

The Truth about the Son Tay Rescue of American Pilots



Vietnamese Story about the Son Tay Raid
Written by Dang Voung Hung
Translated by Merle L. Pribbenow

“The Truth about the Son Tay Raid to Rescue American Pilots”

This story of the Son Tay raid was published in Hanoi in 2000 in a book entitled

Escape and Missing.

It is a trilogy on the Vietnam War with one part of it is devoted to the raid.

Army Colonel Stephen C. Ball from the US Department of Defense Attaché Office in Hanoi sent Colonel John Gargus two copies of this book.

Gargus retained one copy and gave the other to the JFK Museum at Fort Bragg for display with other Son Tay raid memorabilia.

Mr. Merle L. Pribbenow translated the story for the
Son Tay Raid Association

He authorized us to print copies of this English text for the use of our members.

We thank him for his contribution and support of our organization.

Son Tay Raid Association Reunion 2004
Fort Bragg, North Carolina

Colonel Dang Vuong Hung and Mr. Merle Pribbenow gave me their permission to include this story on my website.

Resume of Dang Vuong Hung



Dang Vuong Hung was born on February 15, 1958. He is a proud member of the Communist Party of Vietnam who became a well-known prolific writer with over 50 books to his credit. His professional memberships include the Writers Guild of 2000, Vietnam Journalists Association and Hanoi Writers Association.

He is also a soldier who has risen to the rank of Colonel Public Security. Colonel and writer Dang Vuong Hung spent years working in the Press and Publications in the Army and Police. He is also a Former Deputy Editor-in-Chief of the People's Police and World Security who was appointed Deputy Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of Electronics, Environment and Urban Vietnam in September 2017.

ESCAPE AND MISSING

(Chay Tron va Mat Tich)

By Dang Vuong Hung, Writer's Association Publishing House and the "World Security Newspaper" (Bao An Ninh The Gioi), Hanoi, 2000

Book jacket states that Dang Vuong Hung is Deputy Editor of "World Security"

"The Truth About the Son Tay Raid to Rescue American Pilots" (Su That Ve Vu Tap Kich Cuu Phi Cong My tai Son Tay), Pages 265-382

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Almost 30 years ago, in late November 1970, the American imperialists sent a large number of helicopters and transport aircraft, escorted and supported by hundreds of combat jet aircraft, to deliver a special task force unit to Son Tay, a location deep inside the territory of North Vietnam, in an effort to rescuer a number of U.S. pilots who had been shot down in the skies over North Vietnam and were being held as prisoners.

The U.S. made extremely extensive and costly preparations for this plan. Very senior officials in the massive war machine of this great super-power took part in the planning for this operations, including Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, Secretary of State William Rogers, National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, and CIA Director Richard Helms.

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U.S. President Richard Nixon personally signed his initials to approve this plan. For many years, the plan for the raid to rescue U.S. pilots held at Son Tay has been held in a number of top secret files of the U.S. armed forces.

UNIVITED GUESTS FROM THE SKY

During the sixth decade of this century, Navy Lieutenant Junior Grade "Evoret Anvare" [Everret Alvarez] may have been one of the most famous people in the United States. However, it was not because of some heroic action, some extraordinary ability, or some glorious combat achievement. Instead, quite simply, "Anvare" [Alvarez] was famous because he was the first U.S. pilot to be shot down by Vietnamese air defense forces and taken prisoner.

On the unforgettable date of 5 August 1964, after the so-called "Gulf of Tonkin Incident" that was fabricated by the Americans, on orders from President Johnson, "Anvare" [Alvarez] flew his A-4D aircraft (called a "Skyhawk") to drop bombs from the sky over Quang Ninh and Haiphong. Encountering a thick curtain of anti-aircraft fire, two modern U.S. aircraft were hit and burned like torches in the sky.

