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00:00:00,863 --> 00:00:10,861

This series presents information based in part on theory and conjecture.

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00:00:10,861 --> 00:00:20,859

The producer's purpose is to suggest some possible explanations, but not necessarily the only ones to the mysteries we will examine.

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00:00:21,859 --> 00:00:37,855

During American involvement in the Vietnam War, 57,000 men lost their lives. Over 100,000 wounded were rescued.

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00:00:37,855 --> 00:00:53,852

During air missions over the jungles of Vietnam and Laos, over 1,000 Americans were shot down or lost control of their planes.

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00:00:53,852 --> 00:00:58,851

Their fellow officers were the last to see them alive.

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00:00:59,851 --> 00:01:13,848

What happened to our servicemen who went down behind enemy lines? Men who were known to be alive on the ground?

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00:01:13,848 --> 00:01:20,847

Could new evidence mean that Americans are still alive in the jungles of Indochina?

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00:01:28,845 --> 00:01:37,843

Spring, 1973. Operation Homecoming. American servicemen were coming home.

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00:01:58,839 --> 00:02:15,835

Nearly 10 years have passed since that day of reunion. Today, the families of 2,500 men who didn't come home wonder what has become of them.

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00:02:15,835 --> 00:02:23,834

Over 100 of those men were confirmed POWs at the war's end, and 1,300 were listed as missing in action.

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00:02:24,834 --> 00:02:32,832

Bat Masterson was probably best known as a funny man, a kidder, a guy with a great sense of humor.

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00:02:32,832 --> 00:02:38,831

He married Fran in the spring of 1968, and he headed off to war.

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00:02:40,830 --> 00:02:48,829

Six months later, while flying in formation over Laos, a pilot of another plane heard Bat's message in trouble.

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00:02:48,829 --> 00:02:53,828

He was experiencing vertigo. He was mailing out.

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00:02:53,828 --> 00:02:58,827

The years have not dimmed the memory of that day for Fran and her daughter Sherry.

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00:02:59,826 --> 00:03:07,825

All that day I had a very uneasy feeling, and I couldn't... my throat was like it was closing or something.

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00:03:07,825 --> 00:03:17,823

I just felt very, very strange, and I was thinking about it all the time, and I felt like something had happened to him, but I wasn't sure.

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00:03:17,823 --> 00:03:25,821

The next day, it was about 11 o'clock on October the 14th, which in retrospect was the day after he had gone down.

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00:03:25,821 --> 00:03:34,819

There was a knock at the door, and I opened the door, and there were two Air Force men at the door, and I knew something had happened to him, and I closed the door in their face.

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00:03:34,819 --> 00:03:43,817

One of them had gotten their foot in the door, and he was saying, Mrs. Masterson, and I'm screaming at him to go away, go away.

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00:03:43,817 --> 00:03:50,816

I didn't know what they were telling me. They said that, you know, your husband is missing in action, and I figured he was dead.

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00:03:50,816 --> 00:03:53,815

I didn't know what missing in action really meant.

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00:03:57,815 --> 00:04:04,813

Colonel Bat Masterson was a professional soldier, a highly skilled officer trained to elude capture.

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00:04:04,813 --> 00:04:13,811

He and his fellow Air Force officers were prepared to do whatever became necessary to survive in the jungles and make their way to safety.

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00:04:13,811 --> 00:04:18,810

Whatever happened in those hours or days in the jungle may never be known.

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00:04:18,810 --> 00:04:28,808

Did Bat Masterson disappear? Was he captured, or were he and the other 1300 MIAs simply forgotten in the excitement of the war's end?

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00:04:28,808 --> 00:04:35,807

Paris, 1973. Vietnam peace talks show progress.

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00:04:35,807 --> 00:04:43,805

On January 27th, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger brings an official end to American involvement in Vietnam.

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00:04:43,805 --> 00:04:50,804

The years of bloodshed end with a handshake. Peace is declared.

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00:04:51,804 --> 00:04:56,803

And tonight, the day we have all worked and prayed for has finally come.

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00:04:56,803 --> 00:05:02,801

For the first time in 12 years, no American military forces are in Vietnam.

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00:05:02,801 --> 00:05:06,801

All of our American POWs are on their way home.

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00:05:13,799 --> 00:05:18,798

But what became of the 13th Army Corps?

