

The POW/MIA Issue as Ideology: *Autonomic Certainty*, the League of Families, and the US

National Security State, 1968-1992

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Abstract

This paper combines novel archival research with a re-reading of the existing documentary record to reframe and investigate “the POW/MIA issue” as an ideological phenomenon. Prior research on the POW/MIA issue, or the widespread, persistent belief that US prisoners of war were secretly held in Vietnamese custody for years after the official 1973 prisoner swap, treats its persistence as the outcome of voluntarist factors like fraud and gullibility or the energy and innovation of grassroots activists. In contrast, this thesis argues that the issue's persistence in American political discourse is an artifact of the US national security state's ideological functions. It accomplishes this argument by first casting the National League of Families of Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia as an ideological state apparatus, then demonstrates that the League modeled a specific kind of state-sanctioned POW/MIA subjectivity organized through the feeling I call *autonomic certainty*, or the use of intense feeling as proof in-and-of-itself. The POW/MIA activism of Ann Fischer, a rank-and-file League member from Madison, WI, stands as an example of *autonomic certainty* in action. Ann’s brother, US Marine Richard W. Fischer, was declared MIA in Vietnam in 1968, sending members of the Fischer family into a years-long quest to prove he was alive in captivity. Meanwhile, the Department of Defense withheld convincing wartime evidence that Richard Fischer was killed and buried on the day he disappeared. This thesis is the first piece of POW/MIA literature to stake its claims with DOD case files relating to a POW/MIA.

*For you don't count the dead
When God's on your side.*

–Bob Dylan, With God on Our Side, 1964

1. Introduction

Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, claims that as many as 2505 American prisoners of war (POWs) languished in secret, illegal custody in Southeast Asia, particularly in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV), persisted in mainstream US political discourse for at least two decades after the US formally withdrew from the Vietnam War. These claims persisted in mainstream discourse because the US national security state supported the material infrastructure that circulated and amplified these claims. Prior studies of this phenomenon, typically shorthanded as “the POW/MIA issue,”¹ do not properly for account the persistence of “live POW” claims because their explanations look toward individual-level moral factors of those most closely involved in the POW/MIA issue, either bureaucrats’ and activists’ powers of deception on the one hand² or activists’ determination and public relations guile on the other.³ In contrast, this paper frames the persistence of live POW claims as an ideological phenomenon. By ideological phenomenon, I mean that the material framework that upheld and amplified false ideas about American POWs in Southeast Asia was built and maintained by the US national security state as a means of obfuscating social contradictions inherent to the Vietnam War – both its wartime brutality abroad and enormous postwar economic consequences at home.⁴ In both war and peace, the National League of Families of Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia, an ostensibly non-governmental organization dedicated to retrieving POWs, was the national security state’s tool for accomplishing this obfuscation. In reviving the League of Families’

1 The term “POW/MIA issue” can refer to the forensic issue of whether and how to locate, exhume, and positively identify the remains of missing US soldiers in Southeast Asia, or the diplomatic issue of how this forensic process can proceed through international relations between former belligerents. For simplicity, this paper uses “POW/MIA issue” as synonymous with the belief in or claim of living POWs held in illegal captivity.

2 Franklin, *Mythmaking in America*.

3 Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*.

4 For example, Franklin makes the point that the POW/MIA propaganda campaign emerged shortly after the US domestic press revealed the inhumane treatment of North Vietnamese POWs. Franklin, *Mythmaking in America*, chap. 2. Framing the POW/MIA issue through the concept of *ideology*, which posits the issue’s emergence and persistence as an outcome of conflicting material social forces, is an attempt to elevate this insight to a higher level of generalization.

media profile and political prominence in the postwar period, the national security state made it possible for live POW claims to circulate throughout mainstream political discourse, while the League sharpened a set of idiosyncratic interpretive practices that justified such claims.

The hand of the security state explains *why* these claims persisted, while the League of Families' operations explains *how* ideological obfuscation was carried out. The bulk of this paper investigates the latter dynamic through a close reading of the League's semi-monthly newsletters and a set of government and personal documents related to Ann Fischer, a rank-and-file League activist from Madison, Wisconsin, and her brother, Richard W. Fischer, a US Marine declared MIA in 1968, exhumed in 1994, and positively identified in 2007.⁵ These newsletters, investigatory case files on Richard Fischer, and notes and speeches written by Ann Fischer demonstrate that the League's real work was the production of state-sanctioned subjectivity, rather than advocacy on behalf of families. In my interpretation, the League organized this subjectivity through a feeling I call *autonomic certainty*.

Autonomic certainty is a synonym of felt conviction. But if any conviction is the result of a judgment, the *autonomic certainty* is the conviction rendered through a judgment whose history can only be discerned through its affective, bodily trace. When one is autonomically certain, they are not working through a proposition with the use of their body, as we might do with a hunch, an inkling, or a strange feeling in the pit of the stomach; they are certain because the physical sensation is taken as proof that the evaluation has taken place and come up positive. *Autonomic certainty's* substitution of quantitative intensity for the actual work of qualitative evaluation results in a tautological spiral where any sensation can register as direct proof of the underlying proposition's truth value. This attempt to name the feeling evoked

5 See Appendix I for an overview of the League of Families newsletter corpus used in this thesis. See Appendix II for an overview of archival documents relating to Ann and Richard Fischer. Appendix II, Table 2 provides a timeline of the Fischer case.

through and modeled in League practices is meant to frame their claims as something more than *merely* faulty or mistaken thinking and understand how and why it hooked rank-and-file members and broader audiences alike. As we will see, especially in the case of Ann Fischer and her mother, Eleanor, interpreting POW/MIA evidence through *autonomic certainty* transformed the feelings of loss into a melancholic hope for the return of a loved one.

But, first, one should head into a discussion of the POW/MIA issue with some facts about Vietnam War casualties and the League's history in hand. The US military formally withdrew from the Vietnam War in 1973, and the war between communist forces and US client governments in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam ended in 1975. The struggle against French and then US imperialism cost Vietnam alone over 3 million soldiers and civilians; 300,000 missing soldiers; and an uncountable number of missing civilians. In comparison, 2505 US soldiers did not return from the war in Southeast Asia, the smallest number of missing US soldiers after any 20th century interstate war excluding only the 1991 Gulf War.⁶ The vast majority, about 81 percent, of missing US soldiers were airmen lost through shoot-downs, weather-related accidents, equipment malfunction, or pilot error. Many were lost over inhospitable terrain like jungles, mountains, or open ocean. In many cases, one could reasonably assume pilot, crew, and passengers perished in the course of the incident, but they were carried as Missing In Action (MIA) rather than the more plausible category of Killed In Action/Body Not Recovered (KIA/BNR) because recovery operations were difficult or impossible and because there was no direct eyewitness to the crash, or, in some cases, because the eyewitness did not directly observe a dead body.⁷

6 For example, Korean War produced almost four times as many missing US soldiers, estimated to be around 8000, while the Second World War ended with 78,000 and 8500 recovered but unidentified Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 101–2.

7 Clarke, *The Missing Man*, chap. 3.

Of course, some of the missing, airmen and infantry alike, were indeed taken prisoner. 766 American soldiers and airmen are known to have been captured in the course of the war,⁸ and, if they did not perish in captivity or were not released early for political reasons, these soldiers were released in a prisoner swap negotiated in accordance with the Paris Peace Accords signed in January 1973. 591 American POWs were remanded into US military custody in an official prisoner release the US military dubbed “Operation Homecoming.” At least 935 North Vietnamese Army and National Liberation Front POWs were flown from Saigon to Hanoi,⁹ the barest sliver of the estimated 40,000 POWs held by South Vietnam.¹⁰

Former US Marine Robert Garwood is the only American POW to return alive to the US after 1973, and his case appears to be the exception that proves the rule. Garwood was captured by communist guerrillas in 1965 and defected to the National Liberation Front in 1967. He returned to the US in March 1979, where the hero’s welcome envisioned by “live POW” hardliners like the League of Families turned into a court martial and guilty verdict for collaboration with the enemy.¹¹ Aside from Garwood, the only US soldiers to return from Southeast Asia after Operation Homecoming are the 1062 soldiers whose remains have been positively identified by the US military’s Central Identification Laboratory (CIL) and an unknown number whose remains have been recovered but not yet identified. Today, 1584 US soldiers are still missing, 488 of whom have been deemed unrecoverable.¹² The US and its former enemies have formally collaborated on remains recovery since the 1980s, with US missing receiving the lion’s share of attention. The SRV has its own unilateral effort to locate missing Vietnamese soldiers, and thousands of surviving family members have conducted their

8 Marsh, “POWs in American History.”

9 Associated Press, “N. Vietnamese POWs Get No Bands, Cheers.”

10 This number excludes the tens of thousands of political prisoners held by South Vietnam. Appy, *Patriots*, 221–22. It is not clear to me how many South Vietnamese POWs were held by the North at this point in the war.

11 Solis, *Marines And Military Law In Vietnam: Trial By Fire*, 223–30.

12 Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, “Statistics.”

own investigations. The number of unrecovered Vietnamese soldiers remains well over 300,000.¹³

The accumulated evidence tends overwhelmingly toward the inference that US soldiers still missing after Operation Homecoming perished in the course of the war, yet many Americans came to believe that POWs languished in Southeast Asia long after POWs were released. The assumption that some of the missing survived after the war is in some part a logical outgrowth of the US national security state's wartime propaganda, which cast doubt on prisoner lists released by North Vietnam, inflated the perceived number of American POWs through bureaucratic and rhetorical chicanery, and framed POW safety as a reason to continue rather than end the war.¹⁴ But the mid- and late-1970s prove that these claims could not survive without institutional material amplification. In this period, circulation of the "live POW" narrative was limited to the League and its handful of allies in congress and the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA). They justified these claims through dubious, circumstantial "POW live sightings" solicited from Southeast Asian refugees. In 1979, with official negotiations between the US and SRV broken off due to the latter's invasion of Cambodia, and the Carter administration focused on the Iran hostage crisis, the League and its allies accomplished a feat of bureaucratic maneuvering that folded the League into a semi-official policy-making capacity and, consequently, shifted the executive branch's official position on live POWs in their favor. But the full turn in state support did not come until Ronald Reagan took office. Under Reagan, the DIA had the executive's full support in pursuing its "POW live sighting" investigations, and a sitting US president endorsed the underlying live POW proposition in 1983 when Reagan told

13 Babcock, "Vietnam's Sad Hunt."

14 The propaganda dimensions of the POW/MIA issue were first covered by Hersh, "POW Propaganda War Was Numbers Game"; Schell, *The Time of Illusion*. The postwar persistence of the POW/MIA issue is tied to this wartime propaganda campaign, in one way or another, by Franklin, *Mythmaking in America*; Franklin, *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies*; Appy, *Patriots*, 470–71; Zaretsky, *No Direction Home: The American Family and the Fear of National Decline*, chap. 1; Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*; Perlstein, *The Invisible Bridge*.

assembled League members that “respected figures in the intelligence community reached personal conclusions that these reports [of live POWs] were credible, even though the circumstances of sighting prevented confirmation.”¹⁵

In the early 1980s, live POW claims metastasized into a doctrine of civil religion and a hallmark of popular culture. The League-designed POW/MIA flag – the black standard that reads “You Are Not Forgotten” below the silhouette of a downcast POW surveilled by a prison camp watchtower – became a ubiquitous piece of state ritual, flying over the White House, inside the Capitol rotunda, and above thousands of public buildings and military installations; celebrities and military leaders appeared in League-produced PSAs about live POWs; and arch-POW/MIA crank Bo Gritz, a retired Green Beret who claimed to have been issued a secret, off-the-books mission to prove the existence of live POWs, received, among other radiant media coverage, a glowing front-page feature in the *Chicago Tribune*¹⁶ and inspired a micro-genre of POW/MIA action films.¹⁷ In point of fact, claims about live POWs came to be taken so seriously that the Vietnam War Memorial, completed in 1982, has always had a procedure for marking a name with a special symbol if that soldier returns home alive, though it has never been used. By 1991, almost 70 percent of Americans believed American POWs were held alive in captivity in Southeast Asia.¹⁸

This paper’s main argumentative claims are confined to statements about the League of Families, its relationship to official organs of the US national security state, and the kind of subjectivity it modeled for rank-and-file members, but all these claims advance under the speculative supposition that the POW/MIA issue was a fantasy through which many Americans,

15 “Draft Presidential Remarks: National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia.”

16 Keegan, “Tale of an Ex-Green Beret’s Search for MIAs.”

17 These films are *Uncommon Valor* (1983) starring Gene Hackman, *Missing in Action* (1984) and its sequels starring Chuck Norris, and *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985) starring Sylvester Stallone.

18 *Wall Street Journal*/NBC News poll cited in Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 2.

not only those directly related to the missing, could continually play out the war's traumatic aspects as presently ongoing but manageable problems. Historians have not been blind to the POW/MIA issue's fantastic elements, but they have not yet considered that this dynamic is key to understanding its material history, especially its relationship to the state. H. Bruce Franklin formally labels the issue as a "myth," but ultimately attributes its discursive staying power to "elaborate fraud."¹⁹ Michael Allen recognizes that "[t]alk about lost warriors became a way to talk about a lost war," but he incorrectly frames the League and the security state as fundamentally separate entities. This paper, on the other hand, will argue that the League and its work of constructing a durable POW/MIA fantasy were never entirely independent from the US national security state and, furthermore, that interpretive practices developed by the League complemented selective disclosures of evidence from the Department of Defense. This combined operation steered League members, and mainstream American audiences by way of League "activism," away from the conclusion that all POW/MIAs were deceased and toward the belief that any missing soldier might still be found alive.

Framing the POW/MIA issue history with the armature of *ideology*, in a distinctly Marxist sense of the term, is my path to accomplishing this argument. The Marxist conception of ideology develops out of a fractious literature,²⁰ but at root the concept always points us toward studying social action and ideas as overlapping domains. Indeed, I will label the National League of Families as an *ideological state apparatus*, or an organ of the state that shapes subjective perceptions, notions, ideas, beliefs, and feelings about the world toward the ends of capitalist

19 Franklin, *Mythmaking in America*. Franklin's later work correctly diagnoses the POW/MIA fantasy as "displacing onto Vietnam the source of the imprisonment, powerlessness, and alienation felt by many Americans in an epoch when alien economic, technological, and bureaucratic forces dominate much of their lives," but it takes the issue's "psychocultural" resonance for granted. In contrast, I am trying to document the national security state's concrete connections to the construction of political fantasy. Franklin, *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies*, 189–90.

20 Rehmann, *Theories of Ideology*.

circulation.²¹ The use of the ideological state apparatus is warranted because the League's wartime genesis and its heady 1980s revival were both the result of national security state action. My treatment of the League's postwar form breaks with the prevailing academic history of the League. The League's roots as a wartime propaganda tool are the subject of consensus, because the documentary record unambiguously demonstrates that security state bureaucrats collaborated across departments to create a shared consciousness among the families of POW and MIA casualties, solicited their membership to the nascent League of Families, and allocated necessary material resources like office space, phone lines, and mailing lists.²² But Michael Allen's authoritative history of the POW/MIA issue treats the League as independent from the state in the postwar period and argues that independent League activism, particularly their exploitation of refugee "live sightings," successfully reignited security state investment in the issue. In contrast to Allen's interpretation, I will argue there never a clear separation between the League and the formal organs of the national security state when it came to exploiting refugees as a potential source of POW/MIA information. Diplomatic cables demonstrate that State officials were collecting POW/MIA testimony from refugees at least a year before the League began its own program. More importantly, the Defense Intelligence Agency made it possible for the League to exploit the single most politically consequential testimony, that of Tran Vien Loc, in 1979.

Reframing the League of Families as an ideological organ of the US national security state clears the way for an exploration of how its interpretive scheme evoked *autonomic certainty* with regard to the live POW proposition. The very term *autonomic certainty* arises from my corpus of semi-monthly League newsletters, distributed to members through the mail between 190 and 1994. Here we find the League constantly "urging" – their favorite imperative – rank-

21 Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)."

22 Franklin, *Mythmaking in America*; Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*; Perlstein, *The Invisible Bridge*.

and-file members to actualize their belief in live POWs, while simultaneously deflecting members away from reflective, ambivalent encounters with their grief. As I will argue later, the sum total of this perverse operation, tracked across general rhetorical patterns and discrete examples of aversion to or manipulation of evidence, was the production of a state-sanctioned POW/MIA subjectivity that rested on mistaking the feelings of loss for a kind of positive evidence that a missing loved one remained alive in captivity.

The second set of documents, those related to Ann and Richard Fischer, close the loop around the League, official security state organs, and a POW/MIA family. They also proves the bitter irony of that the hardest line on POW/MIAs – that the US government knows more about the whereabouts of the missing than it has admitted. Ann Fischer spent the 1980s stumping for the League of Families at various veterans' and memorial events around her state of Wisconsin, but came to espouse exactly that hardline stance in the early 1990s out of frustration with the League's close relationship with the security state. The real tragedy of her activism, however, is that it was structured from the very beginning through selective revelations and dubious readings of evidence regarding her brother's fate. When Richard Fischer's case received sustained forensic investigation in 1992, a joint US-SRV team returned no evidence he survived a day past his disappearance. Instead, they in fact confirmed a narrative available in the original 1968 on-site investigation but written-off by his commanding officer and a military intelligence investigator: that he had been shot and buried within hours of his disappearance. Worse still, US military intelligence obtained detailed eyewitness testimony that supported this narrative in 1970 but withheld it from the Fischer family until 1999 at the earliest. Meanwhile, Ann and Eleanor Fischer, League members who received the organization's newsletter and attended at least one national event, acted out the conviction that Richard Fischer and other missing soldiers remained alive in captivity, somewhere in Vietnam.