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Thank God! "Anvare" [Alvarez] was able to escape from his flaming aircraft. He parachuted into the ocean and was immediately picked up by our forces. At the time "Anvare" [Alvarez] was just 26 years old. He had to sit in Cell Number 6 in Hoa Lo

Prison for almost ten years. He may have been the “most senior” of all the POWs in Vietnam. Not long after he was captured, he was forced to laugh and cry at the same time when he learned that his young wife in Florida had gone to court to divorce him so that she could seek a new source of “happiness.” This is the find of faithfulness one finds in a nation that describes itself as the “free world”!

However, Lt. J.G. ‘Anvare’ [Alvarez] was still luckier than many of his fellow servicemen, because on that day the undeclared U.S. air war of destruction against North Vietnam began and escalated in ferocity. President Johnson constantly called for
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intensifying the war. On average, during the initial phase about 70 bombing sorties were flown every day. In 1966, the number of U.S. bombing sorties against North Vietnam increased to 223 sorties per day. By late 1967, the number of criminal attack sorties climbed to 300 sorties per day. Along with the increase in the scale of the bombing, the number of U.S. aircraft shot down over the northern half of our nation increased steadily.

The U.S. announced that, by the end of 1965, 61 U.S. pilots had been taken prisoner by our forces. In 1966, on average eight U.S. aircraft were shot down every ten days and 86 more U.S. pilots were taken to the “Heartbreak Hotel” (or the “Hilton Hotel,” as U.S. pilots jokingly called it) at Hoa Lo in Hanoi. In 1967, virtually no day went by without the report that another U.S. aircraft had been shot down over Hanoi, Haiphong or some other location in North Vietnam.

One of the “lucky” U.S. pilots was Lieutenant Colonel “Risoc Pokiec” [Richard Paul Keirn]. His aircraft was shot down on 24 July 1965, and he was taken prisoner when he parachuted down to the ground (This was almost a very memorable day for our young Vietnamese Missile Forces – the day when they won their first battle and shot down a modern U.S. aircraft). To “Pokiet” [Paul Kiern], this was the second time he had been a prisoner of war. The first time, during the 2nd World War, he had been a B-17 pilot and had been shot down on his first mission on the German front. “Pokiec” [Paul
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Kiern] spent nine months in a Nazi prison camp. However, that was a fascist prison camp, and he was fighting in the joint forces of the allied armies, so he still had a little bit of glory. However, when he came to Vietnam, “Pokiec” [Paul Kiern] was flying an F-105 Thunderchief and was shot down and taken prisoner on the third day after his arrival in the combat area. In 1973, when he was finally exchanged, he said bitterly,

“I really only flew combat missions for a total of a few hours of combat on orders from my superiors, and afterward spent almost ten years as a prisoner in a prison camp. The U.S. Air Force has become better and more modern, but unfortunately I cannot find another pilot willing to sit still and fly beside me.”

In comparison with “Risoc Pokiec” [Richard Paul Kiern], the flying career of Lieutenant Colonel “Robinsn Raino” [Robinson Risner] seems to be more glorious. He had been a hero during the Korean War, flying 109 successful missions and amassing more than 3,000 combat flying hours (a record not achieved by any other professional
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military pilot). “Raino” [Risner] had shot down eight opposition aircraft during savage air battles. However, when he arrived in the Vietnamese combat area, his aircraft was hit and set afire on only his fifth mission. Since he was an experienced old fox, “Raino” [Risner] flew his aircraft out over the ocean and was able to eject and parachute into the

sea. In their very first rescue, U.S. military sea rescue forces were able to save him from drowning. At that time the U.S. press made a tremendous commotion about this great success. The magazine "Time" printed a full-page photograph of him, showing him as a model hero and outstanding hero of the U.S. Air Force. This all turned out to be very funny, however, because later the U.S. press ignored the story when, on 16 September 1965, taking his old familiar route, "Raino" [Risner] was flying his F-105 Thunderchief to commit yet more crimes when Vietnamese air defense fire knocked him from the skies
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over Do Len in Thanh Hoa province. This time, only God could save "Raino" [Risner]! After confessing to journalists all the crimes he had committed, he went down to lay in his bed "recuperating" in a prison camp for seven and a half years before being exchanged. One other point should be mentioned here: When our troops shot him down and took him prisoner, this American "hero" nicely gave us such an honest and complete statement that even we were surprised. I understand that after his exchange back to the U.S. he continued to serve in the U.S. armed forces and rose to the rank of Colonel General (Lieutenant General).