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00:05:18,798 --> 00:05:26,796

But what became of the 1300 MIAs, the 100 known prisoners of war? Were they left behind enemy lines?

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00:05:28,796 --> 00:05:35,795

I believe they're men alive. I know they're men alive. Whether one of them is my husband or not, I don't know that, of course.

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00:05:37,794 --> 00:05:42,793

Marion Vollman was 13 when she met Charles Shelton, 18 when she married him.

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00:05:42,793 --> 00:05:45,793

They raised the family and traveled from one air base to another.

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00:05:45,793 --> 00:05:51,791

When Captain Shelton was captured in 1965, five children waited for his return home.

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00:05:53,791 --> 00:06:04,789

I circled the White House in a camper for a week, telling the public that the prisoners, not all prisoners came home.

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00:06:04,789 --> 00:06:14,787

And I have been fighting with the United States government and appealing to the American public to do something to get a county.

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00:06:14,787 --> 00:06:16,786

At least, man.

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00:06:17,786 --> 00:06:26,784

Other wives and family members demanded answers. Family members like John Shelton, who was nine years old when his father was taken prisoner.

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00:06:27,784 --> 00:06:36,782

I don't feel like the government has done all it can do, and I am bitter because I think that there are lies going on.

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00:06:36,782 --> 00:06:40,781

I think that there are things that aren't being said, and I think they're trying to cover up.

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00:06:41,781 --> 00:06:52,779

It was very difficult to get an accounting for our missing people. It wasn't because the United States government was cold, was uncaring,

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00:06:52,779 --> 00:06:57,778

or didn't want to, in any way, get an accounting for the missing.

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00:06:57,778 --> 00:07:02,777

It was just that it was exceedingly difficult to get any cooperation from the other side.

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00:07:03,777 --> 00:07:07,776

Colonel John Furrer spent seven years in a Vietnamese prison camp.

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00:07:07,776 --> 00:07:13,775

Today, he's the principal advisor for the Office of POW-MIA Affairs.

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00:07:13,775 --> 00:07:25,772

From my viewpoint, it's a frustrating situation that demands positiveness and a degree of optimism that one of these days will get cooperation from the Vietnamese to account for our missing.

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00:07:27,772 --> 00:07:34,770

Today, all but 13 of the 1,300 MIAs have been reclassified as presumed dead.

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00:07:34,770 --> 00:07:41,769

Where is Captain Charles E. Shelton, who remains the last officially recognized prisoner of war?

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00:07:44,768 --> 00:07:50,767

Confined to a wheelchair as a result of his treatment at the hands of his captors,

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00:07:50,767 --> 00:07:55,766

former POW Thomas Nixon believes there are servicemen alive in Vietnam.

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00:07:55,766 --> 00:08:03,764

His concern led him to serve as the National Service Officer for the American ex-prisoners of war.

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00:08:05,764 --> 00:08:10,763

For Vietnam, there were basically three different types of prisoners.

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00:08:10,763 --> 00:08:14,762

The first group were officers that are educated.

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00:08:14,762 --> 00:08:19,761

They would fly over North Vietnam and they would be shot down.

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00:08:19,761 --> 00:08:22,761

They would often be put in solitary confinement.

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00:08:22,761 --> 00:08:30,759

Their only avenue of escape from the torture of being alone for long periods of time, as much as seven years,

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00:08:30,759 --> 00:08:37,757

was to use mind games, think about their loved ones, to work out complex puzzles,

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00:08:37,757 --> 00:08:41,757

to stare at the wall and decide that they were looking at a moving picture, all kinds of things.

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00:08:41,757 --> 00:08:43,756

They all have a different story.

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00:08:43,756 --> 00:08:49,755

The second group were those who were captured by the North Vietnam Regulars.

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00:08:49,755 --> 00:08:55,754

They often took these prisoners and marched them to camps in North Vietnam.

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00:08:55,754 --> 00:09:02,752

The third group were those who were captured by the so-called Viet Cong and they lived in the jungles

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00:09:02,752 --> 00:09:05,752

and they lived on whatever food they could get.

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00:09:05,752 --> 00:09:14,750

And the greatest tragedy was that they were never stabilized in a camp till near the end of the war or conflict.

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00:09:15,750 --> 00:09:23,748

Air Force Colonel Leo Thorsness captured on April 30, 1967, released 1973.

