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DARING POW RAID AT SON TAY

On Nov. 21, 1970, top officials in Washington held their breath as a joint U.S. Army-Air Force **rescue team attempted to free U.S. POWs** from captivity in North Vietnam.

BY AL HEMINGWAY

“We are going to rescue 70 American prisoners of war, maybe more, from a camp called Son Tay,” announced Col. Arthur “Bull” Simons, combat veteran of World War II, Korea and Vietnam. “You are to let nothing interfere with this operation. Our mission is to rescue prisoners, not to take prisoners. If there’s been a leak, we’ll know it as soon as the second or third chopper sets down... We’ll make them pay for every foot.”

When Simons finished his speech, the room fell silent for a brief moment. Then

every man applauded. The raid on Son Tay Prison Camp — deep within North Vietnam — was under way.

In May 1970, two POW camps were identified by the Interagency Prisoner of War Intelligence Committee (IPWIC). This committee, formed in 1967, was responsible for identifying POWs and the camps they were interned in and to veer bombing missions away from those areas.

The two camps were Ap Lo, about 30 miles west of Hanoi, and Son Tay, 23 miles from North Vietnam’s capital, situated at the junction of the Song Con and Red Rivers. It was determined that

Son Tay was being enlarged because of the increased activity at the camp. Intelligence also confirmed that 55 POWs were being confined at Son Tay. Photo reconnaissance discovered the letters SAR (Search and Rescue), apparently spelled out by the prisoner’s laundry, and an arrow with the number 8, indicating the distance the men had to travel to the fields they worked in.

On May 25, IPWIC briefed Army Gen. Earle Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), on a tentative plan to free the POWs at Son Tay. By 1970, the war was in its fifth year. Public sup-

Surprise at Son Tay by Ronald Wong. On Nov. 21, 1970, the Army Special Forces pulled off a perfectly executed raid on the Son Tay POW Camp in North Vietnam. Not a single American was killed. But unknown to the would-be rescuers, the U.S. prisoners had been moved.



port was waning, and a daring rescue of POWs would be a much-needed morale booster militarily; not to mention a political victory for President Richard M. Nixon who was under fire for his recent incursion into Cambodia.

OPERATION POLAR CIRCLE

Wheeler granted the request. Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, the new JCS chairman, sat in on the meeting. The first phase of the plan, dubbed *Operation Polar Circle*, was approved.

On June 10, a 15-man group, headed by Army Brig. Gen. Donald D. Black-



Seated in the cabin of a C-130, Capt. Richard Meadows and his 14-man assault group "Blueboy" prepare for the coming raid during a training exercise in September 1970.

burn, began the planning stage of the operation. Blackburn, no stranger to special operations, was the special assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities. He conceived the idea for the raid and then appointed a panel.

Reconnaissance photos taken by SR-71 "Blackbirds" revealed that Son Tay "was active." The camp itself was in the open and surrounded by rice paddies. In close proximity was the 12th North Vietnamese Army (NVA) Regiment totaling approximately 12,000 troops. Also nearby was an artillery school, a supply depot and an air defense installation.

Five hundred yards south was another compound called the "secondary school," which was an administration center housing 45 guards. To make matters more difficult, Phuc Yen Air Base was only 20 miles northeast of Son Tay. It was evident that the raid would have to be executed swiftly. If not, the Communists could have planes in the air and a reactionary force at the camp within minutes.

Son Tay itself was small and was situated amid 40-foot trees to obstruct the view. Only one power and telephone line entered it. The POWs were kept in four large buildings in the main compound. Three observation towers and a seven-foot wall encompassed the camp. Because of its diminutive size, only one chopper could land within the walls. The remainder would have to touch down

outside the compound.

Another problem the planning group had to consider was the weather. The heavy monsoon downpours prohibited the raid until late fall. Finally, November was selected because the moon would be high enough over the horizon for good visibility, but low enough to obscure the enemy's vision.

OPERATION IVORY COAST

With the planning stage completed, the next phase of the raid, called Ivory Coast, was ready to swing into action. Air Force Brig. Gen. Leroy J. "Roy" Manor, a stickler for organization, led the group. The National Security Agency (NSA) tracked the NVA air defense systems and artillery units nearby. Also, in addition to the Blackbirds, unmanned Buffalo Hunter "Drones" flew over the camp as well, although they had to cease flying because many feared that the NVA would spot them.

In July, an SR-71 photo recon mission depicted "less active than usual" activity in the camp. On Oct. 3, Son Tay showed very little signs of life. However, flights over Dong Hoi, an NVA port and base southeast of Son Tay, were picking up increased activity. The planners were scratching their heads. Had the POWs been moved? Had the NVA picked up signs that a raid was imminent?