Both of these sets of documents represent novel contributions of some kind to literature on the POW/MIA issue. Prior studies have cited League newsletters as evidence for historical claims,²³ but this paper is the first to present a close reading of the work done by newsletters based on a nearly complete corpus. The documents related to Richard Fischer represent something entirely novel to the literature. Never before has a study of the POW/MIA issue tracked a case in such close detail, following what and when the Department of Defense learned about an MIA against what information and evidence it divulged to the family, when it was divulged, and how it was framed. General information, including descriptive statistics, about these documents and selected excerpts can be found in the attached appendices.²⁴

The remainder of this paper proceeds in five sections. Section 2 reviews scholarship on the POW/MIA issue, introduces Marxist literature on *ideology*, and defines the term “US national security state.” Section 3 develops a general argument about the historical forces that contoured the POW/MIA issue, then scopes this argument to specific claims defended in subsequent sections. Section 4 provides an abbreviated narrative history of the League of Families from its origins in the late 1960s through its 1980s revival and political sunset in the early 1990s, with an eye trained toward reinterpreting the League’s relationship to the security state in the crucial late 1970s period. Section 5 presents my systematic reading and interpretation of League of Families newsletters, and Section 6 details how selective disclosures of information and the interpretive practices endorsed by the League informed Ann Fischer’s conclusion that Richard Fischer survived in captivity. The conclusion covers shortcoming to my argument and closes with a brief discussion of the POW/MIA issue as the political use of grief.

23 Franklin, *Mythmaking in America*; Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*.

24 League of Families newsletters are covered in Appendix 1. The Fischer case files and family documents are covered in Appendix 2.

2. Literature Review

Any contemporary study of the POW/MIA issue extends from the work done by H. Bruce Franklin's *M.I.A., or Mythmaking in America* and Michael Allen's *Until the Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Unending Vietnam War*. These books provide access to the rich documentary record necessary for unlocking the puzzle of why live POW claims persisted in American political discourse for so long, but their arguments hang upon an implicit methodological individualism that emphasizes the actors involved with the issue, which bars either investigation from grasping why the issue persisted and, furthermore, how it operated. Framing the POW/MIA issue through the concept of ideology, on the other hand, calls us to examine the interplay between social structure and perceptions of the world. This section reviews these two literatures in turn, beginning with Franklin and Allen before glossing Marx and Engels's text *The German Ideology* and Louis Althusser's essay. It ends by clarifying what I mean by "US national security state."

H. Bruce Franklin's *M.I.A., or Mythmaking in America* and Michael Allen's *Until the Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Unending Vietnam War* are the two books most necessary to understanding the origins and history of the POW/MIA issue.²⁵ Franklin's *M.I.A., or Mythmaking in America* lives up to its polemical title. Published in 1992, Franklin's book is explicitly styled as an intervention into the contemporaneous political debate on the POW/MIA issue incited by televised hearings of the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs. Though popular in aim, *Mythmaking in America* merits careful attention because it assiduously catalogs of the development of the POW/MIA issue during and after the war. From this first

25 Other academic work devoted wholly to the POW/MIA issue include Thomas Clarke early investigation of the political history of the issue; Thomas Hawley's interpretation of the discursive construction of the materiality of POW/MIAs; and Sarah Wagner's anthropological study of family members' relationship with forensic science. Neither puzzles over the *why* of the issue's persistence. Clarke, *The Missing Man*; Hawley, *The Remains of War Bodies, Politics, and the Search for American Soldiers Unaccounted For in Southeast Asia*; Wagner, *What Remains*.

attempt to corral the documentary record emerges the substantive argument that the issue originated with a wartime propaganda campaign and was perpetuated into the 1990s by self-interested activists, unscrupulous bureaucrats, and a cottage industry of conspiratorial pulp writing.

The broad strokes of this argument are empirically correct, but the pejorative use of *myth* as a central organizing concept severely limits Franklin's explanation of the issue. He writes, "A good working definition of myth is a story that is the core of someone else's religion. Or, put more bluntly, myth is the essence of a religion in which you don't believe." This belief, according to Franklin, must be "essentially implausible and nonrational to nonbelievers" in order to be a myth, "for its powers derive from its defiance and transcendence of perceived reality." This framing collapses the structure of POW/MIA belief into a simple inability to grasp "perceived reality and ordinary thinking" – to see through an issue Franklin himself describes elsewhere in the text as "an elaborate fraud." This myth/fraud framing reduces the puzzle of POW/MIA issue persistence to faulty thinking.²⁶

Michael Allen's *Until the Last Man Comes Home* handles the case with defter interpretation. The product of years of research combining extensive archival work with interviews of key figures, Allen first situates the POW/MIA issue within the broader international history of missing and imprisoned American soldiers from World War II onward as well as its national history of US state policy toward casualties of war, then delivers a richly detailed chapter-by-chapter history of the issue's wartime and postwar development. This kind of dense contextualizing is a singular contribution to our understanding of the POW/MIA issue and

26 To be as fair as possible, one should recognize Franklin's employment of myth as an attempt to translate for a popular audience a term of art used by Joseph Campbell, James Frazer, Carl Jung, Richard Slotkin (who Franklin cites), and many others, but his reduction of myth to the obliquely pejorative status of "someone else's religion" confounds rather than succeeds in translating a term used to signify, whether or good or for ill, a universal element of human experience.

underwrites one of the book's major contribution. By situating the late-war POW/MIA propaganda campaign within an already ongoing moral struggle over POWs, a front on which Southeast Asian communists and domestic US antiwar activists took an early lead over the security state, Allen demonstrates that POW/MIA chicanery did not emerge whole cloth from the moral vacuum we call the Nixon administration.²⁷

The book's core argument, however, hinges on an untenable separation of the National League Families and US state as discrete entities. As Allen argues, "it was the families of the missing, particularly those active in the National League of Families, who were responsible for the stubborn persistence of the postwar account effort." And it was these families' rhetorical guile that achieved success: "By presenting the nation's failure in Vietnam as a private trauma, League families illustrated the costs of defeat in terms that were easily grasped and difficult to refute, giving them unrivaled authority in debates about the war." Their exploitation of refugee live sightings were particularly important to activists "politics of loss," or the effort to censure an expansive Cold War state: "after Vietnam the state's obligations to and responsibility for the war dead were made an indictment of a government grown too powerful for the good of its people."²⁸ In other words, these activists struggled and succeeded to nudge the state from below. Allen's argument is supported with formidable archival detail and therefore requires counter-argument at length, which I provide in Section 4. For now, suffice to say that Allen miscasts a temporary, incomplete break between the League of Families and security state in the immediate postwar as a permanent rift.

Where Franklin and Allen see individual moral factors like deception and determination motoring the POW/MIA issue's persistence through the 1980s into the 1990s, Marxist literature on ideology points us toward social structure and the hand of the state. The

27 Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, chap. 1.

28 Preceding quotes in Allen, 4–5, 8–9.

Marxist use of ideology originates with a circa 1848 manuscript by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels published as *The German Ideology* in 1932.²⁹ In this text, ideology denotes a specific kind of distortion in consciousness which conceals the material basis for ruling class domination.³⁰ This usage follows from two premises: first, that individual being is always social being, by virtue of the fact that the materials necessary for human life must be produced and reproduced socially; and second, that any given individual's ideas are "sublimates of their material life-process." "[T]heir ideas are the conscious expression—real or illusory—of their real relations and activities of their production, of their intercourse, of their social and political conduct." *Ideological* ideas are the result of individuals' "limited material mode of activity and their limited social relations arising from it,"³¹ and as such distort their bearer's understanding of their own and others' social being. White supremacist ideology, for example, always entails an essentialist premise that 'naturalizes' the social division of labor and corresponding political arrangements as the expression of an underlying moral or biological fact.³² Crucially, ideological ideas are not mere negative "illusion" in the sense of a cognitive mistake or falsehood that can be dispelled through correction; ideology's "illusions" have positive existence in "limited social relations" and thus can only be remedied by altering one's social relations. For Marx and Engels, this conception of ideology grounds their critique of "the German ideology" in question³³ and its inability to grasp the social division of labor as an objective feature of human history with legible

29 For an overview of the publication history of *The German Ideology*, see Carver and Blank, *A Political History of the Editions of Marx and Engels's "German Ideology Manuscripts."*

30 Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*. Other, non-Marxist uses of ideology in contemporary literature build on the concept of legitimacy found in Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretative Sociology*, Vol. 1. For a Marxist rebuttal of this approach see Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*. For a recent and incredibly thorough overview of ideology literature, Marxist and non-Marxist alike, see Rehmann, *Theories of Ideology*. My reading of *The German Ideology* is most influenced by Chilean social scientist Jorge Larrain, who defined Marx and Engels's use of the term ideology in this text thus: "ideology refers to a limited material practice which generates ideas that misrepresent social contradictions in the interest of the ruling class." Larrain, *Marxism and Ideology*, 27.

31 Preceding ideas and quotes found in Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 41–43.

32 Fields, "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America."

33 Specifically the ideas of Ludwig Feuerbach, Bruno Bauer, and Max Stirner.

effects on the history of philosophy. For this paper, it grounds the move to overcome any explanation of the POW/MIA issue that reduces it to sadly mistaken thinking and search for issue's real power within social life.

Louis Althusser's work on ideology shifts the analytical focus from a materialist theory of ideas to a materialist theory of subjectivity, or ways of being in and making sense of the world, and the state's role in propagating subjectivities conducive to the realization of surplus value. In Althusser's enormously influential formulation, "Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence."³⁴ Two points follow. The first is that concrete individuals bear these representations as subject positions actualized in moments of recognition – moments Althusser terms *interpellation*. His famous example of a policeman hailing an individual on the street captures the everyday nature of this dynamic: the policeman calls, "Hey, you there!", and the individual, despite the lack of a concrete reference that points specifically to them, knows they are the one addressed.³⁵

Althusser's second point is that moments of *interpellation* must be made possible through material frameworks – thus, his notion of the "ideological state apparatus." This state organ, which takes the form of civil society institutions like schools and churches, compliments the state's repressive apparatuses (police, prisons, courts, etc.) by cultivating subordinate subjectivities. Put another way, civil society institutions have a theoretically tractable role not only in producing economically necessary skills but also in shaping individuals' understandings of their relation to impersonal social structures like private property.³⁶ With this material

34 Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," 162. This specific formulation reflects Althusser's engagement with Lacanian psychoanalysis. Because the value-added of reviewing Althusser for this essay is his insight into the state's relationship to ideology, I will not elaborate on his specific formulation of the concept and its critical relationship to Marx's writing in *The German Ideology*.

35 Althusser, 174.

36 Put in more theoretical terms, Althusser's point is that the state must not only reproduce the forces of production through educating its workforce in necessary skills but also reproduces the relations of production by naturalizing capitalist social relations through ideology. Althusser, 174.

framework in place, the state can hail individuals into the subjectivities (e.g., citizen, soldier, worker, criminal) that maintain capitalist relations and the continuous realization of surplus-value.

This paper will argue that the National League of Families served as just such an ideological state apparatus for the US national security state. By “US national security state,” I mean the historic form taken by the US state in the post-World War II era, so called after the National Security Act of 1947 that reorganized the state’s foreign policy and military institutions. This state form’s chief characteristic is the permanent entrenchment of industrialized military armaments production,³⁷ and its concrete form is the ensemble of bureaucratic institutions, legislative bodies, armed forces (state-owned and private), private firms, and public advocacy groups that sustain “national security” as a realm of value realization.³⁸ Althusser’s writing on ideological state apparatuses offers no test for identifying the state’s ideological organs, though his emphasis on civil society institutions tends toward the conclusion that ideological state apparatuses exist whenever and wherever the modern state form prevails. That said, my argument for framing the League of Families an ideological organ of the US state will proceed on narrow empirical grounds: Because the state formed this organization and made its 1980s political revival possible, the League of Families served as an ideological organ of the national security state from its inception in 1969-1970 at least until the early 1990s.

Although *The German Ideology* and Althusser’s essay on ideology are not typically read in concert,³⁹ this essay takes something useful from both rather than adjudicating between

37 Hogan, *A Cross of Iron*; Sparrow, *Warfare State*; Thorpe, *The American Warfare State*.

38 Short-handing the national security state as a unitary actor as I do throughout reduces out the tumultuous bureaucratic, legislative, and civil conflict that accompanied post-WWII state transformations and continues to shape it. However, I am not without warrant for treating the security state as an entity organized through and around economic activity: Rebecca Thorpe demonstrates that local domestic economies’ dependence on military spending has transformed the US legislature’s power of the purse into a bipartisan incentive to protect and expand permanent military spending. Thorpe, *The American Warfare State*.

39 Althusser himself directs withering criticism at the early Marx’s conception of ideology on the basis that it does not escape the notion of ideology as pure illusion. Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses

the two. If one takes the POW/MIA issue to be an artifact of ideology in the sense used by Marx and Engels, as something that is at once immanent to the social division of labor but distorts that division, then we are led to a general hypothesis about the POW/MIA issue's origins and revival: it arose out of the social relations inherent to the Vietnam War and its aftermath. This kind of far-reaching hypothesis cannot be substantiated in this paper, but it is useful insofar as it calls us to contextualize the POW/MIA issue within a matrix of material forces. Althusser's twin insights – that its operative site under contemporary capitalism is state practice and that its operative product is subjectivity – sharpen the investigation with a more narrow hypothesis: what we call “the POW/MIA issue” is used by the US security state to inculcate a specific POW/MIA subjectivity. More will be said in Section 3 about the usefulness and limitations of the first, general hypothesis and the theoretical tools that will be used to pursue the second, narrow hypothesis, but whether one approaches the issue from the early Marx or from Althusser, the underlying point remains the same: the POW/MIA issue cannot be understood without reference to social structure. This emphasis on the centrality of social structure and relations is precisely what differentiates this study from prior investigations of the POW/MIA issue.

3. The POW/MIA Issue as Ideology

This paper's two central theses are 1) the POW/MIA issue was an ideological product of the US security state and 2) POW/MIA subjectivity was organized through the feeling *autonomic certainty*. Given the review of ideology literature, a general Marxist hypothesis about the POW/MIA issue's origin might be something like: The POW/MIA issue was a distortion of the social relations that made possible and maintained US involvement in the Vietnam War. This hypothesis would require a great deal of theoretical elaboration and empirical followup not

(Notes towards an Investigation),” 159–60, 163–64.

possible within the bounds of this paper. That said, considering this hypothesis in a stylized manner alerts us to the forces that contoured the US state's employment of the POW/MIA issue. Althusser's insights bring us to a more manageable hypothesis: the US security state fostered and maintained the POW/MIA issue as a means of securing subordination. Pursuing this more specified hypothesis means demonstrating that the National League of Families served as an ideological state apparatus and interpreting how its work actualized subordinate subjects. The rest of this section plants the stakes for such an investigation by historicizing the POW/MIA issue through the first, general hypothesis, scoping the investigation's focus to the National League of Families as an ideological state apparatus, and laying out the interpretive tools I will use to sound out *autonomic certainty* as the core of POW/MIA subjectivity.

What did the national security state need from the POW/MIA issue? Answering this question requires contextualizing the issue within a broad historical period in which the US national security state needed to manage interconnected sets of problems spanning both sides of the Paris Peace Accords. If ideological ideas emerge out of conflicts within the social division of labor, then the POW/MIA issue's origins are found somewhere within the conflicts immanent to the United States' means of waging its war in Southeast Asia. If we start from the POW/MIA issue, the ideological idea itself, and work upwards, we inevitably happen upon a bombing campaign of world-historic scope. Between 1961 and 1973 the US dropped *six times* the tonnage of explosives dropped by US forces across *all theaters* of World War II.⁴⁰ The Johnson and Nixon administrations suppressed public and even congressional knowledge of the bombing, and eventual public revelations the its true scope and scale, especially in Cambodia, are well-known

40 This amounts to roughly 7.8 million tons of explosives, 19 million gallons of herbicides, and 400 thousand tons of napalm dropped over Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power*; Harrison, "History's Heaviest Bombing." Although the Vietnam War was much longer than US involvement in WWII, the rate of US bombing in Southeast Asia was twice that of its WWII bombing.

precipitates to the legitimacy crisis that gripped US politics from the late- to immediate post-war.⁴¹ My point here is that the very situation in which the US national security state needed to shape a pro-war public perception and the materials available to conduct such an operation were determined by its very means of waging war. Sharpening this point to something more formal would require contending with the structural changes in US military armaments production between World War II, in which armaments were produced through a quasi-command structure, and the Vietnam War, in which armaments were produced through ‘regular’ market means, but this kind of work lies far outside what is possible in this paper.⁴² For now, it is important we note that POW/MIAs, the vast majority of whom were missing airmen, were an externality of the war’s defining feature.

In peace, the POW/MIA issue’s postwar articulation cannot be separated from the neoliberal turn in the United States, both in its policy form, because the war played a general causal role in the inflationary crisis that preceded restructuring the US economy through money supply intervention, and in the ideological “common sense” that accompanied new policies. In the early 1970s, the capital intensive war combined with expansive domestic spending and international oil supply shocks to produce an inflationary spiral.⁴³ The upward movement of prices was first tamed by a Nixon administration price control scheme supported by business and labor alike. By 1974, business had withdrawn support for price controls, and inflation rocketed over 10% by the end of the decade.⁴⁴ The permanent solution found in 1979, tightening the money supply, resulted in capital concentrating toward the top of the socioeconomic pyramid, a

41 For public furor over the bombing and invasion of Cambodia see e.g., Perlstein, *Nixonland*.

42 From this angle, questions about the material determinants of ideology broaden out into a question of how “value,” as a social form with its own peculiar determinative force, informed US foreign policy, military tactics and strategy, and, indeed, domestic propaganda regarding Southeast Asia. E.g., Toscano, “The Open Secret of Real Abstraction”; Heinrich, *How to Read Marx’s Capital*.