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00:09:24,748 --> 00:09:31,746

We tried for six years as did they to figure each other out, to think like each other thought.

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00:09:31,746 --> 00:09:36,745

And I think we got closer but we never really understood the other side.

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00:09:36,745 --> 00:09:39,745

We would go to different camps and we got to know the camps.

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00:09:39,745 --> 00:09:41,744

And every few months or a year they'd move you.

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00:09:41,744 --> 00:09:46,743

And it would take you maybe a week, a month, a year, several months at least,

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00:09:46,743 --> 00:09:49,743

to find some identification of who'd been in that cell before you.

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00:09:49,743 --> 00:09:56,741

Maybe there was a little window way up top and the sun, the season changed enough for the sun to light up a different section of the wall.

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00:09:56,741 --> 00:10:00,741

And you'd find a faint name or initials and dates and so on.

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00:10:00,741 --> 00:10:05,739

It would be one of us, of that list we memorized of who we knew alive in the system.

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00:10:07,739 --> 00:10:14,738

It seems difficult to believe that men could have survived the conditions of POW life after so many years.

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00:10:20,736 --> 00:10:27,735

With the post-war flight of Vietnamese refugees came disturbing stories.

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00:10:27,735 --> 00:10:32,734

They came from boat people as rumors, later confirmed by lie detector tests.

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00:10:32,734 --> 00:10:38,733

They were the stories of Caucasians seen in the jungles, in caves, in prison camps.

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00:10:38,733 --> 00:10:43,732

Live sighting reports of Americans held in Southeast Asia number over 1,000.

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00:10:44,732 --> 00:10:47,731

300 of these sightings are first hand.

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00:10:47,731 --> 00:10:54,729

1976, three years after pieces declared, a number of Americans were spotted in Laos.

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00:10:54,729 --> 00:11:00,728

Another first hand sighting reported, four Americans held at Ton Con.

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00:11:00,728 --> 00:11:08,727

At Can Tho prison in the Mekong Delta, one refugee claims he saw three Americans held among the 800 prisoners.

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00:11:08,727 --> 00:11:14,725

1980, a number of Americans previously held in Hanoi were seen in Han Ton.

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00:11:15,725 --> 00:11:21,724

The director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, which has responsibility for investigating all of these reports,

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00:11:21,724 --> 00:11:31,722

testified before Congress, a subcommittee of Congress, that relative to Americans that are unaccounted for,

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00:11:31,722 --> 00:11:40,720

at this time he's been unable to substantiate the information and that they cannot correlate it with any missing or any unaccounted for Americans.

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00:11:41,720 --> 00:11:45,719

The remains of 1,100 soldiers were never returned.

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00:11:45,719 --> 00:11:50,718

One sighting claims that 400 bodies were in a warehouse near Hanoi.

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00:11:50,718 --> 00:11:53,717

When investigated, it was found empty.

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00:11:53,717 --> 00:11:56,717

Were the bodies removed?

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00:12:02,716 --> 00:12:06,715

Vietnam, nearly 10 years after the war's end.

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00:12:06,715 --> 00:12:10,714

Do camps holding American prisoners still exist?

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00:12:10,714 --> 00:12:15,713

Are they the places of squalor and brutality described during the war?

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00:12:17,713 --> 00:12:19,712

The question is why?

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00:12:19,712 --> 00:12:22,712

Why hold Americans captive today?

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00:12:24,711 --> 00:12:30,710

Ann Griffiths, executive director of the National League of Families, has some answers.

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00:12:31,710 --> 00:12:35,709

Well, they've made it pretty clear that they want several things from our government.

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00:12:35,709 --> 00:12:38,708

They would like very much to have normalized relations with our government,

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00:12:38,708 --> 00:12:41,708

which would also then result in lifting of the trade embargo,

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00:12:41,708 --> 00:12:45,707

which would improve their economic situation measurably,

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00:12:45,707 --> 00:12:51,706

would allow greater distribution of humanitarian assistance to people in Vietnam.

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00:12:51,706 --> 00:12:56,705

They would also like the United States to intercede with the People's Republic of China

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00:12:56,705 --> 00:13:02,703

to help ward off what they perceive as a continuing and ongoing threat from the Chinese,

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00:13:02,703 --> 00:13:06,703

and which has evidenced itself over and over since 1979.

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00:13:07,702 --> 00:13:11,702

Prisoners could still be there because they are labor.

