

The Photo: Shadow or MIA Signal?

THIS IS the story of what has become known in the world of Vietnam MIA evidence as the SEREX satellite photo, a picture the Pentagon has tried mightily, and with much artifice, to discredit.

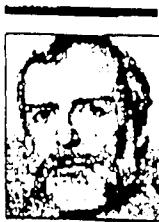
As mentioned in my last column, Henry (Mick) Serex was an Air Force major with the job description of electronic warfare officer. While on a radar-jamming mission over the DMZ on April 2, 1972, his EB-68 communications plane, with crew of six, was hit and downed by a ground-to-air missile. Only one survivor was rescued at the time, the navigator, Lt. Col. Icsal Hambleton. The Pentagon listed the five other crewmen, including Serex, first as missing in action and then, after six years, as dead.

Like so many MIA families, Serex's wife, Barbara, and two daughters, Jennifer and Kathryn, received short shrift from the Pentagon, which gave them only the barest bits of information.

That was still the state of the family's knowledge when a Senate select committee began looking into the MIA issue in late 1991. At a hearing in 1992, the committee took up the evidence of satellite photos that showed apparent MIA distress signals marked into the ground in both Vietnam and Laos. One such photo showed what appeared to be an MIA's name. This testimony came from Robert Dussault, a government expert who devises distress symbols and trains pilots in how to use them. In his public appearance before the committee in October, 1992, Dussault was specifically asked not to give the name of the MIA he found on the photo. The name, drawn on the ground in capital letters, did not get out for another six months. It was S-E-R-E-X.

The Pentagon never told the Serex family about this photo, which had been recorded by satellite on June 5, 1992, four months before the committee hearings. What the Pentagon did do, however, was to say that Dussault didn't know what he was talking about. Its experts at the Defense Intelligence Agency, said the Pentagon, had found conclusively that the distress markings Dussault thought he had seen were only shadows and vegetation.

But grass and furrows and shadows are exactly the explanations the Pentagon has been giving for 20 years, ever since the war ended amid compelling evidence that a large number of American prisoners had not been returned. Every time the satellite imagery seems to show a name or a distress symbol or the secret four-digit authenticator number of a particular pilot, the DIA immediately steps in to say that it's only shadows and natural contours. Sometimes they call the distress symbols a "photo anomaly" — meaning something you see but really isn't there. Independent experts in photo analysis consider this a bad joke, saying that when you see something it's usually real.



Sydney H. Schanberg

Dussault came across the SEREX photo on Aug. 13, 1992, while at the Central Intelligence Agency's headquarters. He had been invited there to brief CIA photo interpreters on his area of expertise — distress signals. Early in his career, Dussault was also schooled in photo imagery. Now he is the deputy director of a Pentagon unit called JSSA — Joint Services SERE Agency. The SERE stands for Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape.

While he was briefing the CIA men, they brought out several satellite photos to show him some of the areas they had photographed. Among the photos was a blown-up print, about 2 feet by 2½, of a piece of a field alongside the Dong Vai prison in North Vietnam. "My eyebrows went way up," Dussault told someone later.

On the photo, he saw not only the letters S-E-R-E-X but a string of nine or 10 numbers above it and a legend below it that read "72TA88." T and A, said Dussault, were distress letters assigned to pilots in 1972, the year Serex went down. Struck hard by the photo, he circled the symbols in red ink.

At first, Dussault didn't realize SEREX could be a name. He thought it might be a pilot using the JSSA's survival acronym, SERE. It nagged at him, though, so he went and checked the list of missing men. And there was Henry Muir Serex.

But then, suddenly, the CIA fell in line with the Pentagon. A month or so after his briefing, it told Dussault that what he had seen was a mirage.



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Dussault described the before and after in testimony to the Senate committee: "The CIA guys . . . said look, we saw the numbers. They admitted seeing the same numbers I did.

When I circled it, they were right there and they said yeah, we saw it. But when we met a week ago, two weeks ago . . . they briefed the fact that they tried to go back to the original . . . they did a digital on this thing, looked at it on a light table, and it wasn't there . . . that stuff wasn't there." The CIA told him, he said, "It must have been an anomaly, photographic anomaly."

This same division over what was there and what was an "anomaly" extended to all the satellite evidence brought before the Senate committee — more than 40 different sets of ground markings. The panel sought to defuse the controversy by bringing in an independent expert. They found Larry Burroughs, retired from Washington service where he had headed the government's main imagery lab, the National Photographic Interpretation Center, an arm of the CIA. The Pentagon sympathizers on the committee, however, wanted someone more to their liking and hired Carroll Lucas, a private analyst who had done a lot of work for the Pentagon.

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The Photo: Shadow or MIA Distress Code?

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The results were not surprising. Burroughs found several authentic distress markings. Lucas said they were all shadows and vegetation.

