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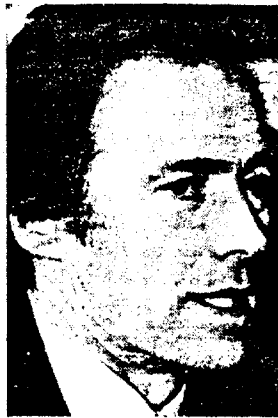
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A Tale of True Gritz

On a steamy night last November, four Americans and a dozen local commandos slipped across the Mekong River from Thailand into Laos. Their mission's private code name, Lazarus, thinly disguised its aim: to prove that missing U.S. servicemen long thought dead were still alive in Indochina. Three days out, though, and still far short of that goal, Lazarus ended in a jungle ambush that sent the men scrambling back across the river. And when details of the operation finally leaked out last week, their leader, former Green Beret Lt. Col. James G. (Bo) Gritz, found himself regarded by all sides as less a bloodied hero than an embarrassing nuisance.

Operation Lazarus was apparently only the latest in a series of cross-border raids run by private American citizens hoping to confirm longstanding rumors of surviving POW's. Gritz—who served during the Vietnam War with the Fifth Special Forces Group—indicated that Operation Lazarus was made with the knowledge and informal support of U.S. officials. "The FBI has helped me," he recently told the Los Angeles Times. "The CIA has helped us," and so, he said, had the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok. Those claims are denied in Washington; State Department officials



Ken Lubas—Los Angeles Times



AP

Eastwood, Gritz: Derring-do with private backing

doubt there are many American POW's still alive. Nevertheless, Gritz has attracted substantial private backing, reportedly including technical support from Litton Industries, an important defense contractor, and \$30,000 in cash from actor Clint Eastwood. (He has also received \$10,000 from actor William Shatner—but for the rights to his life story, says Shatner, not support for the raid.)

While agreeing that a few of nearly 2,500 officially missing Americans may still be held prisoner in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, mainstream U.S. POW groups are critical of Gritz's tactics. "We had only just managed to build any rapport at all with the governments," says George Brooks, chairman of the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia. "We're desperately afraid that commando raids will undo it." Spokesmen for the U.S. attorney's office in Los Angeles—which last year declined to prosecute Gritz after an investigation of his activities—now say they are reviewing new information about possible breaches of U.S. law. Officials in Thailand say they have authorized border troops to use "any means" to stop further private forays. Meanwhile, Colonel Bo is already reportedly back in the jungles along the Mekong, vowing that Operation Lazarus will rise again.

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