Among these "uninvited guests from the sky," we cannot forget to mention one rather special individual, one of the "favored sons" of the U.S. armed forces. This was Navy Lieutenant Commander "Gion Macken" [John McCain], the son of Admiral "Gionsac Macken." While the aircraft flown by this "favored son" was bombing the Yen Phu Electric Power Plant in Hanoi on 26 October 1967 in an effort to "send Hanoi back to the Stone Age" (in the boasting words of the Americans), it was hit by the capital's air defense fire and dove almost straight down toward the Yen Phu Electrical Power Plant.

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The "favored son" was severely wounded but managed to eject and parachuted down into the Truc Bach Lake. Our people arrived quickly to pull him out, but he was floating in the water unconscious, like a body. Amazingly, exactly three months after "Macken" [McCain] was shot down, the U.S. President signed an order promoting his to Full Admiral commanding all combat forces in the Pacific area in order to carry out the American war of aggression in Vietnam. "Macken" [McCain], his son, received leniency from the Vietnamese government. He was given medicine and special medical care, and nine months later, in July 1968, he was exchanged back to the Americans. It is not known whether, back then, every time he issued an order to his subordinate unit to commit another war crime in Vietnam, Admiral "Macken" [McCain], the father, thought about this and felt remorse for what he was doing.

On the night of 10 September 1966, the skies over An Binh, a poor rural hamlet in Hai Duong province, suddenly lit up as a giant torch blazed through the skies. It was a burning U.S. aircraft. The entire village ran out to hunt down and capture the American pilot. Fate led Old Man Chop, a peasant farmer in An Doai hamlet, to capture one of two U.S. pilots who had escaped death by parachuting back to earth. Almost 30 years later, this same pilot returned to visit An Doai as an honored guest of our Government. The

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pilot was the respected "Pito Pitoson" [Peter Peterson], a U.S. Senator and the first Ambassador of the United States of America to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. This emotional story was told by Poet Tran Dang Khoa in a unique special report printed in "*Professional Security of the World*" [Chuyen De An Ninh The Gioi], issue 56, an article

I am sure many of my readers will remember.

There were many, many other such images of “uninvited guests from the sky.” The U.S. says that by the end of 1968, a total of 356 of their pilots had been captured as prisoner by our forces. And the lives of each of these individuals was a long story in itself, each life filled with surprising details.

In actual fact, the number of U.S. pilots shot out of the skies over North Vietnam by that time was actually much higher. When an aircraft was hit and exploded into flames, not every pilot was lucky enough to escape. Many pilots were hit by our shells and died right in their cockpits. Others were trapped and dove into the ground, their bodies burning into ash along with their aircraft. There were also cases when the pilot managed to parachute out of his aircraft, but his parachute did not open, or he was hit by a bullet and killed while still in the air, etc. The U.S. side announced that as of the end of 1968, in addition to the “lucky” pilots who had been sent to prison camps by the Vietnamese side, 927 other pilots had been killed during the performance of their duties.

At the time of their capture, almost all of the U.S. pilots demonstrated remorse at the crimes they had committed against the people of Vietnam. They usually quickly gave
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very honest and complete statements in the hope of receiving leniency and humanitarian treatment from our Government. The “aristocratic pilots” and “favored son” pilots were extremely afraid of hardship, pain, hunger, and bodily suffering. The Air Defense Museum of the People’s Army of Vietnam currently still retains many mementos taken from the U.S. pilots when they were shot down. These mementos range from extremely personal items, such as diaries, photographs of wives and family members, etc., to “national” mementos, such as various types of equipment and weapons stamped “Made in the U.S.A.,” I.D. cards, money and coins, etc. One extremely interesting memento is a rectangular piece of cloth 25 by 50 centimeters printed with special ink in two colors, red and blue. This cloth would not fade in water and was extremely durable. U.S. pilots called these pieces of cloth “blood chits.” Our citizens called them “Begging flags” (because a picture of the American flag was printed on the top of the “blood chit” and the contents of the message were the words of a beggar). The message printed on these

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“Begging flags” was very short, but it was printed in a total of 14 different languages, including English, French, Chinese, Cambodian, Lao, Malaysian, Indonesian, etc. The Vietnamese portion read as follows:

I am an American. I cannot speak Vietnamese. I have been unlucky and need to ask for your assistance, including food, shelter, and protection. Then I would like you to take me to someone who can conceal me and send me back home. Our government will reward you.