43 Riddell, “Inflationary Impact of the Vietnam War”; Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 23–25; Mayer, *Monetary Policy and the Great Inflation in the United States: The Federal Reserve and the Failure of Macroeconomic Policy, 1965-79*, 1–4.

44 Waterhouse, “Mobilizing for the Market.”

trend exacerbated by the destruction of social net programs under Reaganism. A new “common sense” preaching individual action as the primary vector of agency rode on the wake of this upward transfer of wealth. In the new economy writ large, this neoliberal common sense dictated that winners and losers were the result of individual choices, but this kind of thinking shaped the POW/MIA issue as well.⁴⁵ As we will see in subsequent sections, postwar League rhetoric toward its rank-and-file members framed POWs’ fate as a function of individual members’ will to free them, and the “public awareness campaign” it championed and expanded through direct federal support carried this notion into the general public. The general point here is that it is not coincidental that the state’s resurrection of this issue, which resonated so strongly with the question of whether or not the state would dispense care for this or that segment of the population, coincided with the very moment it cast off the last rags of its New Deal vestment. The postwar POW/MIA issue was shaped by neoliberal logic, and it allowed the national security state, which only grew stronger as the welfare state disintegrated, to pose as a formation that *did* care – at least for those who made noble sacrifices for it

This paper cannot follow up on every claim in this general outline of the POW/MIA issue’s relation to social conflict, and it therefore focuses on the issue’s postwar persistence by paying more attention to its 1980s political revival than its wartime roots. That said, the issue’s political function for the security state was broadly similar in both periods. In both periods, it was a banner under which the US national security state organized practices that cut against or derailed the anger, frustration, and disgust that resulted from state action. It emerged as a wartime propaganda innovation aimed at cultivating and prolonging Americans’ personal investment in the continuation of an ugly war whose brutality and cost were increasingly difficult to ignore.⁴⁶ After the war, the political revival of the issue failed to turn up a single live POW,

45 Duménil and Lévy, *Capital Resurgent*; Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*.

46 Franklin, *Mythmaking in America*; Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*.

but the joint federal government/League of Families “POW/MIA awareness campaign” succeeded in incorporating POW/MIA iconography and claims in the everyday practices of the security state, and far beyond. Its general assumption – that caring about the fate and treatment of loyal US servicemen was good in its own right – allowed for a vast range of political identifications from the virulently anti-communist to the seemingly anodyne “I support the troops but not the war,” none of which could serve as a point of emotional mobilization for any serious political challenge to the industrial and military coalition that dominated the US security state.

This rest of this paper will focus on the National League of Families because it was at the center of the state’s ideological work. The League’s membership and general attitude changed between war and peace, but the form of its relationship to the security state was fundamentally unaltered. After the war its core membership shifted from spouses of POWs to the parents and siblings of the missing and began an open feud with the Carter administration over the latter’s refusal to acknowledge the possibility of live POWs. But even here, the organization benefited from a close relationship with sectors of the national security state, in particular the Defense Intelligence Agency. When the DIA’s position on POW/MIAs became Reagan administration policy, the League of Families official positions took their cues from security state leadership, just as they did during the war. Section 4 will tell this story. Although many rank-and-file members expressed deep frustration and distrust of the state, the “ideal member” presented in League material supported state policy. It is this “ideal member,” read as a subjection-position or conglomeration of hermeneutic practices, that tells us about the ideological function of this organization. It is to this end that my investigation combs through the National league’s monthly membership newsletters in Section 5: to understand what subject they interpellate.

This investigation finds that the National League's ideal POW/MIA subject was organized through the melancholic feeling I call *autonomic certainty*. In naming this feeling I follow work engaged in the theorization and study of feelings' social roles, especially work incited by Eve Sedgwick's critical resurrection of Silvan Tomkins's theory of affects and its "formidably rich phenomenology of emotions."⁴⁷ This body of work enfolds overlapping and discontinuous objects and methods of study,⁴⁸ but on the whole it aims, just as Silvan Tomkins did, at dissolving rigid conceptual distinctions between thinking and feeling.⁴⁹ To reiterate, what I call "autonomic certainty" refers to a felt state in which the validity of a conclusion emerges from within the body like an unconscious impulse. What differentiates it from some other form of felt conviction, or even something less strict or severe like a hunch or inkling, is that its sense of certainty is not the product of using one's feelings to suss out one judgment from another; instead, *autonomic certainty* tautologizes these feelings into evidence itself and takes their presence as proof that judgment has already been rendered. *Autonomic certainty's* character is constitutionally ideological and melancholic: Ideological because it blinds the subject to the historical forces that shaped the judgment of the given proposition, and melancholic because the feeling is structurally dependent on pathologized loss. This is precisely the trouble with the National League: to be an ideal member of the organization was to experience only one version of POW/MIA grief. As we will see across Sections 5 and 6, one could only experience the loss of a potential reunion stymied by communist cruelty and duplicity, rather than the concrete loss of a specific loved one who might only ever return as a collection of bone fragments, if at all.

47 Sedgwick and Frank, "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold," 94.

48 This literature falls under the heading "affect theory." For some affect signifies feeling as an impersonal, pre-symbolic phenomenon as opposed to the personal, named emotions which have a history (Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual.*); for others it is a call to engage with effectivity of aesthetic objects (e.g., Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*; Berlant, *Cruel Optimism.*); still others have used affect to think about the contemporary state's projects of managing its subject populations' feelings (Anderson, "Modulating the Excess of Affect: Morale in a State of 'Total War'"; Masco, *The Theater of Operations.*). My thinking about the sociality of feeling is most indebted to these latter two groups of citations.

49 Tomkins, *Exploring Affect*; Frank and Wilson, *A Silvan Tomkins Handbook: Foundations for Affect Theory*.

4. The National League of Families and Its Uses

The first step in this investigation is a general historical overview the creation and maintenance of the National League of Families of Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia, with an eye towards warranting my theoretical focus on ideology and the US national security state. Late in the war, the national security state responded to ideological challenges at home by transforming POWs and their civilian relatives into a prominent justification for continuing an increasingly unpopular the military campaign in Southeast Asia. This propaganda campaign operated by generating epistemic and emotional dissonance around the number and status of American POWs held in communist custody. After the war the national security state effectively continued this propaganda campaign, albeit to new ends, by endorsing the possibility that American POWs were still alive. In both periods the National League of Families served as the state's amplifier for this epistemic and emotional noise. This organization was intended from its earliest days to serve as an exemplary counter-example to any who dared to question whether the US state had its soldiers' best interest at heart, and it continued in this purpose until the state abandoned support for the live POW proposition in the early 1990s. The National League's function as an ideological state apparatus, rather than its actions as an independent activist organization, explains the pernicious durability of the POW/MIA issue.

The POW/MIA issue as we know it arrived at a May 1969 news conference in which Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird demanded the complete and unconditional release of all American prisoners of war held by communist forces in Southeast Asia. Laird's press conference presented a number of unprecedented rhetorical moves which, read together, presented the spearhead of an operation to confuse and obfuscate information about American prisoners of war. For one, the demand to release POWs without a negotiated treaty was itself unprecedented. Typically, the general release of POWs takes place after a war is concluded, as would eventually

be the case in Vietnam. Nevertheless, from Laird's conference onward this demand became a common talking form US officials at the negotiating table in Paris and in popular media. For another, the US state had never before put American POWs front and center in official wartime rhetoric. In all previous 20th century wars, the Vietnam War prior to Laird's conference included, the state typically only communicated the fact of a soldier's missing or imprisoned casualty status, perhaps but not always with some bare details about the soldier's case, and sometimes not even that much.⁵⁰ But foregrounding POWs in this manner was hardly the outcome of the leviathan's altruistic change of heart. Laird's press conference also marked the debut of the combined category "POW/MIA," invented by DOD Public Affairs staff specifically to imply North Vietnam held direct responsibility for all missing soldiers (DOD continued using distinct POW and MIA categories for internal use). Combining prisoners and missing into a single category seemed to justify Laird's claims there were anywhere between 500 and 1300 POW/MIAs in communist custody and that North Vietnam had refused to accurately report on the number and identities of its POWs. In actuality, North Vietnam had transmitted a number of prisoner lists to the US which State and DOD analysts concluded were corroborated by existing intelligence. From Laird's press conference onward, US security state rhetoric would continue to inflate the number of total prisoners, with Nixon himself claiming in March 1971 a total of 1600 POWs, about three times the number estimated by the intelligence services. Nixon followed his claim by declaring that "as long as there are American POWs in North Vietnam we will have to maintain a residual force in South Vietnam."⁵¹

The substance of this propaganda campaign was the creation of a nationwide

50 For example, during World War II the US War Department did not inform families in Harrodsburg, Kentucky their sons had been captured in the fall of the Philippines. Many of these families only learned about their imprisonment when the International Red Cross carried news about them in 1943. Bodnar, "Bad Dreams about the Good War: Bataan," 151–52.

51 Franklin, *Mythmaking in America*, 57–64; Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 37, 91–92. Nixon quote cited in Franklin, *Mythmaking in America*, 74.

citizens' organization that could maneuver against domestic antiwar organizations. The precursor to this state-organized and endorsed organization was the League of Wives of American Prisoners in Vietnam, a group of 33 POW wives organized by Sybil Stockdale from her home on a San Diego military base.⁵² Though wartime leadership core of the League was not spun from whole cloth, the road from living room meetings to coast-to-coast membership and a Washington, DC office was paved all the way by the national security state. Beginning in March 1969, the same month as Laird's press conference, US government agents started laying the groundwork for a national organization by briefing around 1400 POW/MIA family members around the country. In some cases they briefed nascent local POW/MIA organizations, while in others they gathered individuals who shared a source of grief but otherwise lacked any formal association. In a particularly revealing episode Michael Allen pulled from the archives, an audience member had to inform UN Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr. that his praise for their organization was unwarranted, because no such organization existed and all were present at the invitation of the US Air Force.⁵³ This networking effort bore its fruit on 2 May 1970 when Sybil Stockdale's group re-incorporated as the National League of Families of Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia, the day after the DOD flew hundreds of POW/MIA family members to attend a nominally bi-partisan but essentially pro-war rally bankrolled by arms manufacturers. The new organization received a number of critical material benefits directly from the state. The Reserve Officers Association provided office space, and the US government provided long-distance phone lines and an advertising firm. The two most important assets came directly from the Department of Defense: military service casualty officers compiled a mailing list of POW/MIA family members and sent out solicitations for membership, and League members were provided

52 Stockdale and Stockdale, *In Love & War: The Story of a Family's Ordeal and Sacrifice during the Vietnam Years*; Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 25–29.

53 Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 30.

with free military transportation to and from their annual conventions in Washington, DC.⁵⁴

As Michael Allen demonstrates, the Nixon administration treated the League as its practical followup to the president's November 1969 Silent Majority speech.⁵⁵ The war's outcome, Nixon argued, would be determined not on distant battlefields but through a homefront ideological struggle between the vocal antiwar "minority" and the so-called pro-war "silent majority." In reality the League played the role of actualizing the worldview described in Nixon's speech by providing a conduit for popular identification and participation. Though the general public could not join as members, they could raise funds by purchasing paraphernalia or "adopting" a POW through a monthly payment to the league. The most popular piece of merchandise, copper and nickel crescent bracelets stamped with the name and captured or missing date of a POW/MIA, were sold by the Orange County, CA-based pro-war organization Voices in Vital America (VIVA), with all proceeds going toward the League. Between 1969 and 1973, POW/MIA family members, especially wives, mothers, and sisters, provided pathos to White House photo ops, jostled with antiwar activists in the editorial section of *The New York Times*,⁵⁶ and sold fifty million POW/MIA bumper stickers and four million POW/MIA bracelets⁵⁷ – all in service to the national security state's need to circulate the emotional potential of POWs back toward a continued investment in the war; or, in the words of a Nixon speechwriter, to "give ordinary people who need to expend energy on 'helping to end the war' something to be *for*."⁵⁸

The League faced a number of grueling setbacks after Operation Homecoming in the spring of 1973, but it survived the Ford and Carter years because of the political allies and access

54 Allen, 39–40.

55 Allen, 32–36.

56 Ondrasik, "The Prison Raid Raised Hopes"; Weiss, "But It Avoided the Real Facts."

57 Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 33, 57.

58 Allen, 33.

it did not lose. A new leadership factor of MIA parents and sibling seized control at a vicious 1974 national convention, transforming the organization into one radically devoted to the belief that their missing loved ones were still alive in Southeast Asia. From 1973 to 1978 they fought, and ultimately lost, an expensive court battle to challenge the legality of “status reviews,” or the US state’s bureaucratic practice of issuing presumptive declarations of death for missing personnel one calendar year after the conclusion of a war.⁵⁹ Both a House of Representatives special committee and Woodcock commission, the US’s first official diplomatic mission to the SRV, concluded against the possibility of live POWs in 1976 and 1977, respectively. The Carter administration endorsed these findings, which the League interpreted as a deliberate stiff-arm.⁶⁰ In 1977 the DOD discontinued its transportation services for the League, and attendance at annual meetings nearly halved.⁶¹ The organization’s finances were precarious at best and hurtled toward insolvency when the inflation crisis reaching its boiling point.⁶² Despite these setbacks, League representatives were regularly welcomed in the House Sub-Committee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, and in 1979 League executive director Ann Mills Griffiths was granted a security clearance and a seat on the POW/MIA Inter-Agency Group (POW/MIA IAG), the opaque bureaucratic organization charged with coordinating POW/MIA policy across the entire executive branch. In 1979 the IAG reversed state rhetoric on live POWs, ordering the discontinuance of the “no credible evidence” line favored by the Carter administration and replacing it with a “public awareness campaign” that stressed the possibility that missing soldiers remained alive in Vietnam as POWs.⁶³

The single most consequential program undertaken by the League during its self-

59 Clarke, *The Missing Man*, 43–46. League newsletters’ last mention of status review litigation is NLF, “Newsletter,” April 12, 1978.

60 NLF, “Newsletter,” May 2, 1977.

61 NLF, “Newsletter,” July 29, 1975; “Newsletter,” August 6, 1976; “Newsletter,” July 26, 1977.

62 NLF, “Newsletter,” February 28, 1978; NLF, “Newsletter,” November 27, 1979.

63 Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 206–9.

described “wilderness years” between the Paris Peace Accords and its inclusion in the POW/MIA IAG was its ruthless exploitation of Southeast Asian refugees, and it is precisely here that we must adjudicate between my argument that the state was most responsible for the POW/MIA issue’s postwar persistence and Michael Allen’s argument that the issue’s persistence was the achievement of activists *against* the state. In 1977 League board members in cooperation with a Vietnamese national living in a Washington, DC suburb began advertising a cash prize for verifiable evidence of live POWs in Vietnamese-language magazines circulating in refugee camps in East and Southeast Asia. By 1978 the League claimed to have received hundreds of sightings.⁶⁴ Based on the handful of vague reports copied in League newsletters, these “live sightings” are better evidence of refugees’ desperation and ingenuity in bettering their lot than evidence of live POWs.⁶⁵ The program paid off for live POW adherents when Ngo Phi Hung, a Vietnamese businessman who claimed to have personally seen 49 American POWs between 1975 and 1977, repeated his claims at a press conference organized for the League’s 1978 annual convention.⁶⁶ The League created another media stir the following year by exploiting the testimony of refugee Tran Vien Loc, a mortician who claimed to have handled hundreds of American POW remains after the war.

In Allen’s interpretation of this program, the League “pioneered a new style of activism that emphasized the possibility that missing Americans were still alive, soliciting ‘live-sighting reports’ from refugees to compel a government response.”⁶⁷ This interpretation and its postulate, that the League and US state stood fundamentally at odds between 1973 and 1980, is

64 NLF, “Newsletter,” April 12, 1978; NLF, “Newsletter,” October 18, 1978; “Correspondence from Le Thi Anh to Colonel Earl P. Hopper.”

65 NLF, “Newsletter,” April 12, 1978. For another example, a refugee in South Korea sent a letter sent to Le Thi Anh, the Vietnamese national working as translator and consultant for the League, in 1978 hoping that his information about a shoot-down incident could be used to engage US government assistance in extricating their remaining family members from Vietnam. “To Madame Le Thi Anh.”

66 NLF, “Newsletter,” August 29, 1978.

67 Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 4–5.

supported by a strong evidentiary basis. It is certainly the case that the League fell out of favor with the Office of the President after the war, and it is also the case that the National League's attempts to capitalize on live sightings, especially claims by refugees Ngo Phi Hung in 1978 and Tran Vien Loc in 1979, garnered some amount of media attention and preceded the League's semi-formal incorporation into security state bureaucracy through the POW/MIA IAG. As Allen demonstrates, those close to the IAG felt the media spectacle surrounding Tran Vien Loc in particular, an event that felicitously coincided with the Iran hostage crisis, provided the political space necessary for the creation of the new inter-agency group.⁶⁸ From this point of view, it certainly seems like the League independently drove a substantial policy change through the exploitation of live sightings.

The problem with this interpretation is that it underplays that elements within the state supported the exploitation of refugees as a source of POW information *before* the League began its own program. Diplomatic cables show that, starting in September 1976, State officials in the Philippines acquiesced to the request of unnamed members of the House Select Committee interview a particular group of refugees about POWs and to make such POW/MIA questions a routine part of refugee intake interviews. State officers in Malaysia were conducting similar interviews as early as 1977. In May 1978 Secretary of State Cyrus Vance ordered Pacific embassies "to be sure that a continuing program exists to receive and report PW/MIA information" from refugees.⁶⁹ Vance's cable does reference families concern about government action on live sightings, but it is worth noting it was sent weeks before the League made their first headlines with Ngo Phi Hung's press conference. Taken together, the cables from 1976-1977 demonstrate that pressure to exploit Southeast Asian refugees as a source of POW/MIA

68 Allen, 195-99, 206-9.

69 "Department of State to Philippines Manila"; "Questioning Vietnamese Refugees about American PW/MIA's"; "Refugee Information on Possible MIA's"; "Refugee Information on Possible MIA's, Department of State to Malaysia Kuala Lumpur"; "MIA Information from Indochina Refugees."

intelligence seems to have come from *inside* the state, rather than an external source such as a media spectacle created by an outside group. Finally, and most importantly, we must square the facts around Tran Vien Loc's exploitation in 1979. Tran Vien Loc was *not* a product of the League's solicitation program. In point of fact, his testimony was brought to the attention of the League by the Defense Intelligence Agency, who included the League's executive director in classified briefings about his claims.⁷⁰ All this makes the League's re-absorption into national security state functions with its inclusion in the POW/MIA IAG in 1979 look like the expansion of already existing state activities rather than one estranged party coercing another into reunion.