In fact, the POWs had been relocated to Dong Hoi July 14, but not for the



ABOVE: A North Vietnamese photo taken after the raid shows the wreckage of HH-3E that carried the Blueboy assault team, *Banana 1*. The helicopter was destroyed by the team before they were extracted.



LEFT: An aerial view of the Son Tay prison camp shows prisoner housing within the walled area.

reasons the planners had anticipated. The Song Con River, where Son Tay was located, had begun to overflow its banks. So because of the flooding problem, the prisoners were transported to Dong Hoi.

OPERATION KINGPIN

Operation Kingpin, the final component of the raid, was approved by Nixon on Nov. 18. Next day, however, Adm. Moorer was notified that it was suspected that the POWs had been transferred. Unfortunately, the planners nixed the idea to move on Dong Hoi. Their reasoning was that the raiders had rehearsed on Son Tay all this time and changing to Dong Hoi at the last minute might cause catastrophic results.

On Nov. 21, 1970, at approximately 11:18 p.m., the Son Tay raiders, accompanied by C-130Es called Combat Talons, departed Udorn, Thailand, for the final phase of their mission. At the same time, the U.S. Navy began a huge carrier strike against North Vietnam to divert attention away from the raiding party.

As the group neared the prison, the two "Jolly Greens," dubbed "Apple 4"

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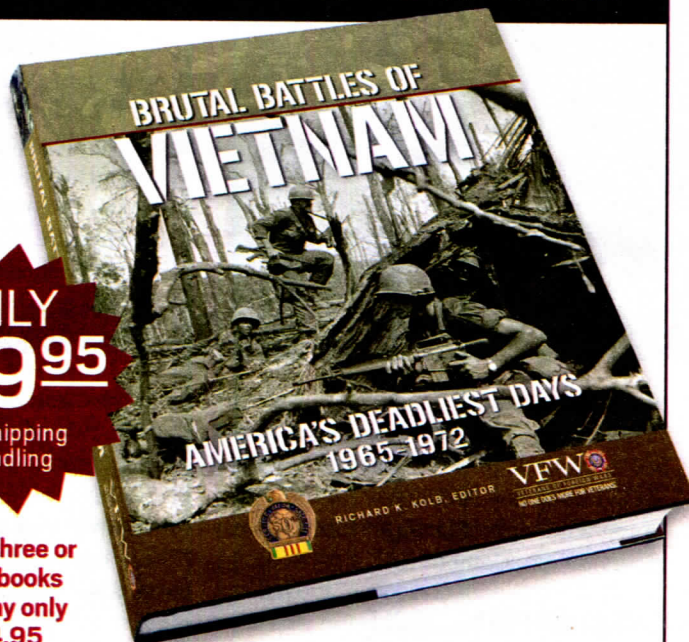
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and "Apple 5," hovered at 1,500 feet to act as reserve flareships in the event the C-130s' flares did not ignite. Suddenly, Col. Frederic M. "Marty" Donohue's HH-53 helicopter, call sign "Apple 3," developed trouble. Without warning, a yellow trouble light appeared signaling transmission problems.

Donohue calmly informed his co-pilot, Capt. Tom Waldron, to "ignore the SOB." In a normal situation, Donohue would have landed. But this was no normal mission. "Apple 3" kept going. As Donohue's chopper "floated" across Son Tay's main compound, the door gunners let loose 4,000 rounds a minute from their mini-guns. The observation tower in the northwest section of the camp erupted into flames. With that, Donohue set down at his "holding point" in a rice paddy just outside the prison.

As Maj. Herb Kalen tried to negotiate a landing inside the compound, he almost lost control of his chopper, call sign "Banana 1," that was carrying the assault group code-named "Blueboy." The 40-foot trees that surrounded Son Tay were, in actuality, much larger. "One tree," a pilot remembered, "must have been 150 feet tall . . . we tore into it like a big lawn mower. There was a tremendous vibration . . . and we were down."

Luckily, only one person was injured; a crew chief suffered a broken ankle. Regaining his composure, Special Forces Capt. Richard Meadows scurried from the downed aircraft and said in a calm voice through his bullhorn: "We're Americans. Keep your heads down. This is a rescue. Keep your heads down. We're Americans. Get on the floor. We'll be in your cells in a minute."

No one answered back, though.

The raiders sprung into action immediately. Automatic weapons ripped into the guards. Other NVA, attempting to flee, were cut down as they tried to make their way through the east wall. Fourteen men entered the prison to rescue the POWs. However, to their disappointment, none were found.