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00:13:11,702 --> 00:13:17,700

Feeding them is no great problem because they feed them just enough to keep them alive to do the work.

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00:13:17,700 --> 00:13:21,699

And so they are suffering from malnutrition, doesn't make that much difference.

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00:13:21,699 --> 00:13:23,699

They're not getting medical care.

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00:13:23,699 --> 00:13:25,699

They're just being worked.

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00:13:26,698 --> 00:13:32,697

The Defense Department remains skeptical, and if the reports are true, rescue seems impossible.

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00:13:33,697 --> 00:13:37,696

When you deal with other countries, you're talking about sovereign nations,

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00:13:37,696 --> 00:13:42,695

and the State Department, of course, can address this much better than I can,

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00:13:42,695 --> 00:13:49,694

but you just can't crank up and go into somebody else's backyard.

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00:13:49,694 --> 00:13:51,693

It's just not done.

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00:13:51,693 --> 00:13:56,692

1978, one man claims the government asked him to look into the matter.

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00:13:56,692 --> 00:14:01,691

Bo Grites, a highly decorated special forces commander.

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00:14:01,691 --> 00:14:06,690

When this thing first came up, I was as shocked as anyone could have been.

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00:14:06,690 --> 00:14:11,689

I had assumed that in 1973, with the accords, all the prisoners were returned.

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00:14:11,689 --> 00:14:15,688

That's what the President said. I bought it. I was satisfied with it.

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00:14:15,688 --> 00:14:21,687

I didn't put this bracelet on, and when I was directed to look into this matter,

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00:14:21,687 --> 00:14:26,686

I was shocked to find that, in fact, our servicemen are still there.

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00:14:26,686 --> 00:14:30,685

Those servicemen have kept the faith in this country, in God,

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00:14:30,685 --> 00:14:35,684

and I hope in the special forces, because we're going to be the ones to liberate them when the time comes.

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00:14:36,684 --> 00:14:38,684

A rescue operation was devised.

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00:14:38,684 --> 00:14:44,683

13 former Green Berets were assembled at a camp in Florida. Training began.

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00:14:46,682 --> 00:14:51,681

These people left their way of life. They dropped their job instantly.

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00:14:51,681 --> 00:14:54,680

They left their wives, their families, their occupation.

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00:14:54,680 --> 00:14:58,680

They left it on a phone call from me that said,

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00:14:58,680 --> 00:15:04,678

we have information about American prisoners, and I'd like for you to be a part of a rescue operation.

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00:15:04,678 --> 00:15:11,677

Now the big problem. If they're alive, where are they being held, and how are we going to get them out?

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00:15:11,677 --> 00:15:15,676

Maps were scrutinized for the safest possible plan.

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00:15:15,676 --> 00:15:22,675

The men trained around the clock, honing the skills they had used to fight a war 15 years ago.

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00:15:24,674 --> 00:15:29,673

Spring 1980, Operation Velvet Hammer is ready to go.

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00:15:30,673 --> 00:15:33,673

We were in the phase two when we got word stand down.

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00:15:33,673 --> 00:15:40,671

The word was simply that the President is excited about this, and he's going to do it with government forces.

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00:15:41,671 --> 00:15:44,670

And therefore we were requested to stand down.

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00:15:45,670 --> 00:15:52,669

Since we are not at any time on the outside of the law of this thing, we deferred to our country, be it right or wrong.

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00:15:52,669 --> 00:15:54,668

Now that I look at it, of course it was a wrong decision.

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00:15:55,668 --> 00:16:00,667

May 1980, the United States stages its own raid.

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00:16:01,667 --> 00:16:08,665

The plan was to send in Laotian ground forces to confirm the presence of Americans seen in U.S. satellite pictures.

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00:16:09,665 --> 00:16:12,665

The Laotians claimed they found no one.

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00:16:13,664 --> 00:16:16,664

I think what happened to them, intelligence gave them a good package.

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00:16:16,664 --> 00:16:23,662

They just weren't able, with all of their analysts and requirements, to get it together quick enough to respond.

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00:16:23,662 --> 00:16:30,661

Suddenly they ran out of weather, they ran out of information, and rather than just say, hey, we blew it,

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00:16:30,661 --> 00:16:33,660

they're saying, look, we did our very best.