In either case, the League experienced a heady public revival under Reagan's first term. The executive restored free military transportation to and from annual meetings, and the President himself marked the tenth anniversary of the Paris Peace Accords with a speech to the League. League leadership was further incorporated into formal and informal aspects of US foreign policy beyond the purview of the POW/MIA IAG. Formally, the League's executive director, Ann Mills Griffiths, was present at over two-dozen official diplomatic meetings between the US and its former enemies in Southeast Asia.⁷¹ Informally, Griffiths cooperated with an NSC staff member to distribute clandestine funds to Laotian anti-communist rebels through a subsidiary non-profit she controlled, reportedly in exchange for POW/MIA remains and information. League finances turned decidedly bullish, rising to six figure revenue by 1982 and over \$3 million a year by the end of the decade.⁷²

Most important to note is how the League was quickly and seamlessly reincorporated into the rituals of national security. The Pentagon organized National POW/MIA Recognition Day ceremonies featuring League leadership as guests of honor, and the DOD "encouraged" its

70 Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 199.

71 Griffiths' presence at diplomatic meetings is cited time and again in League newsletters.

72 Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 225–26, 231.

hundreds of permanent military installations to “get involved” in the POW/MIA IAG’s public awareness campaign by distributing League literature, flying the League’s POW/MIA flag, incorporating the issue into worship services, establishing POW/MIA displays, and providing assistance and facilities for League meetings.⁷³ This public awareness campaign entered popular cultural currents through television and radio PSAs about live POWs featuring Bob Hope, the casts of popular soap operas *St. Elsewhere* and *Dallas*, and General John Vessey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.⁷⁴

But neoconservative attention, however lavish, was short on the results most desired by POW/MIA adherents: live POWs in the flesh. Increased diplomatic contact and expanded forensics investigations brought a wave a POW/MIA remains repatriations and identifications under Reagan’s first term, which slowed to a trickle under his second term, most likely due to the practical difficulties of locating, excavating, and identifying remains. The creep of confirmed deaths angered rank-and-file League members who were promised again and again that Hanoi could solve the POW/MIA issue virtually overnight, if they would just cooperate.⁷⁵ By decade’s end, the contradiction between the League’s affected spirit of fearless, independent truth-telling and the reality of its leadership’s obsequence before the official organs of national security splintered the movement, such that it was, and smaller rival organizations attacked the League from its right flank. One 1990 news article on the POW/MIA schism paraphrased for League members as saying “the league has sold its soul for the trappings of Washington power.” “Instead of solving the mystery of the missing GIs, the league has become a self-perpetuating bureaucracy that shows few signs of completing its mission.”⁷⁶

Neither the League nor its rivals ever succeeded in finding live POWs, and the

73 NLF, “Newsletter,” September 11, 1985.

74 NLF, “Newsletter,” August 5, 1983; NLF, “Newsletter,” October 18, 1984.

75 NLF, “Newsletter,” October 28, 1986; NLF, “Newsletter,” February 9, 1988.

76 Anderson and Van Atta, “Government and the MIAs.”

national security state gradually abandoned the League as ideological apparatus in the post-Cold War. In 1991 the US Senate convened the Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs with a bipartisan slate of high-profile Vietnam War veterans as members, including former POW John McCain (R-AZ), Bob Smith (R-NH) as co-chair, and John Kerry (D-MA) as chair. The committee took a broad look at POW/MIA affairs from all major 20th century wars, but its primary focus was clearly *the* POW/MIA issue. A year and a half later, the committee concluded that, while it could not rule out the possibility that a small number of prisoners remained in communist captivity after Operation Homecoming, there was no evidence the US government knowingly abandoned American POWs and that “live sightings” did not provide sound evidence of continued survival.⁷⁷ Unlike the 1978 House committee final report, the Senate committee’s report was issued against a backdrop of concrete diplomatic developments that cemented economic ties between the US and SRV. 1992 was likely the decisive turning point in the relationship between the US national security state and the National League of Families. That year, a US diplomatic mission returned from the SRV with an agreement on access to SRV archival records – and no mention of live POWs.⁷⁸ After this development, it seems that League of Families activity fell off a virtual cliff, with newsletters becoming progressively infrequent between 1992 and 1994. The League of Families still exists today with Ann Mills Griffiths at its helm, but the organization has moved out of its Washington, DC offices to the suburbs, and it no longer commands the political clout it once wielded as an ideological arm of the state.

5. *Autonomic Certainty: The League’s Work*

If the previous section argued that the National League of Families operated as an ideological state apparatus, this section begins to unfold how the League’s ideological work operated. It

77 “Report of the Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs.”

78 NLF, “Newsletter,” October 30, 1992.

accomplishes this unfolding of POW/MIA ideology through a close reading of League newsletters, where we find the League interpellating its readership as an ideal subject organized through *autonomic certainty*, or one who subsumes critical evaluation and interpretation of evidence under the intensity of their loss. At first blush the austere, business-oriented missives of relatively small, mission-oriented citizens' group might seem like an unlikely place to find such an insidious operation. Averaging about eight pages and issue and typically printed on legal-sized sheets carrying famous bowed POW/MIA silhouette as header, newsletters carried headlined blocks of text reporting precisely the kind of information one expects from such a group: logistical information about upcoming meetings, announcements about scholarships, calls for amateur art submissions, and notices about relevant changes in tax codes and helpful government programs. In many cases repeat information was copied and pasted word-for-word from one newsletter to the next. My reading, however, focuses on examples where newsletters interpellated readers as a subject whose conclusion about live POWs was informed by, or even identical to, their feelings toward a promised reunion with a missing loved one. This reading begins with a discussion of *autonomic certainty* as a neologism informed by newsletter rhetoric, then details examples where the newsletter instructed or implied its reader to follow good feelings and avoid troubling ones.

Newsletters' tendency towards repetition can itself be read as a melancholic aesthetic that actively resists the unpredictable variation that comes with active thinking. This evaluation would be hyperbolic if it did not track so closely with the League's own explicit statements about thinking and evaluating evidence. This point I hope will become more clear as the section proceeds, but one statement from a 1979 newsletter, issued in response to official DIA gestures toward increasing attention to refugee live sightings, stands as a kind of thesis statement for *autonomic certainty*: "we fully expect that all live-sighting reports be treated impartially and

evaluated objectively, *not with pre-conceived ideas about validity*” [emphasis added].⁷⁹ Of course, this reads as a demand for analysts to actually investigate live sightings rather than dismiss them out of hand, but it is actually more revealing when read very directly as a demand to evaluate evidence without *any* “pre-conceived ideas about validity.” In other words, it is the demand to employ a paradoxical, self-negating epistemology that cannot how exactly a relationship between evidence and truth can or should be established. The result of such an epistemology is the evacuation of critical thinking and the impression that the claim, especially when defended with vigorous intensity, must be true. For the League’s ideal member, this resulted in treating one’s grief as evidence in and of itself of live POWs.

As a neologism, *autonomic certainty* harmonizes many aspects of the worldview found in League newsletters. At one turn, it is both a play on the subject at hand (questions about missing soldiers’ bodily remains) as well as newsletters’ very favorite imperative: *to urge*. Newsletter readers were rarely asked to attend meetings and marches, they were *urged*. In lean years they were urged to contribute more and more to save the League from financial destruction; in years of plenty they were urged to provide leads on potential new donors.⁸⁰ They were urged to urge others – to urge local media to run PSAs, to urge congressional action, to urge action from their neighbors.⁸¹ When internal factions struggled over the League’s increasingly naked intimacy with the national security bureaucracy in the late 1980s, newsletters condescendingly urged dissenters to drop their reasonable questions about the pro-state leadership’s lack of results: “We believe unity is the answer and urge you to spread the word, not be vindictive.”⁸² When reading League newsletters, it can seem as if the League addressed a subject who was nothing more than a bodily impulse toward confirming the live POW

79 NLF, “Newsletter,” October 18, 1978.

80 NLF, “Newsletter,” July 26, 1977; NLF, “Newsletter,” October 7, 1980.

81 NLF, “Newsletter,” May 21, 1990; NLF, “Newsletter,” April 4, 1979; NLF, “Newsletter,” May 18, 1992.

82 NLF, “Newsletter,” February 25, 1987.

proposition. To quote a position promulgated by the board of directors in 1986, “the National League of Families [...] urges immediate pursuit of every feasible avenue to confirm our view that live Americans are still held in Indochina.”⁸³

At another, much more critical turn, *autonomic certainty* points toward the distinctly embodied modes of knowing and reason-giving valued by the eccentric epistemology that sanctioned “every feasible avenue” to confirm a specific conclusion. Examples of emphatic conviction as valid reason-giving in-and-of-itself first appear in newsletters in 1976 through reporting on testimony given to the House select committee by Admiral John McCain, former supreme commander of Pacific forces during the Vietnam War, and Lieutenant Colonel Ray Schrupp, a former POW.⁸⁴ But much more revealing are the examples of how the League subtly pressured readers towards the same kind of reason-giving. When newsletters announced an official League-sponsored live sighting program in October 1978,⁸⁵ finance chairman George Schultz anticipated members’ potential anxiety over the program’s prohibitive cost by soliciting them to consider the potential emotional payoff instead. “But stop and think about this! If we were successful in getting one live American out of Southeast Asia, it would prove once and for all that the [League] were right. It would make you feel very good to think you had a small part in bringing someone back home to his loved ones.”⁸⁶ Schultz pressed this idea again in November the following year when the DIA publicly launched their own live sighting investigations. “Folks, these are exciting times for us. [...] All we need is a picture, a finger print or some handwriting to prove there are live Americans in Southeast Asia.”⁸⁷

This November 1979 newsletter’s coda, titled “Holiday Limbo” and written by Kathi

83 NLF, “Newsletter,” March 11, 1986.

84 NLF, “Newsletter,” March 12, 1976; NLF, “Newsletter,” June 17, 1976.

85 Newsletters’ incomplete coverage of the League’s live sighting efforts, which date back to at least 1977, give the impression that League leadership withheld information about their activities from rank-and-file membership until October 1978. “Correspondence from Le Thi Anh to Colonel Earl P. Hopper.”

86 NLF, “Newsletter,” October 18, 1978.

87 NLF, “Newsletter,” November 27, 1979.

Neal Parsels, wife of released POW John Parsels, keys us to the implicit demand beneath these appeals to good feelings. “Holiday Limbo” described its author’s seasonal reminiscence occasioned by upcoming January anniversary of the 1973 Paris Peace Accords. It relived in distinct emotional punctuation the initial uncertainty around John Parsels’s fate, the anticipation of his release, and the exhilaration of his homecoming. John Parsels had been carried as MIA for several months before being confirmed POW. “His mother felt like she had been kicked in the stomach. It’s a helpless feeling. But then you find out he is a prisoner of war and at least you know he is still alive.” Then, “Finally, after three years of praying, getting petitions to Hanoi signed . . . , and passing out bumper stickers . . . , the word comes. He is coming home! A plethora of pent up emotions are unleashed, debilitating you for a brief time” before giving way to manic preparation for his long-anticipated, now imminent arrival. Finally, “The moment comes when he is back in your arms and the nightmare is over. The good Lord has given you the opportunity to have merry Christmases for the rest of your lives!” The rest of the piece spoke about the importance of the League’s ongoing work to those unfamiliar with the organization and why its members remain in “holiday limbo.” In the newsletter, it was post-scripted with an editorial parenthetical: “(This is an example of what an individual can do. All that is needed is a little time and effort.)”⁸⁸

There is no evidence, however, that “Holiday Limbo” ever circulated beyond newsletter recipients, raising the question of what precisely this individual accomplished by writing an emotional personal appeal to support the organization’s work aimed, nominally at least, at an audience that never received it. One answer is a more cynical version of the finance chairman’s appeals. In the fold between Kathi Parsels’s past tense, first-person remembrance of John Parsels’s disappearance and imprisonment and the present-tense, second-person model of

88 Ibid.

their reunion lies the insidious premise that the moment of reunion can only ever come about when *you*, the *actual* reader, have done enough work that actualizes the belief that your loved one survives. If you do not act with certainty, if you lose your conviction now, will “your missing man,” a League-favorite euphemism, ever return?

Aside from a lack of credible evidence of live POWs, the most serious challenge to the League’s fantasy that member conviction could deliver live POWs was the positive identification of repatriated remains. The League solved this challenge in two ways: sharpening the terms of its epistemology and avoiding confrontations with the concrete details of loss. This first turn came in the form of a new phrase employed by the League: “the weight of evidence.” The phrase was lifted verbatim from a DIA statement on what the agency termed the “weight of evidence theory” on live POWs, which tautologically cited conviction itself (alongside an Orientalist trope) as a form of evidence. “*The conviction* that the many reports, the known perfidiousness [sic] of the communist government of Southeast Asia, the logic that implies some of the many missing have survived, all suggest that Americans may be alive in communist controlled Southeast Asia.” [emphasis added]⁸⁹ The League followed the DIA’s lead by using this phrase to split the difference between the disappointing results of its live sighting data and the steady reduction of names on the MIA list through positive identifications. The “accumulation of data (weight of evidence), not any specific report”⁹⁰ validated its positions on live POWs. The League board adopted this reasoning as its official position in 1986.⁹¹

A November 1985 newsletter provides the example that best captures how this phrase informed POW/MIA subjectivity toward national security state ends. When hardline members demanded the League oppose any further US-SRV cooperation on remains recovery

89 NLF, “Newsletter,” February 8, 1982.

90 NLF, “Newsletter,” April 10, 1985.

91 NLF, “Newsletter,” March 11, 1986.

until the latter released the live prisoners they supposedly held, executive director and newsletter editor Mills Griffiths framed cooperation with the Reagan administration as the only viable path forward. Her position was justified by the earnestness of her own belief in live POWs. “I hold the belief that Americans are being held captive and know that most who receive this newsletter also share my opinion.” “*This real, objective truth,*” she cautioned, “*must not be discredited by statements from the League that we know POWs are held – as yet, we do not!* Based on past Vietnamese behavior, *the weight of intelligence data* and the man discrepancies, we believe, we feel, and we hope that POWs are still alive and that we can bring them home” [underlining original, italics added].⁹²

Like the League’s demand for ‘objectivity without preconceived notions of validity,’ reading this statement directly and literally demonstrates what “the weight of evidence” accomplished for the League. In figuring live POWs as a paradox – a “real, objective truth” that is not yet known – the antinomy is solved through a pre-critical sensuality of belief. Rather than risk disappointment by hanging the validity of the live POW proposition on the particulars of any refugee live sightings, the League reduced any distance between what little physical evidence it had and the intensity of its members’ feelings, making one analogous to the other. This framing allowed the National League and the security state to hold the diplomatic and forensic aspects of the POW/MIA issue in permanent stasis. As Griffiths emphasized: they believed, they felt, they hoped in the “real, objective truth” of live POWs, effectively canceling the need to confirm the belief through judgment. All said, it is supremely fitting that the League’s very first reference to anything like the ‘weight of evidence,’ years before the term was codified by the DIA, was a celebration of the literal mass of body of de-classified documents, which weighed in at an impressive 60 pounds.⁹³

92 NLF, “Newsletter,” November 8, 1985.

93 NLF, “Newsletter,” January 12, 1979.

The League's second tactic for dealing with the conflict between lack of credible evidence and the slowly growing number of identified remains was the outright refusal to confront the particulars of loss. There are two kinds of example of this refusal, a common reflex and an extreme case. The common form of this refusal was a conspicuous allergy to mourning the formerly MIA whose remains were positively identified. Impossible to ignore outright, newsletters assiduously reported all identifications, which were usually announced in batches that appeared as the newsletter's leading headline. These newsletter announcements typically printed the names, ranks, and services of the identified (provided the primary next of kind permitted the DOD to publish this information), an updated count of those still missing, and, almost with variation, the same doleful formula: "The League offers support and understanding to the families."⁹⁴ What needs to be pointed out here is the absence of anything that resembles actual mourning. Identified MIAs were not eulogized as the fathers, brothers, sons, or comrades they were to League members in life and death. Instead, it seems they were perfunctorily acknowledged in order to be forgotten.

The extreme case, one in which newsletters very clearly dissembled facts around a controversial case of remains identifications, proves this routine to be a general allergy to mourning rather than a respectful acknowledgment of private grief. In April 1985 a joint US-Lao forensics team announced the recovery of fragmentary human remains from the crash site of an AC-130 gunship shot down in 1972 near Pakse, Laos. By July, the White House announced the CIL had positively identified remains from each one of the thirteen missing crewmen associated with the shoot-down, all of whom were originally carried as MIA. But things did not sit right with family members of three of the "identified." These families, one of whom was a former League board member, successfully sued for the right to challenge the CIL's findings, and in

94 For examples see NLF, "Newsletter," March 11, 1986; "Newsletter," November 7, 1994.

each case third-party forensics experts determined that it was not scientifically possible for the lab to have conclusively identified the remains, which in one instance amounted to no more than seven bone shards.⁹⁵ The Pentagon commissioned a team of outside experts for an on-site inspection of the CIL, and their scathing review catalyzed the lab's transformation into a state-of-the-art hybrid academic, military-bureaucratic organization it is today.⁹⁶ But this episode was more than a road bump on the way to better science; it was a macabre embarrassment to the national security state's projected image of benevolent, noble care toward its missing men and their families.