The SEREX photo was not among the 40 or so images they were given to examine, perhaps because the particular image that showed the SEREX markings was not provided by the CIA or Pentagon. As experts will tell you, a satellite, as it scans over an area, will record many images of the same section over a period of time, say an hour. Differences in angle and time of day will produce quite different images, and all of the images are authentic. Just because a shape or marking does not show in one frame does not mean it doesn't exist.

In any event, though Burroughs and Lucas were not shown the specific image Dussault saw, they did examine a number of images from fields close by. Lucas found only shadows and vegetation. Burroughs found several markings, including one — "GX2527" — that matched the distress letters and secret four-digit number of Air Force Col. Peter Matthes, missing since 1969. Burroughs said a number of the symbols around Dong Vai prison seemed to be old, and he recommended the use of special photo processing techniques. The Dong Vai prison is no longer being used, but in the late 1970s — long after 1973, when Hanoi said it had returned all prisoners — U.S. intelligence received reports from local sources in that area who said Americans were being held in that facility.

While none of Dussault's or Burroughs' findings on the SEREX or other photos prove conclusively that the specific men indicated in the markings actually made the distress symbols themselves or that they are alive today, these markings, if authentic, had to have been made by men familiar with the assigned symbols and code numbers —

that is, by American prisoners.

Despite all the official activity on the SEREX photo, the family was still given no information. It was not until April 15, 1993, nearly a year after the image was recorded, that they learned of its existence — not from the Pentagon but from a television talk show where the photo was cited by former congressman Billy Hendon, an MIA activist.

From that moment, this distressed family — the two now-grown daughters and their mother, Barbara, who remarried after the Pentagon declared her husband dead — has been pushing Washington for a chance to view the satellite imagery.

Helping the family deal with the Pentagon is Sen. Bob Smith of New Hampshire, who was vice chairman of the Senate committee and is the most active member of Congress in trying to pry MIA information out of the intelligence establishment. Smith himself viewed the SEREX imagery and saw the distress signals on a visit to a government imagery center in November 1992.

Yet even with Smith demanding that the family requests be granted, the Pentagon dug in its heels.

For example, the family, in letters and phone calls, asked the Pentagon to let them view the precise blown-up SEREX print on which Robert Dussault circled the symbols in red ink. They also asked to see all digital satellite imagery plus negatives and positives related to that exact photo.

The Pentagon agreed to a meeting — set for next Monday — but it completely ignored the family's requests to view this photo. Instead, Edward Ross, who heads the Pentagon's POW/MIA office, and his deputy, Col. Joseph Schlatter, both of whom have spent years in efforts to debunk MIA evidence, responded in a Dec. 30 memo sent to the family that "photo analysts do not use 'positives or negatives'

'Grass and shadows are exactly the explanations the Pentagon has been giving for 20 years.'

"are not suitable for serious analytical work." They said they would be showing the family only "the Primary Imagery Record and computer-assisted enhancements." This primary record is a reference to the satellite's system of transforming light signals into digital signals, which are then displayed and enhanced at high-resolution workstations that are like very advanced television units.

The memo's edict about what materials were not usable for analysis was as close to a flat-out lie as any gobbledygook can get. What Ross and Schlatter, neither of whom has any training in photo imagery, forgot to mention was that analysts use not only the digital images on high-resolution workstations but concurrently transform the digital images into negatives and positives and 3-D images and view these film images on light tables. They also forgot to mention that specialists who might be hostile to their visitors' goals can, on those workstations, change the color and contrast and fix it through massive enlargement so that all the markings suddenly blur and disappear.

Ross and Schlatter apparently also forgot the testimony that then-Assistant Secretary of Defense Duane Andrews, a trained photo interpreter, gave to the Senate committee on Oct. 15, 1992. Andrews explained that imagery experts need and work with precisely the materials the Serax family had asked for — film negatives, film positives and 3-D images. He said that the digital signals produced these materials by projecting "laser light onto a film negative," with other techniques being used "to view the image as if it were in three dimensions."

In short, imagery-trained Andrews defined as important all the materials that Ross and Schlatter, untrained, said "are not suitable for serious analytical work."

In the last few days, pressure on the Pentagon has increased — from the family and Sen. Smith. There has also been fallout from my earlier column, which triggered other press queries.

Thus, on Tuesday, only five days after the Dec. 30 rejection, Schlatter called Jennifer Serax-Helwig and told her the family would be shown all the materials they had asked for.

The meeting is scheduled for Monday afternoon in Washington, with the Serax family flying in from the West Coast. Smith and Dussault and Burroughs will be there at the request of the family. The Pentagon will produce an array of officials. Schlatter also told Jennifer Serax-Helwig that Lucas, the photo interpreter who does consulting for the Pentagon and who always finds nothing but shadows and vegetation, was being invited as well.

