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N E W S C O N F E R E N C E

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AT THE WHITE HOUSE
(Key Biscayne, Florida)

ON-FILE NSC RELEASE
INSTRUCTIONS APPLY

WITH GERALD WARREN

AT 1:00 P.M. EST

MARCH 8, 1970

SUNDAY

MR. WARREN: The President is returning to Washington this afternoon.

We will find out the details of the movement and when we can have the buses here. We will make those details available to you hopefully before this is over. If not, it will be soon after that we will come up with the announcement and put it on the board.

Q About what time do you expect to leave?

MR. WARREN: I would judge mid-afternoon, which does not give us much time. We will give you as much time as possible. We can work out a theory that the pool and those who wish to go out to observe the departure can. Those others can finish filing their stories and go out later. We will work that out when we get the timing set.

That is all I have.

Q Jerry, I assume you have seen this story on the front page of the Miami Herald, with the headline "I Knew a Yank Killed in Laos".

MR. WARREN: Yes, I have.

Q It is considerably in conflict with what the President said the other day. Is there any comment from the White House or anything you might want to say about it?

MR. WARREN: The only comment that we would have would be that the President said on Friday there have been no Americans stationed in Laos killed in ground combat operations. A thorough check of the agency records showed that to be correct and still shows that to be correct.

Q Was he not technically stationed in Laos?

MR. WARREN: Yes, he was.

Q He was stationed in Laos?

MR. WARREN: I don't know the full details. The Defense Department would have those. But he was in Laos, so I assume technically stationed there.

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We checked into this when the story was brought to our attention early this morning and found that Captain Bush was in his quarters in a compound approximately 10 miles to the rear of the expected line of contact with the enemy when North Vietnam commandoes attacked the compound.

Captain Bush was, at the time, in a command post in this compound. He was in his quarters but he was working with the command post in this compound. He took action immediately to attempt to protect other persons in the compound and by taking this action exposed himself to enemy fire and was killed. He was not engaged in combat operations.

Q What was he doing?

MR. WARREN: He was a military attache.

Q What was he doing? Did he fire a gun?

MR. WARREN: When the compound was attacked, the compound was attacked by North Vietnam commandoes. He did take action, firing a gun, to attempt to protect others in the compound.

Q And you say that is not being engaged in combat when they are shooting at him and he is shooting at them?

MR. WARREN: When we were searching our records to find exactly what the figures were in the Laos situation, we looked into every category which could possibly be construed as persons actively in combat operations. There are no ground combat troops, as the President said. Captain Bush was taking action after this compound, which was behind what would normally be called enemy lines, was attacked by a commando force of North Vietnamese.

So in the definition of combat, this person was defending other persons in the compound.

If I may go on a little bit further, to make this clear, as you can probably imagine we have had some conversations about this this morning. I talked to many people, and I talked to Ron about this.

If I could take you on BACKGROUND, I would like to so there will be no misunderstanding.

Q I don't know whether we want it on BACKGROUND.

Q Let's finish with some questions on the record and then see if you can answer them.

I would like to know how many other Americans died or are missing in this kind of operation which you do not define as combat but which obviously results in the death or capture of Americans.

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MR. WARREN: I am going to take you on BACKGROUND to answer that question.

Q Do you mean by that off the record?

MR. WARREN: I mean by that attributable to White House sources.

Just so there is no misunderstanding, a thorough review of agency records, or records of the agencies involved, shows us that the total number of U. S. personnel killed or missing in Laos due to hostile actions is 26.

Q On the ground?

MR. WARREN: Not necessarily. There are 25 civilians in this category who have been killed or who are missing due to hostile actions. Some of those may be in a helicopter which was shot at or which was downed because of hostile actions.

Q What time period is that?

MR. WARREN: That is since July 1962.

Q This is not included in the figures that a White House official gave us the other day.

MR. WARREN: You were given this Friday on BACKGROUND. You were told that included in the number killed or missing were less than 50 civilians. These 25 are those that he was talking about, the less than 50.

Q Is Bush the 26th?

MR. WARREN: Bush is the 26th. In addition to that, there is one dependent of a U. S. Government official or a person working for a U. S. Government contractor, who has been killed or missing as a result of hostile action.

Let me clear that up. It is one dependent who has been killed.

Q A woman, a man, a child?

MR. WARREN: I don't have that.

Q One dependent of a soldier?

MR. WARREN: No, one dependent of a person working for the U. S. Government or for a U. S. Government contractor.

Q That makes it 27.

MR. WARREN: Twenty-six persons working for the U. S. Government or for U. S. Government contractors, and one dependent.

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Q How many of the 25 were on the ground?

Q Let's go back on the record now, can we?

MR. WARREN: All right.