Rather than direct their facility for acerbic scrutiny toward the military bureaucracy's bungling of remains, the League ran cover the CIL. Newsletters celebrated the original April 1985 recovery announcement, lauding it as proof of the Reagan administration's coordination with former enemies.⁹⁷ But newsletters printed only a vague notice after one family was granted a restraining order and the right to challenge the CIL. The notice did not acknowledge the particulars of the family's grievance, settling instead for a gesture toward the "unique problems which arise from an excavation."⁹⁸ Newsletters mentioned Pakse only twice more – once to announce support for a congressional review of CIL and again, months later, to publish a DOD summary of the review team report.⁹⁹ At no point did newsletters report that identifications were overturned, much less the relevant details – not the names of the soldiers involved, not that the case involved a former board member, and nothing about the state of remains received by families.

The CIL review summary included with a newsletter is particularly revealing.

95 Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 241. NB: This controversy took place before the advent of DNA testing.

96 Wagner, *What Remains*, chap. 2.

97 NLF, "Newsletter," April 10, 1985.

98 NLF, "Newsletter," July 29, 1985.

99 NLF, "Newsletter," November 8, 1985; NLF, "Newsletter," March 11, 1986.

Crucially, this summary was *not* the original report from independent experts; it was a summary authored *by the DOD*. The DOD summary, essentially a prospectus listing the review team's recommendations in one column and the US Army's responses in another, reads as if the CIL actually received high marks. The DOD somehow saw fit to print that the review team "found the administration of the laboratory to be excellent, the anthropologists to be competent and dedicated to their objectives, and the routine identification procedures to be sound and acceptable,"¹⁰⁰ while the original report in fact described the lab as "between inadequate and barely adequate."¹⁰¹ Worse still is the DOD summary's contortions of the review team's conclusions about the thirteen Pakse identifications. According to the summary, the review team had "no real reason to doubt" eleven of thirteen identifications, and yet "did not feel that there was sufficient evidence to establish" their identities.¹⁰² The newsletter attached to the DOD summary distributed to League members does not draw attention to the fact this was a summary of a summary, leaving the impression there was no conflict between the interests of missing soldiers' families and DOD practices.

This refusal to confront grief, especially in the Pakse case, demonstrates that the League's ideological work was managing members' understanding of their grief toward the ends of the national security state, *not* its ostensible mission of advocating for family members otherwise at the cold mercy of an uncaring leviathan. At this point, one can agree with Kathi Neal parsels's closing statement in "Holiday Limbo" that the League's work "has to do with a letting go process – a completion of grief" – but only if we take the statement ironically. League newsletters propagated a subject-position predicating on avoiding, stalling, or derailing generative encounters with loss, while this postponement of grief was turning back around as a

100 NLF, "Newsletter," March 11, 1986.

101 Quoted in Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 242.

102 NLF, "Newsletter," March 11, 1986.

justification to continue searching for the elusive live POW. This paper's archive cannot demonstrate how any rank-and-file members reacted to the League's framing of Pakse, but it is clear that the organization's ideal member had to square themselves with DOD summary's bizarre and nakedly self-interested misrepresentation of the review team's findings. For those hailed as ideal POW/MIA subjects through appeals to *autonomic certainty*, epistemic conflict was undeniably, even brutally evident yet always foreclosed through the overbearing pressure of felt conviction.

6. The Fischer Family: Evidence Held & Withheld

There is one rank-and-file member and an associated MIA case about whom I can write in some detail: League member Ann Fischer and her brother, Richard Fischer, MIA. Before Richard Fischer's case was revisited in detail by forensics investigators in 1992, a process that confirmed his death in 1968 through an abundance of credible first-hand testimony, Ann Fischer presented herself in public speeches as a League of Families member who believed that Richard survived long past his disappearance on the battlefield.¹⁰³ Her private notes attest to the agony of his ever-present loss.¹⁰⁴ To my knowledge neither Ann nor her mother, Eleanor, also a League member, ever held official positions with the organization, but both were at least intermittently active. They received League newsletters,¹⁰⁵ attended at least one national event,¹⁰⁶ and portions of Ann's speeches certainly read as stumps for the League and its work. As she told an audience at a 1989 Memorial Day gathering, "They [the League] knew how we [POW/MIA families] felt."¹⁰⁷ In November 1991 her written testimony was read into the record of the of the Senate Select

103 "Ann Fischer Address to WI Vietnam Veterans Chapter III"; "Ann Fischer Memorial Day Speech."

104 Fischer, "Waiting."

105 E.g., NLF, "Newsletter," September 24, 1990; NLF, "Newsletter," June 14, 1991.

106 "National POW/MIA Recognition Day 1985 Program."

107 "Ann Fischer Memorial Day Speech."

Committee's opening session, and by this time she had clearly grown angry and disappointed with the League over its close cooperation with the national security bureaucracy, which she believed held more evidence than it would admit about her brother's disappearance and life as a POW. That said, her testimony leaves little doubt the League indelibly marked her experience of the loss of her brother.¹⁰⁸

The importance of the Fischer archive is not limited to whether and how it reflects Ann Fischer as an agent of the League. Because it includes DOD case files and a record of when the family received them, this archive demonstrates how the triangular relationship among the DOD, League leadership, and the families of the missing worked to foreclose certain evidentiary pathways in favor of others, always to the advantage of the live POW fantasy. Exploring this aspect of the archive means traveling a rough but accurate timeline consisting of four points of disclosure between the DOD and the Fischers, beginning in 1968 and ending in 1999. In so doing, we see how Ann Fischer solved evidentiary conflicts presented by the DOD through exactly the kind of hermeneutics cultivated by the League. My reading of these documents argues that the DOD and League of Families collaborated to spin a thread of mystification that anchored one family's loss to the present tense. By selectively revealing certain aspects of the bureaucratic object labeled Lance Corporal Richard W. Fischer, 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines, MIA, this process preserved Dick Fischer, brother and son, as the pristine object of melancholic fantasy. **(NB: See Appendix II, Table 2. for a timeline of the Fischer case.)**

The first two points on our timeline, 1968 and 1978, anchor this thread. In March 1968 Eleanor Fischer received a letter informing her that her son had been declared MIA after going missing on 8 January of that year. According to the letter, Richard left his ten-man "ambush team" to accept food proffered by two young Vietnamese women, one of whom "was

108 "Ann Fischer Testimony to Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs."

on crutches as she had only one leg.” His comrades initially thought nothing of it, but hours later a battalion-wide search commenced that produced no physical evidence over two days. Villagers interrogated by the South Vietnamese National Police claimed they saw Richard killed, but Richard’s company commander favored the testimony of the elderly man whose home the ambush team originally occupied. The elderly man claimed the two women had “known Viet Cong connections” and that he personally “did not feel that Lance Corporal Fischer had been killed, but thought rather that he had probably been taken by the Viet Cong and moved to Regional Headquarters.”¹⁰⁹ The Marine Corp headquarters that issued the casualty notification letter all but explicitly concurred with the company commander by playing up the possibility of capture in vague terms. Vietnamese communists generally “refused” to disclose POW identifies, and “[t]here are many [POWs] about which no information at all has been obtained.” “It is quite possible that he was taken captive by the Viet Cong, but the evidence that is available will not substantiate that fact.”¹¹⁰

The second anchor is a bounty of documents received in mid-1978 via FOIA request, which itself was very likely motivated by a League newsletter instructing members to file such requests as a means of delaying status review hearings.¹¹¹ The request filed by Eleanor Fischer yielded the Marine Corps casualty file, parts of the DIA case file, and a Joint Casualty Resolution Center (JCRC) case file. Of particular importance were the original MIA investigation report from January 1968 and a handful of intelligence reports from 1970, 1973, and 1974. The details in the investigation report and casualty file contain unsavory grit sanitized from the disappearance story presented in the original casualty notification letter. For one, the “young women” were teenagers between 16 and 19 years old, and the woman on crutches bore

109 “Col. W. E. Abblitt, US Marines, to Eleanor J. Fischer.”

110 “Col. W. E. Abblitt, US Marines, to Eleanor J. Fischer.”

111 NLF, “Newsletter,” December 13, 1977 references FOIA instructions distributed with the previous newsletter.

another “distinguishing characteristic” – “scars on right wrist, possibly from shrapnel wounds,”¹¹² clearly marking her as either a victim of American bombing or a direct participant in the fighting, if not both. For another, the investigator reported that the Vietnamese teenagers’ offer of food “had been interpreted by most of the [ambush team] members as a possible means of having sexual intercourse with one or both girls, and that Richard “was hear to state he ‘was game.’” And for yet another, Richard’s comrades told the investigator they warned Richard not to leave¹¹³ – a direct contradiction of their nonchalance in the casualty notification letter. These details hardly square with the Richard Fischer described by his commanding officer as “brave, but not foolhardy” in the casualty notification letter.¹¹⁴

These troubling details aside, documents in the 1978 FOIA cache point toward conflicting possibilities for Richard Fischer’s fate, but on the whole they support the ‘unofficial’ conclusion Fischer was captured, especially if one reads for quantity over quality. For one, the casualty file reflects exactly this conclusion in detail: “This was a well planned kidnapping operation set up and executed by a well organized Viet Cong Unit,” and “SUBJECT [Richard Fischer] was not killed and is currently being transferred to a Viet Cong Prisoner of War Camp.”¹¹⁵ For another, the 1974 intelligence report, subject line “PW Sighting,” states that an NVA deserter sighted a white American POW working as an ammor carrier on the Ho Chi Minh Trail in 1971, and a 1975 DIA evaluation of this report lists Fischer as one of nine possible MIA candidates for the sighting.¹¹⁶ Only one document, a November 1970 intelligence report concerning the interrogation of a communist POW, points towards Fischer’s actual fate. The POW claimed to have remembered reading an after-action report of an ambush and burial of a

112 “US Personnel, Missing/Captured in Southeast Asia, Biographical Data.”

113 “MACV Missing in Action Investigation Report.”

114 “Col. W. E. Abblitt, US Marines, to Eleanor J. Fischer.”

115 “US Personnel, Missing/Captured in Southeast Asia, Biographical Data.”

116 Defense Intelligence Agency, “DIA Evaluation of Intelligence Information Report 6918767074.”

US soldier, which intelligence agents correlated with Richard Fischer as the single candidate.¹¹⁷ The importance of this report will soon become apparent, but when it came into the Fischers' possession in 1978 it was the single piece of evidence that cut against the prevailing narrative that Richard Fischer survived after his disappearance.

The next two points of the timeline, October 1992 and roughly July 1999, snip this thread of mystification. In October 1992 the Fischers received the report of a JCRC field team investigation that firmly concluded Richard Fischer had been ambushed and killed on the day he went missing. Investigators located both women noted in the original story, both of whom were National Liberation Front operatives at the time of the incident. In their stories they deliberately separated Richard Fischer from his ambush team in order to propagandize to him, but Fischer was killed upon noticing their armed security detail following at a distance. Investigators also collected testimony from several individuals who witnessed Fischer's death and participated in transporting and burying the body, as well as those who, years later, found human remains while working the field that reportedly contained his grave.¹¹⁸ It is certainly not impossible that some of those individuals in the 1992 report were the same individuals interrogated by South Vietnamese National Police in 1968.

The fourth and final point on the timeline is an astonishing circa-1999 disclosure. It is not clear why these documents were released or when exactly the Fischers took possession of them, but in July 1999 three more wartime intelligence reports pertaining to Richard Fischer were declassified. All three were produced in late 1970 and concern the same subject: intelligence on the possible grave site of Richard Fischer obtained through the interrogation of a communist POW. Because these reports were produced around the same time as the

117 Combined Military Interrogation Center, "Intelligence Report 6029125770, Possible Grave Site of Unidentified US Soldier."

118 "JCRC Field Investigation Report Pertaining to Richard W. Fischer."

aforementioned “grave site” report given to the Fischers with the 1978 FOIA documents, we can presume they concern the same interrogated POW. But there is a key difference between that report, released to Eleanor Fischer in 1978, and the three reports in this circa-1999 release: in the former the interrogated prisoner only had second-hand knowledge of the grave site, while in latter documents the prisoner claimed to have been a *first-hand witness* to Richard Fischer’s death, to have handled his identification card, and to have assisted in the burial. In these reports, US intelligence officers requested resources for a follow-up search and recovery operation, but the request was denied because the prisoner, fearing for his life, refused to travel to the purported location with the search and recovery team.¹¹⁹ Had the operation gone through it is very likely that Richard Fischer’s remains would have been recovered in 1970 or early 1971 rather than 1992.

The archival documents did not contain an explicit acknowledgment from Ann Fischer regarding these evidentiary conflicts and their dramatic, tragic turn, but it is clear the Fischer family had to navigate a position in which the gut feelings of commanding officers and military investigators held greater weight than other kinds of evidence. Ann Fischer responded by taking a position that never truly denied the possibility of her brother’s death but always treated that possibility generally and ambiguously, whereas the fantasy of his survival was expressed in more certain, corporeal terms. In a piece of writing prepared for Memorial Day 1987 she described her experience of “What does it mean to be a sister to a POW/MIA” as one in which actively imagining her brother as deceased was a welcomed flight away from the grim reality of his continued imprisonment. In one “compartment of [her] mind” she stored “the hope of some day knowing what happened”, while “[i]n another compartment I hide the horrors of what could be happening daily, hourly, to my brother.” In this compartment, the war continued.

¹¹⁹ “Assistance for Search and Recovery,” October 1970; “Assistance for Search and Recovery,” November 1970; “Information Relating to the Location of the Remains of L CPL Fischer.”

“We all know of the tortures, the mind games of the Viet Cong, it is too much to deal with—I can’t often think of it. When I do—I pray to God that Richard is in a better place.” She concluded by giving her brother’s ongoing suffering temporal enunciation: “Memorial Day will also mark day 7,073 (169,752 hours) of his captivity.”¹²⁰ The gap between possible death and concrete life is narrower but still present in her 1991 congressional testimony. In one breath, she expressed anger toward the federal government for its metaphorically fatal neglect of her brother. “I feel they have killed my brother *again* and have written him off [emphasis added].” But in her next he was still unambiguously alive: “I have waited 23 years for word of my brother and his fellow prisoners. I believe that the government knows that our men are still alive.” This testimony contains the only direct reactions to any particular piece of evidence the Fischers received from the security state, and these reactions demonstration the primacy of embodied evidence. Ann Fischer’s only mention of specific documents centers on redacted portions of intelligence reports included in the 1978 FOIA disclosure, which she believed hid details suggesting that “my brother could have been alive and his whereabouts known as late as December 12, 1974.” She followed this assertion with a narration of her and her mother’s reaction to a prior interaction with DOD evidence. Sometime prior to Operation Homecoming, Ann and her mother, Eleanor, were asked to look through a lineup of photographs of known POWs. They both selected the same photograph that depicted a man from the back “who held himself in the same manner as my brother would”. The casualty officer “checked the number of the picture with a list and, though he did not verbalize into words what he discovered, *his sharp intake of breath* lead my mother to believe that this might be Richard, approximately four years after his disappearance. No confirmation or denial or explanation of this reaction was ever given us” [emphasis added].¹²¹

120 Fischer, “POW/MIA.”

121 “Ann Fischer Testimony to Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs.”

It would be unfair and untrue to conclude that the value Anne and Eleanor Fischer found in a single, sharp intake of breath was the product of an idiosyncrasy particular to either one of them as individuals. It was, in fact, one product of the POW/MIA issue as an ideological distortion supported by the national security state through its formal organs, like the DIA, and its informal, ideological apparatus, the NLF. The former provided piecemeal, highly selective disclosures of information that blurred the meaningful distinction between different evidentiary pathways to conclusions about Richard Fischers' fate. The latter provided hermeneutics for interpreting this evidence, one that valued exactly the kind of corporeal, embodied evidence like an intake of breath. As a newsletter recipient, Anne Fischer was addressed as one who felt certain that her brother survived and suffered in captivity.¹²² Month after month, she was cajoled, needed, and urged to shield her fantasies of survival against intrusions from the growing abundance of disconfirming evidence, whether it be in the form of hopelessly co-mingled fragments of human remains in Pakse or an enlisted soldier whose "mind was not oriented towards tactical considerations at the time of his disappearance," to quote Fischer's commanding officer's euphemistic description of his interest in two Vietnamese teenagers embroiled in a war not of their choosing.¹²³ Ann Fischer, POW/MIA subject, was one output of this combined ideological operation.

7. Conclusion

I have argued that the POW/MIA issue, as a shorthand for the belief that Americans POWs were held by Southeast Asian communists for years after the formal conclusion of US military involvement in Southeast Asia, was first and foremost an ideological phenomenon. Its

122 This archive contains a handful of newsletters from the late 1980s. My claims rest on the assumption that Ann and Eleanor Fischer received newsletters for many years but did not preserve them.

123 "Col. W. E. Abblitt, US Marines, to Eleanor J. Fischer."

persistence in the postwar period period was drive by the US national security state, not individual epistemic malfunction or activist will. I argued that the National League of Families was an ideological state apparatus, and I demonstrated how the League's ideological function the production of a pro-state POW/MIA subjectivity organized through the feeling I call *autonomic certainty*. This ideological operation worked in tandem with selective disclosures from the Department of Defense to point MIA family, that of Richard W. Fischer, toward the incorrect conclusion that their son and brother survived in captivity after disappearing in 1968. The hermeneutics of pro-state POW/MIA subjectivity valued felt conviction above all else, effectively barring critical engagement with the reality and historical sources of families' grief.