FURIOUS FIREFIGHTS

As the raiders were neutralizing the compound, Lt. Col. John Allison's helicopter, call sign "Apple 2," with the "Redwine" group aboard, was heading toward Son Tay's south wall. As his door gunners



On Dec. 4, 1970, Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird presented Silver Stars to the Son Tay raiders at Ft. Bragg, N.C. Earlier, on Nov. 27, Col. Arthur Simons and Sgt. First Class Tyrone J. Adderly each received the Distinguished Service Cross at the White House.

fired their mini-guns on the guard towers, Allison wondered where "Apple 1" was. Code-named "Greenleaf," it was carrying Simons. Allison put his HH-3 inside the compound and the Special Forces personnel streamed down the rear ramp.

Wasting no time, they blew the utility pole and set up a roadblock about 100 yards from the landing zone. A heated firefight ensued. Guards were "scurrying like mice" in an attempt to fire on the raiders. In the end, almost 50 NVA guards were killed at Son Tay.

"Apple 1," piloted by Lt. Col. Warner A. Britton, was having troubles of its own. The chopper had veered off the mark and was 450 meters south of the prison and had erroneously landed at the "secondary school." Simons knew it wasn't Son Tay. The structures and terrain were different and, to everyone's horror, it was no "secondary school"—it was a barracks filled with enemy soldiers—100 of whom were killed in five minutes.

As the chopper left, the raiders opened up with a barrage of automatic weapons. Capt. Udo Walther cut down four enemy soldiers and went from bay to bay

riddling their rooms with his CAR-15. Realizing their error, the group radioed "Apple 1" to return and pick up the raiders from their dilemma. Simons, meanwhile, jumped into a trench to await the return of Britton when an NVA leaped in the hole next to him. Terrified and wearing only his underwear, the Vietnamese froze. Simons pumped six shells from his .357 Magnum handgun into the trooper's chest, killing him instantly.

Britton's chopper quickly returned when he received the radio transmission that Simon's group was in the wrong area. He flew back to Son Tay and deposited the remainder of the raiders there. Things were beginning to wind down. There was little resistance from the remaining guards. Meadows radioed to Lt. Col. Elliott P. "Bud" Sydnor, the head of the "Redwine" group on the raid, "negative items." There were no POWs. They had been on the ground exactly 27 minutes. The Son Tay Raid was over.

WHAT WENT WRONG?

Why had the raid on Son Tay failed? According to historian Dale Andrade: "The fact that initially the CIA, DIA and

NSA would all be involved sounded like a good idea. But, in reality, they only muddied the waters of the planning and got in each other's way."

Another important factor was the seemingly never-ending poor weather. That's why the POWs had been relocated from Son Tay in the first place; because of the rapidly rising waters near the camp. Even Manor wrote in his after-action report that "five years of typhoons moved into the area of North Vietnam, South Vietnam and Laos" in the months just prior to the raid.

What most did not know was that a top-secret "weather modification" experiment named *Operation Popeye* was responsible for some of the inclement weather. (Col. Keith Grimes, an Air Force meteorologist, was on the raid.) Aircraft had been dropping "cloud-seeding paraphernalia" in the region, and the missions over Laos had doubled in 1970.

"Why didn't top officials in the CIA and Air Force tell the JCS and the *Ivory Coast Task Force* about *Operation Popeye*?" wrote Dale Andrade. "That gap in the knowledge of the planners could have endangered not only the lives of

POWs in the area, but also the lives of the raiders."

After the raid, the NVA moved POWs from outlying POW camps to the Hanoi Hilton.

"What really stands out in my mind," remarked Special Forces Sgt. Terry Buckler, a member of the raiding party, "was the dedication the guys had. I was the youngest person on the raid, so I felt my life was unimportant. But the others had family. And they could have gotten off the mission at any time. But they stayed. That impressed me. These guys were willing to lay down their lives for their comrades. They were true professionals." ★

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15 CROSSES

DISTINGUISHED SERVICE CROSS

Adderly, Tyrone J.	Sgt. 1st Class
Kemmer, Thomas J.	Master Sgt.
Meadows, Richard J.	Capt.
Powell, Thomas E.	Staff Sgt.
Simons, Arthur D.	Col.
Sydnor, Elliott P.	Lt. Col.



AIR FORCE CROSS

Allison, John V.	Lt. Col.
Britton, Warner A.	Lt. Col.
Donohue, Frederic M.	Maj.
Kalen, Herbert D.	Maj.
Wright, Leroy M.	Tech. Sgt.



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