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00:16:33,660 --> 00:16:39,659

We've even got two Laotian indigenous patrols that say there weren't any Americans there, and so we'll try again next year.

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00:16:40,659 --> 00:16:46,658

But how can you call the ball game off because of rain and louse when we've got prisoners still over there who have kept faith?

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00:16:47,657 --> 00:16:56,656

The Defense Intelligence Agency will always pursue these investigations pertaining to the unaccounted for Americans,

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00:16:57,655 --> 00:17:04,654

with the idea that there is at least one or more Americans being held against their will in Southeast Asia.

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00:17:05,654 --> 00:17:13,652

And the reason that they will proceed from this position is that any other attitude, anything less than that,

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00:17:13,652 --> 00:17:22,650

would not give them the incentive or the enthusiasm or the vigor which this important issue commands.

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00:17:23,650 --> 00:17:30,649

Of going back to Washington, D.C., and dealing with the State Department and the Department of Defense and all their classified material

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00:17:30,649 --> 00:17:33,648

that they won't let us see and everything, I don't believe anything they say.

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00:17:34,648 --> 00:17:40,647

October 1968, Bat Masterson disappears, leaving behind the beginning of a new life.

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00:17:41,646 --> 00:17:45,646

Marion Shelton kisses her husband goodbye one morning in 1965.

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00:17:46,645 --> 00:17:54,644

Time has passed, children have grown up, but the years are filled with uncertainty and loneliness.

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00:17:56,643 --> 00:18:03,642

I think all of us who are prisoners, I can only speak for myself for sure, but I think it's typical that we have a,

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00:18:03,642 --> 00:18:11,640

I have an ambivalent feeling of wanting to do more to solve this problem, to prove it or not prove it,

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00:18:11,640 --> 00:18:18,639

and if there are some there to get them home, the other side of it is it was a tough grind while we were there for all of us,

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00:18:18,639 --> 00:18:24,638

and now we're home and we have a family and we want to start our life over and kind of get that behind us.

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00:18:25,637 --> 00:18:32,636

If I found out that Bat died yesterday, I would be very mad. I would be very irate.

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00:18:33,636 --> 00:18:39,635

But if I found out that he died during the war, like when he went down, then it would be okay.

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00:18:40,634 --> 00:18:47,633

But if he died useless, you know, like being killed or something like that, while the war was over, he was supposed to be here,

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00:18:47,633 --> 00:18:51,632

he's not supposed to be there, and that would really upset me.

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00:18:55,631 --> 00:19:03,630

Reasonably, I don't think he's going to come home. I dream about it. I think emotionally, I think he'll be home.

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00:19:03,630 --> 00:19:08,629

I need him to be home. I dream about him coming home all the time.

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00:19:08,629 --> 00:19:15,627

You know, everyone has the reoccurring realistic dreams they always have, and that one still occurs.

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00:19:19,626 --> 00:19:24,625

I could take it if my husband was dead, if I knew that he was dead.

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00:19:24,625 --> 00:19:31,624

And of course, I would love for him to be alive. Sometimes when I think of him being alive and coming back,

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00:19:32,624 --> 00:19:37,623

I wonder just what he would think that he'd been abandoned all these years.

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00:19:45,621 --> 00:19:53,619

It is important for us to bury our dead, to pay them tribute, to recall their memories, to lay them to rest.

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00:19:53,619 --> 00:19:58,618

But can we later rest a memory that may still be alive?

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00:20:02,618 --> 00:20:07,617

I think I'll be able to take it back.

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00:20:07,617 --> 00:20:12,616

I think I'll be able to take it back.

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00:20:12,616 --> 00:20:17,615

I think I'll be able to take it back.

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00:20:17,615 --> 00:20:22,614

I think I'll be able to take it back.

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00:20:22,614 --> 00:20:27,613

I think I'll be able to take it back.

183

00:20:28,612 --> 00:20:33,611

I think I'll be able to take it back.

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00:20:45,609 --> 00:20:51,608

It is the 1980s. Vietnam seems years and miles away.

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00:20:51,608 --> 00:20:59,606

But close to the hearts and minds of their loved ones is the fate of the 2,500 who never came home.

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00:21:51,595 --> 00:21:55,595

The triumph of Apollo 11 and the tragedy of the Challenger.

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00:21:55,595 --> 00:22:02,593

Then weapons at war tracks the evolution of famous small arms from mini cannons to laser aimed rifles.