This paper has a number of limitations. For one, it frames the National League's ideological work as a broad operation but does not explore in depth how its brand of POW/MIA subjectivity circulated beyond the world of its members. Tracing these connections could be accomplished through an investigation of the POW/MIA IAG's expansive 1980s "public awareness campaign." For another, it can be fairly accused of 'selecting on the dependent variable' using one MIA family's case to make general claims about the complimentary relationship between the National League and DOD. Finally, the paper fails to approach and make adequate sense of the enormously important role of racists attitudes, notions, and ideas in the POW/MIA worldview. Suffice to say, the issue was constitutionally dependent on caricaturing Southeast Asian peoples as innately cruel and duplicitous and could only be sustained through a willful ignorance of the degree to which US behavior in Southeast Asia was itself cruel and duplicitous. In my estimation, the POW/MIA issue was in fact supported as a means of furthering precisely this kind of "willful" ignorance.

I want to conclude by considering pathological grief and the tragedy of its political use. In his essay "Mourning and Melancholia" Sigmund Freud finds that melancholia operates

through a sado-masochistic circuit. He posits that grief typically works as a piecemeal process through which a subject's sense of reality slowly adapts to the loss of a loved one. In melancholia, on the other hand, the lost object is given a powerful afterlife as something unconscious lodged within the subject's ego, shaping currents of thought and feeling around itself. In this state grief manifests as an attack on the self because every brush with reality that threatens to dislodge the lost object is matched by a vicious counter-effort to protect it, and at its most extreme this sado-masochistic circuit can end in abject self-destruction in service to preserving something lost but unperceived.¹²⁴ To the extent that this investigation has any correspondence with the topographical image of the psyche just described, we could say that the POW/MIA issue survived, in part, by virtue of its ability to provide resources for the protection of various melancholic objects at a time of military defeat, national embarrassment, and widespread economic dislocation. This paper was unable to explore the many audiences that found identification through the POW/MIA issue, but the families at the front line of this ideological maneuver demonstrate the inherent tragedy of keeping the war alive through melancholic fantasy. In my archive, there are very few cases of people escaping the grip of the live POW fantasy. Anne Fischer's case is ambiguous. In November 1992 she wrote out a letter to Richard, presumably after receiving the no doubt disappointing JCRC field team report. She told her brother Dick, "I can no longer hold out that you are alive and that you will come home to us. I have to let go of that hope to heal the wounds of the past." But, it turns out, the living Richard persisted through an exchange; her adoptive family of "Viet Nam Vets" held the hope in her stead. "They have made a vow to do whatever they can do get you home. It is to these wonderful men that I entrust you."¹²⁵

In another case we find some who took direct action to put the war behind them, but

124 Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia (1918)."

125 "Handwritten Letter from Ann Fischer to Richard Fischer."

only in the wake of a life utterly destroyed. In 1994 the US Air Force changed the status of its final POW, Charles Shelton, to KIA at the request of Shelton's adult children. Marian Shelton, widow to Charles Shelton, did not survive to see it; she took her own life in 1990. The cause, according to their children, was despair in the uncertainty of her husband's fate. Marian Shelton served on the NLF board of directors in the early 1980s, traveled to Laos to look for her husband, and in the years before her death was active with another POW/MIA group, Task Force Omega, who claimed that the US government knew more about live POWs than it was telling. Her death was not acknowledged in League newsletters until the 1994 status change, four years after she killed herself. Marian Shelton's adult children remembered her devotion and strength in raising the five of them on her own. According to them, the status change was a way of possibly moving forward with their lives. "I'm bitter," her son John told reporters. "I think of my mom as a casualty of the Vietnam War."¹²⁶

126 "Children of the Last P.O.W. Close a Pain-Filled Chapter."

APPENDIX I: The League of Families Newsletter Corpus

This appendix provides an overview of the corpus of semi-monthly newsletters published by the National League of Families of Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia. The appendix breaks down into two sections. The first section provides general information about corpus contents and details where and how the documents were obtained. The second section provides photographs of general examples newsletters and a few of the most important newsletters cited in the body of the thesis. An archival citation for the newsletters used in this corpus can be found at the end of this appendix.

I. Corpus Overview

This corpus contains 141 newsletters printed and distributed to members of the League of Families between 1970 and 1994. **See Table 1 for descriptive statistics and Figure 1 for a timeline of the number of newsletters published by year.**

Corpus Data	Count
Number of issues	141
First issue (date)	4 November 1970
Last Issue (date)	7 November 1994
Frequency (average weeks between issues)	~8.11
Median length (pages)*	8.04
Mode length (pages; number of issues)	8; 50
Shortest issue (pages; dates)	1; 20 June 1979 2 June 1986
Longest issue (pages; date)	24; 10 April 1985
Total pages	1134
Issues cited in thesis body	30**

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for League of Families newsletter corpus.

*All page counts are inclusive of attachments such as committee reports, executive memos, advertisements for convention lodgings, reproduced news articles, etc.

** This number excludes two newsletters cited from the Richard W. Fischer archival collection.

Digital copies of documents contained within the corpus were obtained through an

archival trip to the Wisconsin Historical Society on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The newsletters in this corpus were digitally photographed in order, then manually grouped into digital folders by issue. A rudimentary Python script was used to batch convert these folders into PDF files of each newsletter issue for easier reading.

The to include or exclude a document or individual page within the corpus depended on whether or not it read as an original newsletter item. Supplementary items like special messages from the President of the United States, memos from board members, order forms, advertisements for annual meeting lodging, instructions for contacting local media, reproductions of newspaper articles and government reports, etc. were included as part of the issue to which they were originally attached. This decision was made because such supplementary material was often an important part of newsletter content, with editorial and news items referencing their

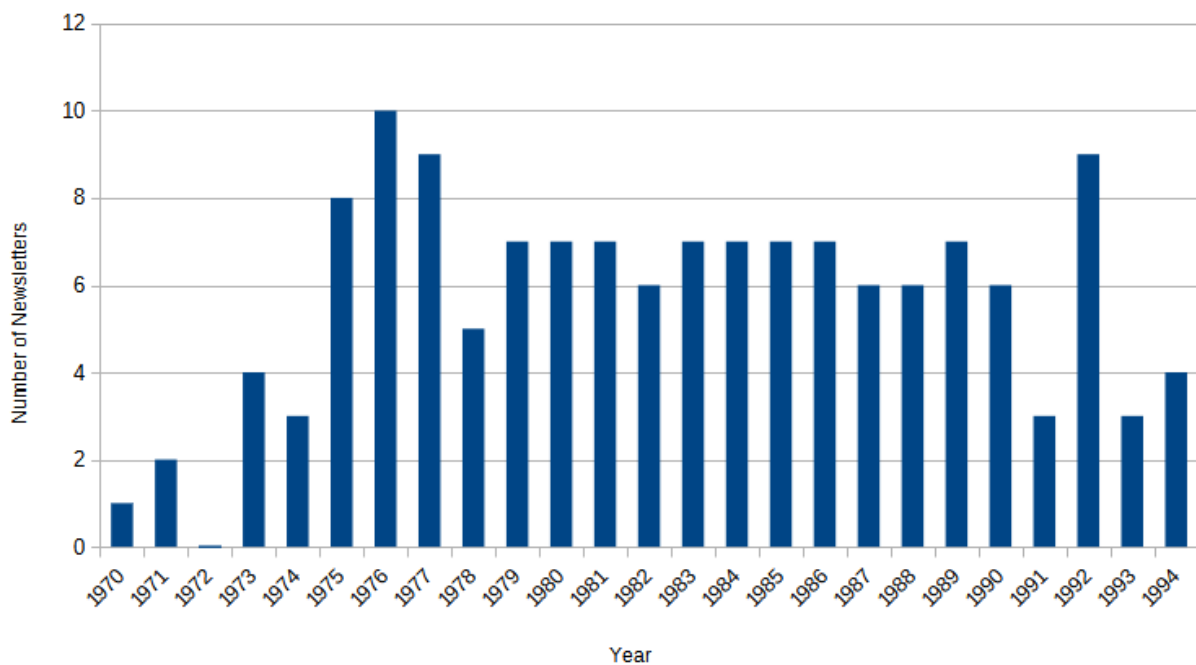


Figure 1: Newsletter count by year.

attachment to the newsletter. The only documents within the Wisconsin Historical Society's collection of 1970-1994 newsletters excluded from my newsletter corpus are a spread of candidates for the 1975-1976 board elections and handful of newspaper clippings attached to

newsletters. The former document was excluded because it was not clear if the spread was attached to a specific issue or if it was mailed out individually. The former clippings were excluded because they were most likely attached after publication.

It is not clear how the documents came into the possession of the Wisconsin Historical Society collections. Because the collection contains newsletters dating back to 1970, the first year of the League's existence, it is possible and even likely the newsletters originally belonged to one of Wisconsin's POW/MIA families, but this is only a supposition.

II. Newsletters Examples: Aesthetics & Stories

In this section you will find two kinds of example newsletters. The first kind, **Figures 2 through 5**, demonstrate newsletter aesthetics. The second kind, **Figures 6 through 8**, show a few important newsletter stories cited in the thesis.

Figure 2 shows the top portion of the newsletters' inaugural front page. **Figure 3** shows to top portion of the first issue to use the League's famous "POW/MIA You Are Not Forgotten" image as its header. This header appeared on every subsequent newsletter.

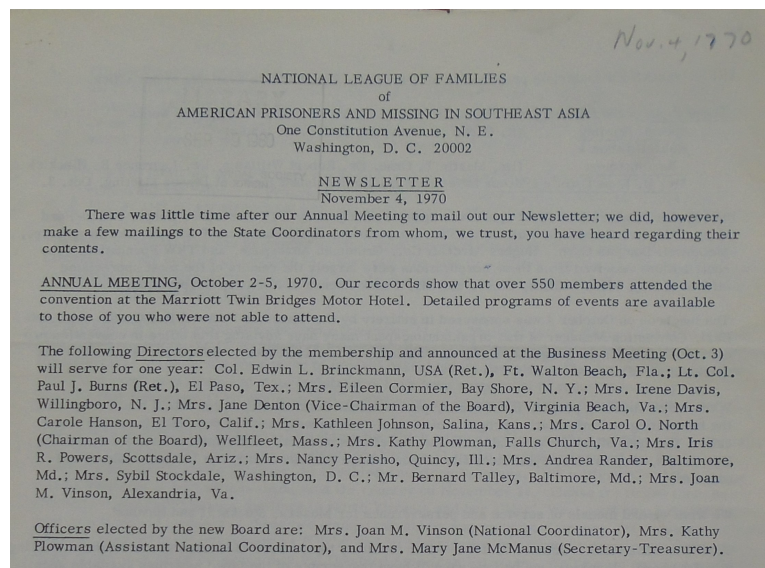


Figure 2: The very first League newsletter, dated 4 November 1970.

Figures 4 and 5 show something not discussed in the thesis: special posters celebrating National POW/MIA Recognition Day. The first National POW/MIA Recognition Day was declared by the US congress in 1979, and it remains one of the hundreds of federally declared commemorative periods celebrated every year. Because it is a special commemorative

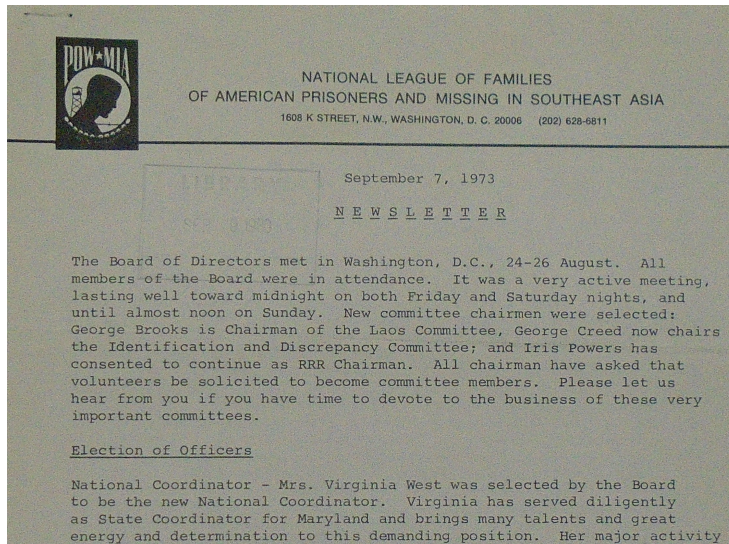


Figure 3: The first use of the famous “POW/MIA You Are Not Forgotten” image as newsletter header, dated 7 September 1973.

period recognized through a resolution that must be passed in each congressional session, rather than a fixed annual occurrence, the League used National Recognition Day resolutions as a reason to urge rank-and-file members to write to their federal representatives in support of resolutions, as well as

urge lower jurisdictions to pass similar state, county, and municipality Recognition Day resolutions to coincide with the federal Recognition Day.¹²⁷ This is one example of how the League of Families worked to create a nationwide POW/MIA consciousness. Conservative artist Tom Nielsen usually designed a special National POW/MIA Recognition Day poster, which was often reproduced in League newsletters.

Figure 6 shows “Holiday Limbo,” the personal appeal written by Kathi Neal Parsels in 1979. **Figure 7** shows an example of “POW live sightings” testimony printed in League newsletters. Finally, **Figures 8 and 9** show the Department of Defense summary of the outside review team’s report on the Central Identification Laboratory following the Pakse remains identification disaster and the League’s notice of the summary in the March 1986 newsletter,

¹²⁷ E.g., NLF, “Newsletter,” February 22, 1983.

respectively. With **Figure 9** note 1) that the League does not acknowledge that the summary was authored by the DOD and is not an original third-party document and 2) the lack of editorializing on the summary. Contrast this taciturn note with the subsequent story, "MISINFORMATION AGAIN," which is more typical of the League newsletters' confrontational house style.

III. Archival Citation for Newsletters

DS559.8.M5 N49. Box 40, South 1, Newsletter/National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia. Wisconsin Historical Society. Madison, WI.

Kathi Neal Parsels (wife of Major John Parsels, USA, returned POW)
1126 Oxford Rd., N.E.
Atlanta, Georgia 30306

HOLIDAY LIMBO

The holiday season around our house is a particularly joyful time of the year because we celebrate a couple of significant anniversaries. One is our wedding anniversary. It surprises us each year when it rolls around at Thanksgiving time because it is so hard to believe that we aren't still young newlyweds. The other anniversary is celebrated in quiet unspoken prayers of thanksgiving. It is the anniversary of the Paris Agreements that ultimately brought American Prisoners of War home from Vietnam.

On March 27, 1973, the last planeload of POW's landed, bringing our loved one back to the fold. It had been over three years, actually four holiday seasons since he was already in Vietnam for Christmas in 1969. He was captured on February 2, 1970, and listed as missing in action for several months before the word came that he was confirmed as a prisoner of war.

His mother felt like she had been kicked in the stomach. It's a help-less feeling. But then you find out he is a prisoner of war and at least you know he is still alive. Each year you receive a holiday plaque that reads: "In honor and recognition of the sacrifices of the families of our brave men captured and missing in Southeast Asia. May you know a full measure of faith and courage during this season when the separation of families is most keenly felt. God bless you." It is from the Army Chief of Staff and the Secretary of the Army. You curse, hoping you never have to add another to the collection.

Finally, after three years of praying, getting petitions to Hanoi signed at card tables set up at shopping centers, and passing out bumper stickers advising that "POW's Never Have A Nice Day," the word comes. He is coming home! A plethora of pent up emotions are unleashed, debilitating you for a brief time. Then you fly around doing all those things that were lurking in the back of your mind to do when he did come home. You make a big banner to hang on the front of the house. You tie bright yellow ribbons around every tree in the yard - who cares if they are oak trees or not? The moment comes when he is back in your arms and the nightmare is over. The good Lord has given you the opportunity to have merry Christmases for the rest of your lives!

This should be the happy ending to this story, but it's not. Each holiday season we pause for a moment in our joy to reflect and pray for a group of Americans for whom the nightmare has never stopped. After all 566 POW's were home and the celebrations were over, some 2500 families still waited. Of these, over 50 men had been confirmed POW's, but they didn't come home. The others were listed as missing in action. Their families are left, years later, in confused, unceasing pain.

The National League of Families of Prisoners of War and Missing in Action in Southeast Asia, which was formed in 1970 as a support group for POW/MIA families, is still struggling to get as full an accounting as possible for these men. It isn't easy. Americans want to forget the ugly decade of Vietnam. The bumper stickers are gone and no one wants to think about Hanoi, much less write a letter expressing indignation that the government there has not attempted to complete an accounting of American MIA's. The scars of that war are still angry and sore. The

American government is happy to let the memory fade.

For the families left in limbo, however, there is no way to erase the memory or ease the pain. There is always that nagging, stubborn hope that their loved one is still alive, tucked quietly away in some jungle prison camp. The fact that eleven prisoners of war from Korea came home two years after the last official prisoner exchange sits in their minds, heightened by Vietnamese refugee reports of Americans still in captivity. During 1978 and 1979, reports of groups of Americans from two and three to as many as 46 were brought to this country by Vietnamese refugees. This kind of activity makes POW/MIA families even more determined to poke and prod at the government to do something about their situation.

Most family members have learned the ropes in Washington, lobbying Congress stubbornly, and standing up to intimidating State Department officials. They are fighting Vietnam still. Even though it is probable that most of the men are dead, these families are fighting for a realistic accounting of our men by the Vietnamese government. When the remains of American servicemen are dribbled back to this country ten and eleven at a time, at some crucial point in international diplomatic or economic negotiations, it's hard to believe that a reasonable accounting is not possible.