Q How many were on the ground, of the 25?

MR. WARREN: I am going to have to take you back on BACKGROUND.

Q That is all right.

MR. WARREN: I don't know.

Q Jerry, can you define combat activity?

MR. WARREN: I didn't use the words "combat activity." I said hostile actions. Those could be ambushes. They could have been the result of long-range artillery attacks.

Q Mines?

MR. WARREN: I am not certain about that, but I would assume that that would come into that category.

Q Jerry, still on BACKGROUND, I am a little confused on these figures. Dr. Kissinger told us two days ago that slightly less than 400 persons had been killed as a result of air activity.

MR. WARREN: No, I don't think he told you that. He said the total number of killed and missing personnel is somewhat less than 400.

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Q Yes, as a result of airc activity in Laos. What are these?

MR. WARREN: The persons that he told you about were airmen. Included in there he said there were something less than 50 civilians.

Q These 27 that you are talking about now are people involved in ground operations in Laos?

MR. WARREN: These ~~were~~ not involved in ground combat operations, no. They are people who are in Laos working for the agencies. In Captain Bush's case, Captain Bush was an assistant military attache.

Q Going back on the record, was the President aware of Captain Bush's death and the circumstances of it when he made this statement?

MR. WARREN: No.

Q Are the 26 part of the 50?

MR. WARREN: Back on BACKGROUND, yes. The 26 are part of the less than 50 that were referred to Friday when they were talking about civilians.

Q They said that those some 400 were air.

MR. WARREN: And then he came back to say there were included in this somewhat less than 50 civilians.

Q Air?

MR. WARREN: Not necessarily air, no. He was taking away from the air part of it for those somewhat less than 50 persons.

Q This designation of civilian bothers me a little bit because for a long time we have known that military personnel resign their military status and go to work for CIA. Are these the type of people you are calling civilians? Are these civilians, as you put it, employees of CIA:

MR. WARREN: I don't have the breakdown of the agencies that they are employes of. I know that some of them are employes of the AID. Some of them are employes of international voluntary services. I just don't have a full breakdown.

Q Can you say were some of them CIA?

MR. WARREN: I cannot answer that.

Q Is there a chance there are more cases like Captain Bush that are not known, or are you completely satisfied now that that is it?

MR. WARREN: I will take you back on BACKGROUND, if I may. I cannot stand up here and flatly say that there are no more cases. There may be.

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Q Was the death of Captain Bush known to the official who prepared the statistics for the President initially?

MR. WARREN: As I said earlier, the records were thoroughly checked before the statement was made.

Q That would indicate he was.

MR. WARREN: No, that would indicate that he was not, that it was not.

Q Can you tell us when?

MR. WARREN: On February 10, I believe, 1969.

John, to go back to your question, I cannot answer that question.

Q The story says February 11.

MR. WARREN: You might have some dateline difference.

Q What was John's question?

Q What is this February 10? Is that the date of the death?

MR. WARREN: The date of the attack, as I understand it, on the compound.

Q What was John's question?

MR. WARREN: John's question was: Was Captain Bush's situation and the circumstances known to the persons who compiled the statistics initially?

I cannot answer for the agency but I do know that a thorough check of the agency was made.

Q Jerry, do you consider that the President was furnished misleading information in the way he phrased this?

MR. WARREN: No, I don't, really, because Captain Bush falls into the category of these civilians who have been killed in Laos as a result of hostile action.

Q Jerry, do you want to stand on the statement that when guerillas or commandoes attack an American outpost and the Americans there fire back and they are in the military, that is not combat?

MR. WARREN: I don't accept the word "outpost" when this is some 10 miles behind.

Q Well, an American installation, whatever it is.

MR. WARREN: He was with a neutralist group as a military attache some ten miles behind a line that would have been the line of contact with the enemy. It was not an outpost.

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Q Does the President think there are well developed front lines over in Laos?

MR. WARREN: That is why I phrased it the way I did. What normally was thought of at that time as the line of contact between the enemy and the Laos troops was a line some ten miles in front of this compound.

Q When the President made his statement you said he was not aware of Captain Bush's death. Do you think now that he is aware of Captain Bush's death, that he would modify the statement that no Americans stationed in Laos have been killed in ground combat operations?

MR. WARREN: No, I don't, because of the categories that I have gone through with you. This was a result of hostile fire in a compound which was behind what normally would have been a line of combat with the enemy, ten miles back.

Q In Vietnam when our U.S. personnel, military personnel, are killed in such circumstances, are they not listed as combat deaths?

MR. WARREN: The White House does not normally respond to questions about combat deaths and about Vietnam casualties, so I can't get into that. The Defense Department could perhaps answer that question for you.

