "negative" evidence about the fate of these officers.

But a new variant of the Cold War between Russia and the West makes it unlikely that lingering questions about American MIAs can be resolved.

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[1] Edward Tivnan, "[On the Trail of the MIAs](#)," *Los Angeles Times Sunday Magazine*, 27 October 1991; Barbara Crossette, "[Gulag Held MIAs, Yeltsin Suggests](#)," *New York Times*, 16 June 1992; John M. G. Brown and Thomas Ashworth, [Moscow Bound: Policy, Politics and the MIA Dilemma](#) (Eureka, CA: Veteran Press, 1993); Nigel Cawthorne, [The Bamboo Cage: The Full Story of American Servicemen Still Missing in Vietnam](#) (London: Mandarin Press: 1991); Mark Sauter and Jim Sanders, [The Men We Left Behind: Henry Kissinger, the Politics of Deceit and the Tragic Fate of POWs After the Vietnam War](#) (Washington, DC: National Press Books, 1993); Monika Jensen-Stevenson and William Stevenson, [Kiss The Boys Goodbye: How the U.S. Betrayed Its Own POWs in Vietnam](#) (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1990).

[2] The three captured EB-66C crew members were John Fer, Jack Bomar, and John Davies, while the F-105F crewmen were David Duarte and Jay R. Jensen. See Chris Hobson, [Vietnam Air Losses: United States Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps Fixed-Wing Aircraft Losses in Southeast Asia, 1961-1973](#) (Hinckley, England: Midland Publishing, 2001), 88-89.

[3] The website is "[The US-Russia Joint Commission on POWs and MIAs and the Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office Joint Commission Support Division Archival Documents Databases](#)," hosted by the Library of Congress. The TFR 294 document is [here](#).

[4] Email from Robert Destatte/DPMO analyst to author, 19 April 2014, “Talking Points on Soviet-Vietnamese Relations” 16 September 1996; US House of Representatives, Committee on National Security, *Accounting for POW/MIAs from the Korean War and the Vietnam War*, (Washington, DC, GPO, 1997), 165. See also US Senate, [Report of the Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs](#) (Washington, DC: GPO, 1993), 444; Emails from JCSD to author, May-July 2014.

[5] Email from Danz Blasser/Joint Support Directorate/DPMO to author, 16 July 2014; American Embassy Moscow 33784, 9 December 1996, Subject: [Joint Commission Support Directorate-Moscow Interview with Vietnam War Veteran \[name redacted\]](#). The sample review of approximately 25 percent of the debriefings of all returned American POWs (147 out of a total of 591 former POWs) revealed that five of these returnees (about three percent) had “reported contact with Soviet officials during interrogation sessions.”

[6] Stuart I. Rochester and Frederick Kiley, [Honor Bound: The History of American Prisoners of War in Southeast Asia, 1961-1973](#) (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 1998), 92, 146, 168; James H. Warner, [“Dispelling Internet Rumors About John McCain,”](#) FrontPageMagazine.com, 5 February 2008; Peter Brookes, [“The Rule of Pain,”](#) *Chicago Tribune*, 9 May 2004.

[7] Email from George J. Veith to author, 19 April 2014, Headquarters USAF Analysis Program for Southeast Asia (SEA) Prisoner-of-War (PW) Experience Program, “North Vietnamese Intelligence Collection Activity Against USAF Prisoners-of-War in Southeast Asia,” Report No. 700/JF-1, December 1973. Out of a total of 57 reported cases of interrogations on ECM subject matter, the competence of the North Vietnamese interrogators in the subject matter was rated as “high” in ten cases and as “medium” (or average) in 37 cases.

Declassified CIA analytical report, [“The Responsibilities of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam Intelligence and Security Services in the Exploitation of American Prisoners of War,”](#) 1975, CIA-750161-200A, 37, Texas Tech University, [The Vietnam Center and Archive](#), Item No. 11270323005. Mac Lam’s experiences as a wartime POW interrogator are the subject of a recent book published by the Vietnamese Army’s official publishing house: Nguyễn Ngọc Phúc, *Nhà tình báo và những tù binh phi công [The Intelligence Officer and the Pilot Prisoners of War]* (Hanoi: People’s Army Publishing House, 2009).

[8] Lieutenant General Phan Thu, *Cuộc đối đầu không cân sức [The Unequal Contest]* (Hanoi: Tre Publishing House, 2014), 25-28.

Air Defense-Air Force Service, *Lịch sử Quân chủng phòng không, tập II [History of the Air Defense Service, Volume II]* (Hanoi: People’s Army Publishing House, 1993), 125.

[9] *Ibid*, 121.

[10] Lieutenant Colonel Jay R. Jensen, [*Six Years In Hell*](#) (Bountiful, Utah: Horizon Publishers, 1989), 44.

[11] Ibid. It should be noted that the information in TFR 294 on the composition and armament of a four-aircraft F-105 “Wild Weasel” flight is identical to the information on this subject found on pages 6 and 7 of the 1989 edition of Jensen’s *Six Years in Hell*.

[12] Translation of 28 July 1966 Soviet Embassy Hanoi cable to Moscow found in TFR 440, accessed at [POW/MIA Databases & Documents](#), Library of Congress; American Embassy Moscow 33784, *ibid.*; Ilya Gaiduk, [*The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War*](#) (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996), 71-72.

[13] Merle Pribbenow, “[The –Ology War: Technology and Ideology in the Vietnamese Defense of Hanoi, 1967](#),” *Journal of Military History*, January 2003, 175-200.

5 May 1967 entry in *Biên niên sự kiện Bộ tổng tham mưu trong kháng chiến chống Mỹ 1954-1975* [*Chronology of Events: The General Staff During the Resistance War Against the Americans 1954-1975*], accessed [here](#); General Department of National Defense and Economic Industries, *Biên niên sự kiện: Lịch Sử Quân giới Việt Nam* [*Chronology of Events: History of Vietnam’s Ordnance*] (Hanoi: People’s Army Publishing House, 1997), 238-239.

General Nguyễn Xuân Mậu, *Bảo vệ bầu trời* [*Defending the Skies*] (Hanoi: People’s Army Publishing House, 1982), 161; General Department of National Defense and Economic Industries, *Chronology of Events: History of Vietnam’s Ordnance*, 263-264.