You may wonder why it is so fiercely important to these Americans to know what happened to their husbands, sons, brothers and fathers. It has to do with a letting go process - a completion of grief. When a board of armed service officials meets and decides your loved one is dead, it is meaningless to you. One day he is missing, then someone says, "We declare this person dead." You want to know when and where he died. Where is he buried? You want some reality of death - a dog tag, an I.D. card, something - so that you can put your loved one to rest and complete your own grief. Finding out what actually happened won't make the MIA family happy, but it will at least afford them a little peace - and peace is what they firmly believe their men fought for so valiantly.

Americans are a compassionate and proud people. We have compassion for the Vietnamese boat people. We are appalled that Cambodians are starving to death or succumbing to disease. We were totally outraged when the U.S.S. Pueblo was seized in 1968, and when 60 Americans were held captive by Iranian students recently. There are never any easy solutions. But to seek no solution is a disservice to the families of the men who got lost amid the confusion of a hateful war.

This holiday season, an angry minority representing a cross-section of this country will again pray that the new year will bring some answers. My family will take a pause from traditional celebrations to reflect and pray. We will continue to tell anyone who will listen about the desperate need for a full accounting of our MIA's in Vietnam. If even one man is still alive and can be returned home, it would be wonderful, but to free brave patriotic families from the torment of uncertainty and limbo is reason enough.

(This is an example of what an individual can do. All that is needed is a little time and effort.)

Figure 6: "Holiday Limbo", newsletter dated 27 November 1979.

"Holiday Limbo" cont'd.

REFUGEE REPORTS

Over the past few months, several reports of sightings of American POWs, made by Vietnamese refugees, have been brought to the attention of the League. Some of these recent reports are the result of an advertisement run by a Washington, D.C. area woman in Vietnamese language publications which are circulated through refugee centers around the world. It should be noted that at this time there is no way to determine the absolute validity of these reports, but the League, along with Phil Clarke of the American Security Council (a non-profit foundation), is making every effort to follow up and secure further information. Following are the highlights of the various reports:

...Two separate reports deal with Americans (two on each occasion) being seen in custody in sampans headed for the remote U-Minh forest. These sightings were made in April and October of 1975. Both refugees could supply only vague descriptions of the Americans.

...Another recent escapee from Vietnam writes that in June 1977 he was in a labor camp and forced to clear an area around a former Viet Cong hospital. Surrounding the rubble of the hospital were a number of graves of Vietnamese, and off separately were three graves. Placed on top of each of the three graves were a helmet, clothes, and shoes. In the plastic lining of the helmets the refugee saw the names of the owners of the helmets, but as he does not read English, he cannot recall the names.

Figure 7: "Refugee reports" "brought to the attention of the League." Printed in League newsletter 12 April 1978.

...Further, another letter has been received from an escapee who is now in a camp in Japan. The woman relates that as a government employee of the Communists, she and others were shown a TV show which pictured an unknown number of American POWs. The film commentator said, "Those imperialists must be severely punished, we shall do so until their government pays for the war damage and rebuilds in full for Vietnam, especially the areas they have bombed and destroyed."

The woman also reports that a doctor she knew, who had recently been released from a prison camp, reported that there were many American prisoners of war still held in the north. He is reported to have said that the Americans received more food than the Vietnamese prisoners, because the Communists "wanted to feed the Americans properly to keep them in good health in order to claim for reparation payments from their (the U.S.) government."

Again, it should be reiterated that these reports have not been confirmed and are passed on in an effort to keep League members informed.

FUNDRAISING

Thanks to the many League members and concerned citizens who responded to the plea for money in the last newsletter, some \$11,000 in donations was received which will be most useful in keeping the office open and the organization functioning. Thank you for your generosity!

Remember! The Eastern Pennsylvania Chapter is holding a raffle to help the National Office. Tickets are available from JoAnn Wallen, 5844 Oxford Avenue, Philadelphia, PA 19149 - (215)535-6162. Members are strongly encouraged to contact JoAnn to obtain tickets to sell to

Fig. 7 continued.



PUBLIC AFFAIRS

February 10, 1986

OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301-1400

MEMORANDUM FOR CORRESPONDENTS

At the request of Department of the Army, a team of prominent scientists conducted an internal review of the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii during December 10-12, 1985. The members of the team were: Dr. Ellis R. Kerley, Ph.D., Diplomate, American Board of Forensic Anthropology; Dr. Lowell Levine, D.D.S., Diplomate, American Board of Forensic Odontology; and Dr. William R. Maples, Ph.D., Diplomate, American Board of Forensic Anthropology. All are Fellows of, and have been past officers of, the American Academy of Forensic Sciences.

Attached is a summary of the review team's report and a listing of recommendations and the U.S. Army's evaluation of those recommendations. Copies of the review team report are available at the Army Desk, Armed Forces News Branch, Directorate for Defense Information, OASD-PA.

Any actions taken as a result of the review team recommendations, combined with current U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory technology, procedures and expertise, will enhance the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory's ability to pursue the difficult task of combat identifications, which encompasses more than forensics, and ensure they will continue to merit the full confidence of the families and the professional scientific community. The most thorough investigation efforts forensically possible will be exhausted in all cases. The current policy of full and complete disclosure with the families will continue and next-of-kin desires for private opinions on identifications will be supported.

-more-

Figure 8: First page of the Department of Defense summary of the third-party review team's findings regarding the Central Identification Laboratory. Inserted into League newsletter dated 11 March 1986.

At the U.S. Army's request, the review team examined case files from two aircraft crash incidents involving fragmented commingled remains, the identifications of which resulted in controversy. The team also randomly selected cases of identifications made over the last three years for examination. The team determined that the identifications on all the randomly selected cases and one of the two aircraft crash incidents were strong identifications, biologically and legally sound. With respect to the Pakse aircraft crash incident, the review team did not detect any errors in the identifications. However, the review team felt that in the absence of actual remains they could only acceptably identify two of the Pakse cases. The team found the administration of the laboratory to be excellent, the anthropologists to be competent and dedicated to their objectives, and the routine identification procedures to be sound and acceptable. The review team offered the following recommendations to improve the total identification process and further enhance the credibility of CILHI and the Armed Services Graves Registration Office (ASGRO) Board in the general and scientific communities.

REVIEW TEAM RECOMMENDATIONS

Only cases in which direct fingerprint, serological profile or radiographic comparison between actual X-rays of the remains and antemortem clinical x-rays should be referred to as "positive" identifications in any of the case reports. Less well documented cases might be referred to as "within all reasonable scientific certainty" or "very favorable comparison."

Unidentifiable commingled fragments of human remains should be accepted and presented as such. Dentition, identification cards, tags or the like can indicate that specific individuals were indeed killed in the crash, but hopelessly commingled fragments should be recommended for mass burial.

A nationally or internationally known forensic anthropologist, who would bring his or her credibility to the CILHI should be appointed in a supervisory capacity. Person should be at the academic level of full professor, full curator or laboratory director, should also be a diplomate of the American Board of Forensic Anthropology or have some similar form of established credentials. This is a most sensitive appointment and should not be bound by Civil Service rules.

Tadao Furue (the resident GS-13 forensic anthropologist at CILHI) should be retained as a senior anthropologist.

INITIAL U.S. ARMY EVALUATION

Concur. This recommendation will be implemented immediately not only for skeletal remains, but in all cases.

Concur. Group interment will be utilized only after exhausting all measures to identify individuals.

Concur. A high level (GS-15) expert will be hired on a part time basis. This person will be located near the National Capital Region to advise not only the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory (CILHI), but also the Armed Services Graves Registration Office (ASGRO) Board which approves the findings of CILHI.

Concur. His professionalism remains unchallenged after more than 35 years of Army service.

REVIEW TEAM RECOMMENDATIONS

A competent dentist with some training in forensic odontology should be hired to take responsibility for dental comparison and reports.

The proposed GS-12 and GS-10 new anthropologists to be hired will not alleviate the problem of credibility. An addition of one or two as identification specialists would increase the speed with which remains could be processed in the event that many more bodies are returned or recovered, but only if there is additional space and improved facilities.

A photographer and radiographic technician should be attached to the CILHI.

It would be very helpful to have a full-time experienced investigator appointed to the CILHI to actively seek out both military and civilian records, photographs, descriptions and radiographs to be used in identification of individuals.

The Armed Services Graves Registration Identification Review Board would benefit from the addition of two forensic anthropologists, two forensic odontologists--all at a senior level--a lawyer and forensic pathologists. The current review board simply lacks the professional training and experience necessary for evaluating identification statements and evidence.

All anthropologists and dentists at CILHI should be encouraged and financially supported to attend appropriate scientific meetings on the mainland and to submit papers for publication in appropriate journals.

INITIAL U.S. ARMY EVALUATION

Concur. The incumbent has limited forensic training. When the position becomes vacant, it will be filled with a dentist who is trained in forensic odontology.

Concur. Five additional anthropologists have been hired to assist with expected increasing workload at CILHI. Additional space and improved facilities are being provided.

Concur. A photographer will be assigned to CILHI on February 15, 1986. Tripler Army Medical Center will provide x-ray support.

Concur. Request for the additional manpower will be processed.

Concur. Additional forensic odontologists, pathologists and a medical lawyer from the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology (AFIP) will be added to the ASGRO Board. AFIP will ensure additional board members represent all services. Additionally, one forensic anthropologist will be added to the board.

Concur.

-more-

Figure 8 cont'd. DOD summary pp. 2-3.

REVIEW TEAM RECOMMENDATIONS

In the Pakse cases, particular problems exist because some of the bodies have been returned to next-of-kin. As previously indicated, we did not detect any errors in the identification, but it should be borne in mind that we did not see the actual remains and had only a part of the three day visit to review the records of identification. Two of the bodies were acceptably identified, and there is no real reason to doubt any of the others. However, we did not feel that there was sufficient evidence to establish the other identities either. We recommend that families of the deceased from Pakse be apprised of the situation and asked of their wishes in resolving it. Any remains that families do not wish to accept should be given mass burial with all military ceremony and the acknowledgment that they cannot be identified individually. A more detailed review of the cases, remains and records by a team of forensic anthropologists might help to resolve the problem.

FACILITIES

A new building should be constructed as soon as possible.

INITIAL U.S. ARMY EVALUATION

Concur. All families of the Pakse crash site have been notified by the Air Force of the review team's findings and will have the opportunity to provide the ASGRO Board with independent information which can be considered. Further, ASGRO Board procedures will be implemented in keeping with DoD guidance to recognize and support private opinions if desired by next-of-kin.

Concur. U.S. Army Western Command will provide adequate additional space to CILHI on March 1, 1986.

EQUIPMENT

Various items of specialized professional equipment should be procured.

Concur. Additional funds are being provided for procurement of the additional specialized equipment and supplies recommended.

Recommend that a followup site inspection be conducted in six months to a year.

Concur.

Request permission to discuss the several findings of audit report at the February 1986 meeting of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences.

Concur. This would allow the team to answer directly some of the allegations made concerning CILHI's staff and operations.

-END-

Figure 8 cont'd. DOD summary p. 4.

Policy On Democratic Principles Of The League: "That the board of directors of the National League of Families reaffirms LEAGUE POLICY that board members will support board decisions whether or not personal opinion varies from the decision of the majority."

Policy On Declassification Of Information: "That the board of directors of the National League of Families has full confidence that the executive director is vigorously and consistently pursuing declassification of all classified POW/MIA data to provide to the families."

Policy On Distribution of Materials: "Materials requests in excess of 1,000 per item must be made in writing at least one month in advance, with a detailed explanation of the activity taking place, to permit sufficient time for delivery. To the greatest possible extent, material requirements should be projected, by the individual ordering, to include anticipated needs for near term future activities. Exceptions to this policy will require approval by the executive director." (Adopted at the November 16, 1986 board of directors meeting.)

FORENSICS SCIENTISTS REPORT ON CIL: The US government retained as consultants three certified forensics specialists to review identification procedures and facilities of the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory (CIL) in Hawaii. The last four pages of this newsletter contain the findings and recommendations of the scientists and the Army's actions taken or in process as a result. (The full report is available from the League office upon request.)

As noted in the League's November 8, 1985 newsletter, several specific suggestions had been made by the League regarding our concerns and the need for the families to have full confidence that identifications made by the CIL are accurate. Credibility of the CIL is central to the accounting process and the ability to determine positive identifications must be of the very highest caliber.

MISINFORMATION AGAIN: Recently a "publication" notorious for lies and distortions has claimed that the League intends to "exclude veterans and concerned citizens" from our 1986 annual meeting. As family members know, this is untrue. The league welcomes all those who support responsible efforts to return our men and understand the seriousness of the League's annual meeting. Family members have received copies of the board-approved regulations to govern the conduct of the next annual meeting. This unfounded accusation is based on the fact that League members and other family members will be first to be accommodated in the headquarters hotel and the first to be permitted to address the microphones during business meetings, open sessions and briefings.

The regulations were necessary due to purposeful disruptions last year. The annual meeting is for League members FIRST, as it should be. No organization

Figure 9: National League notice of the inclusion of the DOD summary of the review team report in the newsletter dated 11 March 1986.

APPENDIX II: Documents Pertaining to Ann Fischer and Richard Fischer

This appendix provides an overview of archival documents pertaining to Ann Fischer, rank-and-file League member, and her brother, Richard “Dick” Fischer, who was killed in Vietnam in 1968. The first part provides general information about the documents, including a rough breakdown of different types of documents. The second offers this appendix’s centerpiece: a timeline of what the Fischers received and when they received it. (Table 2). The third part contains example pictures of documents referenced in the thesis. A full archival citation for the Fischer collection is found at the end of this appendix.



Figure 10: "We are ready." Vietnamese propaganda poster. N.d. Source: <https://www.dogmacollection.com/female-fighters>

I. Overview of the Fischer Documents

The Wisconsin Veterans Museum Fischer collection contains 22 separate folders and 137 individual documents. Digital copies of these documents were procured through an archival trip to the Wisconsin Veterans Museum in Madison, Wisconsin. The serendipitous discovery of these documents was made possible through the public good known as WorldCat. I originally traveled to Wisconsin to review the League newsletter collection housed at the Wisconsin Historical Society and visited the Wisconsin Veterans Museum because a WorldCat search suggested the latter had a few League of Families-related items, too. Little did I know the Wisconsin Veterans Museum collection would present such a novel and compelling insight into the POW/MIA issue



Figure 11: Richard W. Fischer. N.d.

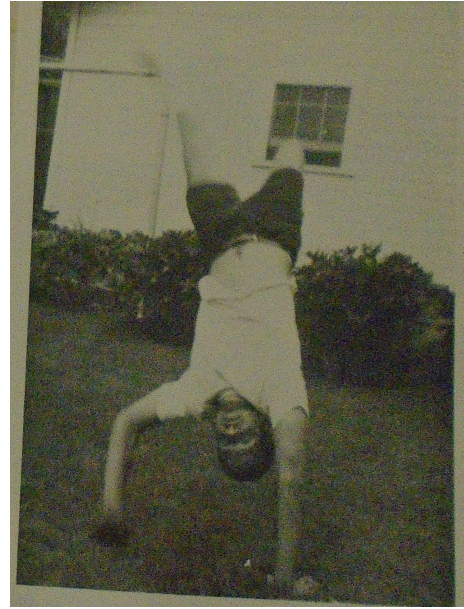


Figure 12: Richard W. Fischer. N.d.

These documents break down into roughly three categories: official case files pertaining to Richard Fischer's disappearance; documents pertaining to Ann Fischer's POW/MIA activism and personal experience of Richard's loss; and miscellaneous documents like pictures of Richard, rubbings from his name at the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, DC, and a local-write about about his 2007 burial. Eleanor Fischer, the mother of Ann and Richard, is mentioned often (e.g., she was the primary recipient of nearly all communications from the state), but there are no documents produced by Eleanor in the collection.

Like the newsletters, these documents were digitally photographed, manually separated into digital folders labeled by document title, and converted to PDF for easier reading.

II. DOD Case Files & the Fischer Family Timeline

Table 2 reconstructs a timeline that begins with Richard W. Fischer's disappearance and death in 1968 and ends with his interment in Madison, Wisconsin in 2007. In between, his sister, Ann Fischer became a POW/MIA activist, while the US national security state all but confirmed his

death in 1992 and withheld its most convincing wartime evidence until 1999. This timeline is an attempt to produce some of the information in my case study in the most legible possible form.

Much of this timeline rests on Folder 6, which contains various Department of Defense case files received by the Fischer family at different points in time. We can know when, how, and why these documents came into the possession of the Fischers because Folder 6 contains documents like a FOIA response card and letters from bureaucratic organizations detailing the documents enclosed in response to requests for information. The one exception to this rule is the bundle of intelligence reports about the interrogation of a Vietnamese POW who divulged information about Fischer's death and burial. There is no accompanying letter, but we can assume these documents came into the Fischers' possession sometime after July 1999, the date they were stamped as declassified.

The "director's cut" of my investigation of this folder would unfold like a noir plot. When I first reviewed the Fischer collection in the archives I was excited about the prospect of learning something about a rank-and-file League member, an aspect of the POW/MIA issue I felt remained under-examined. What I did not anticipate was uncovering a story where that activist's claim that the US government knew more than it was telling about MIAs was in fact true, though not at all in the manner in which she originally intended them. As I observe in the thesis, the case files in Folder 6 prove the US national security state held circumstantial but convincing evidence of Richard Fischer's death while providing the family with vague gestures toward the possibility he remained in captivity. A number of the documents in Folder 6, especially the documents dating back to the war, are difficult to read because they are poor-quality xerox copies. Luckily, some, though not all, of these wartime documents exist in duplicate because they were transmitted to the Fischers more than once, with later copies tending to be higher quality and therefore easier to read. In some cases I had to manually transcribe the documents in order to

Table 2: Timeline of the Fischer case.