Q Jerry, I don't quite understand, and this was an answer on BACKGROUND that you gave so I guess I have to ask my question on BACKGROUND. Did you say that there may be other cases like this that you don't know about?

MR. WARREN: Bob, on BACKGROUND, I can't stand here and say there are none because a further check of the records showed that Captain Bush was killed in February 1969 when attacked by North Vietnamese commandoes. He was in his quarters when they were attacked. So in that category of deaths resulting from hostile action, we have found the case of Captain Bush.

Q You found that after the report came out.

MR. WARREN: Exactly.

Q Is this saying in effect that the United States will not tell us of others until others come out in published reports?

MR. WARREN: No, I am not saying that at all. I am saying this is the only case we know of. I cannot say flatly there are no others.

Q Of the 27 killed or missing, we know that two are killed. How many of the remaining 25?

MR. WARREN: I don't have the answer.

Q Can't we say that so many are dead?

MR. WARREN: I don't have the answer.

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Q Jerry, if Captain Bush were alive, he would he be one of the 320, therefore 321, military advisors mentioned the other day?

MR. WARREN: I don't know the answer to that. The Defense Department might know the answer to that.

Q Jerry, is the White House taking any corrective or disciplinary action to make sure that the President gets more accurate information in this category in the future?

MR. WARREN: I know of no such action.

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Q Was Captain Bush getting combat pay?

MR. WARREN: I don't have the answer to that. The Defense Department might have it.

Q Do you know where he is from?

MR. WARREN: No, I don't. The Defense Department can give you details on that.

Q Can you describe the circumstances under which these others were killed? You mentioned helicopter.

MR. WARREN: That is a possibility. I am not in a position to respond to any detailed questions on that.

Q Back to Gene Risher -- question earlier, I didn't understand your answer.

Does the President still stand on the statement that no American has been killed in ground combat?

MR. WARREN: The statement was no American has been killed in ground combat operations.

Q And he stands on that statement?

MR. WARREN: Yes.

Q Did you assume he was stationed in Laos technically?

MR. WARREN: Yes, I assume that. I don't know where his orders had him stationed.

Q Jerry, can we go through this once again, the distinction that the President draws between ground combat operations and hostile enemy actions, responding to hostile enemy actions?

MR. WARREN: I have said everything I can say on this.

Q Jerry, are you in effect saying that he was killed in combat but not in a combat operation and that is the distinction the President drew, using the term "combat operations"? Is that what this boils down to?

MR. WARREN: I didn't say that. I said he was killed as a result of hostile actions and he was responding or trying to respond to an attack by North Vietnamese commandoes. That is what I said.

Q How can the 27 that you mentioned have not been part of the 400 that were killed in the air and yet not have been killed in the air or as a result of air action?

MR. WARREN: When you were told on BACKGROUND Friday about the overall total, the distinction was made, in the questioning following the BACKGROUNDER, when the source came back up here -- when they asked how many were civilians -- that less than 50 of these were civilians. Those weren't all

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necessarily in the air.

Q Was that said?

MR. WARREN: I am not saying that was said, but they were not necessarily all in the air.

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Q But at the time we were told on Friday, we were not told that part of the 50 were on the ground. We were told they were all in the air.

MR. WARREN: Before you start talking about civilians, yes, it was said that there were less than 400 airmen.

Q Is the President disturbed that because he was not told in advance about the Captain Bush isolated case that a credibility question has been raised here?

MR. WARREN: I have no response for you on that.

Q To go over this arithmetic one more time, approximately 400 people have been killed in the air, Americans have been killed in the air, and 27 have been killed additional to that.

MR. WARREN: Less than 400 persons have been killed or are missing in the air.

Q And additional to that are these 27?

MR. WARREN: No, that is within that 400 figure, the less than 400 figure.

Q Is the distinction you are making that these 27 individuals were stationed in Laos, whereas the rest --

MR. WARREN: The distinction I am making is that there are 25 civilians, on BACKGROUND, either working for the US Government, or for US Government contractors stationed in Laos who were killed as a result of hostile actions, and one dependent was killed, and Captain Bush.

Q Jerry, you said the President did not know about Captain Bush.

MR. WARREN: That is correct.

Q Did he know that 25 civilians had been killed by hostile action before he made his statement?

MR. WARREN: Not 26 civilians. 25 civilians and one dependent.

Q He knew about that before he said no Americans --

MR. WARREN: No Americans stationed in Laos have been killed in ground combat operations.

Q Jerry, he knew about these 25 when he made the statement that no Americans were killed?

MR. WARREN: That is right.

Q It seems to me that one is in conflict with the other.

MR. WARREN: There is no conflict, Gene. That is the extent of my information for you.

THE PRESS: Thank you.

END

(1:25 PM EST)