Jennifer Serax-Helwig, a mother of three who also works, says the struggle with the Pentagon has left her very stressed. "I have a hard time sleeping," she said by phone from Sacramento. "I wake up composing letters to the president. I find myself in the shower at six in the morning bawling my eyes out and talking to my dad, saying I'm sorry for what happened to him. It's been very hard."

A New MIA Tale of Disappearing Images

WASHINGTON —

The family of Henry "Mick" Serex — an Air Force major whose plane was downed in Vietnam in 1972 and whose name was seen by some intelligence officials on satellite imagery taken over North Vietnam in 1992 — will be leaving here with the case still unresolved. But quite apart from the Serex imagery, which I wrote about in two columns last week, the family's stressful visit to the capital revealed some telling new information about the Defense Department's failures to explore MIA evidence and about the fallibilities of its satellite technology and the image "experts" who analyze it.



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Here are two of the failures uncovered:

• At the Monday session, according to sources there, the Pentagon admitted for the first time that its touted IDEX system cannot pick up symbols on

the ground unless they are quite wide. This means that many distress symbols, being too narrow for the system, could have been going undetected or falsely dismissed as blurred shadows or vegetation.

• A Senate committee on MIAs revealed in 1992 that the Central Intelligence Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency (of the Pentagon) had no training in pilot distress signals and therefore, for 20 years, had not been specifically looking for them on overhead photography. Thus, in 1993, a test of the DIA's skills was made at several sites in the United States. A large number of intentional distress symbols of all varieties were laid down to see if the satellite system and its interpreters could pick them up. The DIA was told the sites, and the imagery was taken. The result, according to information that emerged at the Monday meeting: Almost none of the signals were detected by the DIA and CIA analysts. Only after they were told exactly what the signals were did they find some of them.

What follows is a partial re-creation of what happened Monday when, after persistent pressure by Serex' wife and two daughters and by Sen. Bob Smith (R-N.H.), Congress' leading MIA activist, the Pentagon agreed to let family members view some of the imagery they had asked to see. This account is based on information from several of the participants at the session, both on the government side and the family side.

Though the Monday session at the CIA's photo lab (shared by the Pentagon) was the first time an MIA family had been allowed to see the lab and its product, what happened there came as no surprise. As it has been doing with similar MIA evidence since the end of the war two decades ago, the Pentagon contended there was nothing of relevance on the imagery, even though an independent expert (in this case, a man who used to run this lab) said he saw markings that could have been distress symbols. Also, the DIA failed to produce related photos requested by the family that would have been useful, possibly pivotal, in clarifying the situation.

Specifically, for nearly five hours, about 18 DIA and CIA officials filled the room and, as one told the family that the images they thought they saw on a print made from the electronic imagery were neither man-made nor letters spelling out the name

SEREX in capital letters on the ground. Instead, the officials said, the images were "a configuration" and "changes in texture" that disappeared when "enhanced" on the IDEX computer screen.

The independent imagery analyst brought to the session by the family was retired Col. Larry Burroughs, who had four decades of photo-interpretation experience with the Air Force and the CIA, where he was acting director of the photo lab.

Burroughs examined an enlarged print made from the satellite imagery and said he saw on it most, though not all, of the letters that Robert Dussault, a Pentagon distress-symbol expert, testified he saw during a briefing at the CIA in August, 1992. Dussault said he saw the whole name, S-E-R-E-X, on the print, and testified under oath that CIA people present agreed that they saw it, too.

Burroughs, in Monday's session, examined both the print and the imagery as displayed on the IDEX screen. He said he saw on both of them an S and the second E and the X. He said the R was a "possible" but he couldn't define it clearly enough to say definitely. Burroughs said there wasn't enough to be conclusive. But, he said, "something is there that created these figures."

Burroughs said one way to help resolve the controversy was to produce satellite-generated photos taken of the same area on the days just before and just after the print shown Monday, which was taken June 5, 1992. The reason for needing photos from the same period is that distress symbols don't always last a long time, getting wiped out by such things as bad weather. Indeed, on Monday, one of Serex' daughters asked that such photos be produced. Thereupon, a DIA man, Chuck Napper, left the room and, after a long absence, returned to say there was no such imagery. Some in the room found this unconvincing, even suspicious.

Burroughs explained that if the markings on the SEREX photo were, as the Pentagon claimed, "anomalies," then the other photos would either establish or disprove this contention. What the Pentagon calls "anomalies" — things that look like they're present but aren't real — will not appear in the same spot or look the same in a photo taken on a different day, since light and other factors will have changed.

I believe it's fair to conjecture that the Pentagon believes it succeeded in confusing the Serex family on Monday. I wonder if these masters of confusion realize how much they revealed in the process.

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