Date	Event
8 January 1968	After voluntarily separating from his unit in the company of two female Vietnamese teenagers who, likely unbeknownst to Fischer, are active in local National Liberation Front (NLF) cell, Richard Fischer is killed near a village outside of Da Nang, Vietnam. Fischer's commanding officer declares him MIA after a search produces no evidence except testimony of local villagers. Many of the locals interrogated by US Marines and the South Vietnamese National Police claim Fischer was killed by the NLF. The commanding officer, however, favors the testimony of one man who believed Fischer was kidnapped. ¹²⁸
11 March 1968	Eleanor Fischer receives a casualty notification letter that presents a sanitized version of the events leading to R. Fischer's disappearance. It raises the hope for survival by presenting R. Fischer's commanding officer's conclusion about villagers' testimony and editorializing on Vietnamese communists' duplicity regarding POW identities and status. ¹²⁹
Ca. October-November 1970	US military intelligence officers interrogate a National Liberation Front POW who claims first-hand, eyewitness knowledge of R. Fischer's death and burial. Military intelligence considers a recovery operation but scratches the operation because the POW refuses to accompany the search team. The fact that the POW claimed first-hand knowledge, even in some kind of sanitized form that omits the source of the information, is withheld from the Fischers until 1999. ¹³⁰
July 1978	E. Fischer lodges a FOIA request, likely made at the urging of the League of Families as a means of delaying status review hearings. The documents received point toward conflicting conclusions. On the one hand, one intelligence report reads that an interrogated POW claimed secondhand knowledge through an after-action report of R. Fischer's possible grave site. On the other hand, the possibility Fischer's remains could be located in this grave was crowded out by a MACV investigation report, which concluded Fischer was kidnapped in a well-planned operation an intelligence report that correlated Richard Fischer's case, a wartime intelligence report on a "PW sighting" from an NLF defector. The "PW sighting" was accompanied by a postwar DIA evaluation, which could give the impression the national security bureaucracy put more stock in captivity than burial. ¹³¹
December 1978	R. Fischer is re-classified from MIA to KIA through a review hearing held in a military court. The Fischers

128 "Col. W. E. Abblitt, US Marines, to Eleanor J. Fischer"; "JCRC Field Investigation Report Pertaining to Richard W. Fischer."

129 "Col. W. E. Abblitt, US Marines, to Eleanor J. Fischer."

130 "Information Relating to the Location of the Remains of L CPL Fischer."; "Assistance for Search and Recovery," October 1970; "Assistance for Search and Recovery," November 1970.

131 "Charles W. Hinkle to Eleanor Fischer"; Combined Military Interrogation Center, "Intelligence Report 6029125770, Possible Grave Site of Unidentified US Soldier"; "MACV Missing in Action Investigation Report"; Department of Defense, "Intelligence Information Report 6918767074, PW Sighting and Crash Site [Cable Format]"; Defense Intelligence Agency, "DIA Evaluation of Intelligence Information Report 6918767074."

	receive an updated casualty file that reflects his new status. ¹³²
ca. 1982-ca. 1989	In 1982 Ann Fischer attends a national POW/MIA event in Washington, DC. She speaks in the capacity of League of Families activist at various POW/MIA and Vietnam Veterans events in the late 1980s. ¹³³
5 November 1991	A. Fischer's written testimony regarding her experience as a POW/MIA family member and activist is entered into the congressional record of the first meeting of the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs. ¹³⁴
April-July 1992	E. Fischer makes two more documents requests. The first, in April, yields a number of intelligence reports. The second, in July, yields a Joint Casualty Resolution Center (JCRC) field team summary of their investigation into R. Fischer's case. This report contains abundant eyewitness testimony regarding R. Fischer's death and burial, including corroborating testimonies from the two female National Liberation Front fighters in whose company he disappeared. The team locates the likely burial site but recommends against excavation because local knowledge tends toward the conclusion that any remains were dislocated through agricultural activity and flooding. ¹³⁵
November 1992	Ann writes a goodbye letter to her brother Dick. ¹³⁶
1994	What are not yet positively identified as R. Fischer's remains are located and exhumed. ¹³⁷
Ca. 1999	The documents produced in 1970 pertaining to the interrogation of an NLF POW with firsthand knowledge of R. Fischer's death and burial (see above) are declassified. It is unclear exactly how and when these documents come into the Fischers' possession.
19 November 2007	R. Fischer's remains are positively identified and reinterred in Madison, Wisconsin. ¹³⁸

132 "Major M. J. Marshall, US Marine Corps, to Eleanor Fischer"; Department of the Navy, "Richard W. Fischer Casualty Report."

133 "Correspondence from Alan Cantrell to Ann (Fischer) Fassbender"; "3rd Annual Southern Wisconsin POW/MIA Awareness Program"; "Ann Fischer Address to WI Vietnam Veterans Chapter III"; "Ann Fischer Memorial Day Speech."

134 "Ann Fischer Testimony to Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs."

135 Department of Defense, "FOIA Request Interim Response"; "W. M. McDonald to Eleanor Fischer"; "Robert P. Richardson to Eleanor J. Fischer"; "JCRC Field Investigation Report Pertaining to Richard W. Fischer."

136 "Handwritten Letter from Ann Fischer to Richard Fischer."

137 Boeker, "Fischer Comes Home."

138 Boeker.

understand the information they contained. I am happy to produce these transcriptions along with my digital copies of the files.

III. Sample Documents

Below you will find images of documents sampled within the thesis. **Figure 13** shows the selection of the casualty notice letter sent to Eleanor Fischer: the first full page and a selection of the penultimate page where, at the bottom, you can see how the US Marine Corps headquarters framed the possibility of captivity.

Figure 14 shows the original MACV investigation report produced in 1968 and received by the Fischers in 1978. Note the investigator's comments: "SUBJECT was not killed and is currently being transferred to a Viet Cong Prisoner of War Camp."

Figure 15 shows an undated report on an interrogated NLF POW with firsthand knowledge of Fischer's death and burial location that was withheld from the Fischers until at least 1999. Note that the handwritten message on the bottom half of the report. Though the document is undated, the report itself talks in the present tense about the POW's ability to locate the grave site, and the handwritten message uses future tense to talk about a course of action. Because a November 1970 report claims a POW with knowledge of Fischer's burial location has become uncooperative, rendering his involvement in a recovery operation null, we can safely assume the undated report was produced some time in or before November 1970 and concerns the exact same NLF POW.



DEPARTMENT OF THE NAVY
HEADQUARTERS UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20380

IN REPLY REFER TO
DNA-jrm

11 MAR 1968

Mrs. Eleanor J. Fischer
1209 Elizabeth Street
Madison, Wisconsin 53703

Dear Mrs. Fischer:

I am writing to you regarding your son, Lance Corporal Richard W. FISCHER, 2319998, U. S. Marine Corps, who has been missing in the Republic of Vietnam since 8 January 1968.

An investigation was conducted to inquire into the circumstances surrounding your son's disappearance. A report of that investigation was recently received at this Headquarters. It is our policy to provide the families of our missing and captured Marines with as much information as possible regarding the Marine's status. In accordance with that policy, the following is a concise account of the incident involving your son.

Lance Corporal Fischer was a member of a ten man team with instructions to establish an ambush position in the house of an elderly Vietnamese man in the village of Duc-Ky, Quang Nam Province, Republic of Vietnam. The ambush team's orders were to be in position prior to daybreak on the morning of 8 January 1968. The ten Marines arrived at their destination at approximately 4:00 A. M. and immediately went on a 50% alert, 5 men on watch while the other 5 slept. At approximately 8:00 A. M., a Vietnamese woman appeared and prepared a meal for the elderly man. She immediately became aware of the Marines in the area. During the normal morning routine, several other Vietnamese civilians were in and out of the area where the ambush team was located. All were well aware of the presence of the Marines. Two girls, estimated to be 15 and 20 years of age, arrived at approximately 11:00 A. M. They engaged in conversation with the Marines and prepared a meal for everyone. The older of the girls was on crutches as she had only one leg. Both of the girls appeared to be extremely friendly to all of the Marines. The one-legged girl and your son were especially friendly with one another. The girls invited three of the Marines to their house for more food. Two of the men politely refused the invitation. Your son accepted. The other members of the ambush team reported that your son left the house with the girls. They thought nothing of it at the time because he had seemed to

received sniper fire shortly after they left their positions. The fire came from the direction in which LCpl Fischer left with the two girls.

- (5) The question of defection was never considered openly. LCpl Fischer's actions appeared to be motivated by quite different considerations.
- (6) LCpl Fischer was armed only with a .45 caliber pistol.

CONJECTURE AS TO LANCE CORPORAL FISCHER'S ACTION IF CAPTURED

1. LCpl Fischer would probably not have attempted to shoot his way out of an ambush if the enemy appeared with rifles. Though a dedicated Marine, LCpl Fischer was well aware of the relative firepower of a pistol versus several rifles. He was brave, but not foolhardy.
2. LCpl Fischer's mind was not oriented towards tactical considerations at the time of his disappearance. He could have been captured or surprised easily.
3. Were he taken by the enemy, LCpl Fischer would probably try to escape and to resist interrogation after the initial shock was over.
4. LCpl Fischer's personality and personal toughness would suit him to resist most types of interrogation well.
5. LCpl Fischer had no known personal or political reason to defect from or to be disloyal to his country.

The foregoing consists of all of the significant details that are known about your son's disappearance. This Headquarters has reviewed all of these details, and it has been determined that your son will continue to be carried as missing in action. It is quite possible that he was taken captive by the Viet Cong, but the evidence that is available will not substantiate that fact. Unless the present conditions in Vietnam change drastically or additional information about your son is obtained, we feel certain that he will be carried in a missing status for a substantial but undetermined period of time. Throughout the course of the hostilities in Vietnam, both North Vietnam and the Viet Cong have refused to abide by the rules of the Geneva Conventions which require that the identity of all prisoners of war be made known to

Figure 13: Causality notification letter dated 11 March 1968, p. 1 of 6.

Causality notification letter p. 5 of 6.

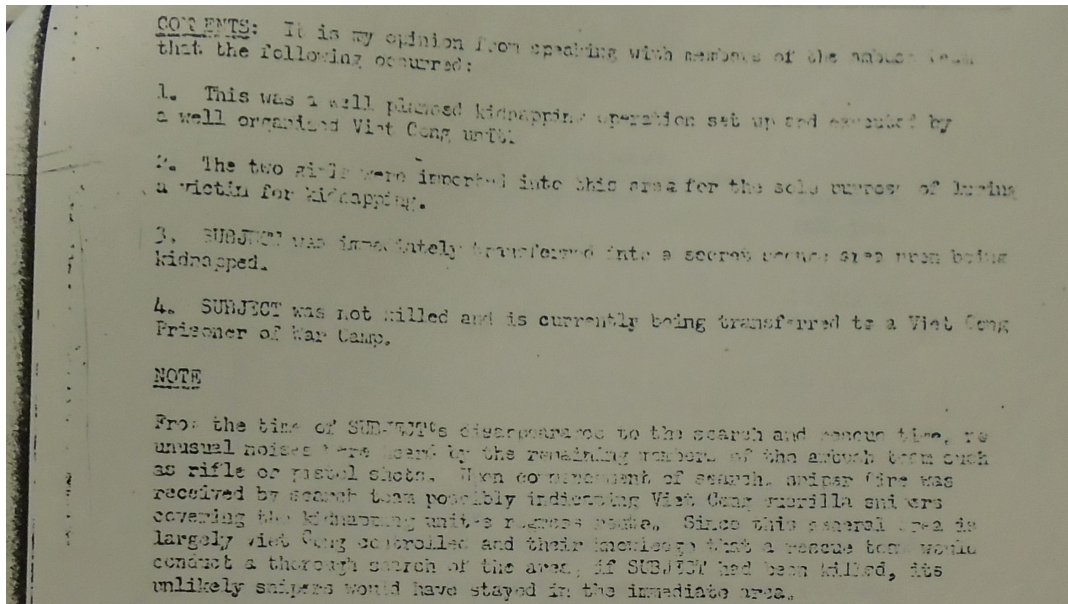


Figure 14: Comments from MACV investigator, document dated 30 January 1968.

Figure 16 shows a portion of the JCRC investigation report from 1992. This portion shows part of a summary of the testimony given to the investigation team by one of the two female National Liberation Front fighters present with Fischer when he was killed. There was no space to discuss this in the thesis body, so note how her description of the events leading to his death differs from both the casualty notification letter sent to Eleanor Fischer and the MACV investigation.

Figure 17 shows Ann Fischer's goodbye note to her brother.

IV. Archival Citation

Richard W. Fischer, Papers and photographs, 1947-1968, S100.N32.09.03, WVM Mss 815. Wisconsin Veterans Museum. Madison, Wisconsin.

Information Relating To The Location of The Remains of L CPL Fischer

1. Source: Dang Van dien aka Dang Ngoc Toa. He was present when Fischer was killed after a skirmish and buried. Source personally examined the ID card, money and other papers carried by FISCHER. The papers were pierced by bullets.
2. Date: The action took place some time in January 1968.
3. Location of action and burial: Action took place in an area ^{about 15 Km} south of Da Nang along the Railroad just across the stream Song La Tho. It is also near a hamlet called Quang Dong(I). After the skirmish, the body of Fischer was buried at a place near a bamboo bridge ~~spanning~~ spanning Song La Tho. Source recalls a discussion took place at the time of burial of the possibility of the remains being washed away by the river. However, in 1969 Source passed by the area again and noticed that the bamboo bridge was no longer there. Source believes that if he ~~is~~ taken to the area described above, he would be able to locate the burial place.

Above info & the attached were given to
 Major Powers thru
 Capt. Wilson
 USA Mortuary, T.S.N. Airport
 APO 96307 on 22 Sept 70
 Major Powers is to get in touch with
 us after he returns from Da Nang
 some time in late Sept or ~~late~~ ^{early} Oct
 as to what steps to be taken
 next

JAL

Source at CMIC

Figure 15: "Information Relating to the Location of The Remains of L CPL Fischer." N.d., most likely produced in the second half of 1970.

SUBJ: FIELD INVESTIGATION REPORT OF CASE 0977 (FISCHER)

- (2) THE WITNESS, WHO WAS THEN A VILLAGE PROSELYTIZING CADRE, ARRIVED AND OBSERVED TWELVE AMERICANS AT THE NOW COMPROMISED AMBUSH SITE. THE WITNESS CONVERSED WITH THE AMERICANS BEGINING AT 0600. AT 0700 HOURS, THE WITNESS LEFT THE SITE TEMPORARILY AND RETURNED WITH A [REDACTED] [REDACTED] WHO HAD RECENTLY ARRIVED TO LIVE IN THE AREA. [REDACTED], WHO IS STILL ALIVE AT THE TIME OF THIS INTERVIEW, WAS A PROVINCIAL PROSELYTIZING CADRE WHO SPOKE ENGLISH AND FREQUENTLY COMMUNICATED WITH AMERICAN SOLDIERS AT A NEARBY AMERICAN BASE FOR PROSELYTIZING PURPOSES.

- (3) ACCORDING TO THE WITNESS, SIX AMERICANS WANTED TO DEPART FOR HER HOUSE, WHICH WAS APPROXIMATELY 200 METERS FROM THE AMBUSH SITE (AT983614). AT 1000 HOURS, THE WITNESS GUIDED THE SIX AMERICAN SOLDIERS TO A LOCAL POND WHICH WAS LOCATED APPROXIMATELY 50 METERS WEST FROM THE AMBUSH SITE AND USED FOR BATHING. AFTER THAT, THEY RETURNED TO THE OLD COUPLE'S HOUSE. AT THE AMBUSH SITE, AN AMERICAN CALLED [REDACTED] OFFERED THE WITNESS SOME FOOD. [REDACTED] WAS ABOUT 20 YEARS OF AGE, APPROXIMATELY 1.8M TALL, SKINNY, BLOND HAIR, BLUE EYES, HANDSOME, SINGLE, AND CAUCASIAN.

- (4) THE SOLDIER KNOWN AS [REDACTED] SAID HE HAD BEEN STATIONED IN VIETNAM FOR 18 MONTHS AND WANTED TO GO TO HER HOUSE. THE WITNESS INTENDED TO TAKE [REDACTED] TO [REDACTED] FOR PROSELYTIZING. AT 1300 HOURS, THE WITNESS AND [REDACTED] DEPARTED THE AMBUSH SITE, HEADING FOR LAM'S HOUSE. [REDACTED] WAS WEARING AN OLIVE DRAB GREEN MILITARY UNIFORM, ARMOR VEST, PISTOL BELT, AND ARMED WITH A HAND GUN AND GRENADES. THE REST OF THE SQUAD WAS CLAPPING THEIR HAND WHEN THE TWO DEPARTED THE AMBUSH SITE. THREE GUERRILLAS

Figure 16: Portion of 1992 JCRC field team investigation report showing partial summary of testimony from one of the women with whom Richard Fischer was last seen alive.

Nov. 1992

Dear Dick,
For over 24 years, I have held onto the hope that you would come home alive. I envisioned you ringing the doorbell at Grandpa's house and we would be there to welcome you home. No family member has lived in that house for over 13 years.

Dick, you will live forever in my heart and memories as well as those of your niece. I can no longer hold out that you are alive and that you will come home to us. I have to let go of that hope to heal the wounds of the past. I have to do this to take care of me and to take care of my daughter.

I'm giving you this copper bracelet, dear brother. It is

a POW/MIA bracelet with your name on it. We wear it on and off for almost 20 years. My friends have similar bracelets with your name on it. They are fellow Viet Nam Vets and they consider me their sister, and you, their forgotten brother. Because of their love and support, we have gotten through many tough times. They have made a vow to do whatever they can to get you home. It is to these wonderful men that I entrust you to. I will always remember you, dear brother. I will always love you.
Love, your Beautiful
sister, Annie

(Don't no longer dig by)

Figure 17: Photocopy of Ann's goodbye letter to Dick, November 1992.

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