This was truly an extremely concrete and careful example of the concern of the U.S. government for its’ expeditionary aggressor troops. It is truly ironic, then, that when U.S. pilots were shot down and were fortunate enough to escape death, they usually quietly raised their hands to surrender and never had to use their “begging flags.”

Back then, every time they were forced to fly through the thick curtain of anti-aircraft fire over the northern half of our nation, the American “heroes” were always terrified. They usually had to fly at high speed for many hours straight with the utmost in concentration, making them extremely tense. Their bodies tightly strapped into their seats

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they tried to withstand G-forces many times more than normal in order to avoid being thrown out of their cockpits. When an aircraft was hit, reacting out of fear of death, they had to make a number of extremely rapid actions in order to eject themselves from the cockpit. By design, the pilots flying America's most modern jet combat aircraft were all strapped in tight with leather belts to hold them in their ejection seats. However, almost every time they flew into the skies over North Vietnam, the pilots loosened their seat straps to enable them to be able to move around so they could more easily view their radar screens and turn to look all around them to defend against the Vietnamese Air Force's highly effective MiGs, which would suddenly appear and launch missiles at them. When the aircraft was hit, they usually did not have enough time to tighten their leather seat straps back up sufficiently. When they ejected in this situation, the pilots often hit the sides of the cockpits as they shot out of the aircraft, breaking their arms, crushing their knees, or inflicting other types of serious injuries. They then would spiral through the air, with their arms and legs feeling like they were being ripped off by the supersonic air stream, until the parachute automatically opened to help them as they approached the ground. And when they reached the ground they were usually surrounded by many people carrying guns, knives, clubs, sticks, or anything else that available. These people stood there with their eyes blazing with hatred in an atmosphere of extreme excitement as they surrounded and captured the pilots!

The terror felt by the American pilots extended beyond the time when they were flying in the skies over North Vietnam. It seems to have extended into the mealtimes and even into their dreams. Many of them were so discouraged that they became alcoholics,
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and some became drug addicts. There were even a number of pilots who participated in the protest movement against the war in Vietnam.

I am sure many of my readers still remember those difficult and savage but also very heroic years of the war. The entire northern half of our nation was turned into an air defense position, ready to open fire against U.S. aircraft. No one can ever forget the scenes of evacuated cities, self defense forces and militia firing at enemy aircraft, children wearing straw hats attending classes in underground bunkers, etc. At night the air would be split with the roar of jet aircraft, bomb explosions would shake the ground, and the explosions of our missiles and anti-aircraft shells would turn the night sky red.

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Every morning, everyone would excitedly look for the reports about our victories in the "Nhan Dan" [People's Daily] and "Quan Doi" [Army] newspapers and would listen to the loudspeakers blaring the latest editorials broadcast over the Voice of Vietnam Radio describing our victories over the Americans the night before.

The American air war of destruction over the northern half of our nation escalated to its most savage level. The air battles became increasingly violent and U.S. losses grew higher with each passing day. This may have been the most costly war in the entire history of U.S. military aggression. In addition to the steadily growing numbers of aircraft shot down, the number of U.S. pilots captured by our forces and brought in to "register" to live at the "Hanoi Hilton Hotel" grew larger every day. Every one of these
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sky pilots was a giant, and the rooms used to detain U.S. pilots in Hanoi during that

period were crowded, and in fact were beyond their designed capacity.



Các "người hùng" phi công Mỹ bị bắt làm tù binh ngày càng nhiều...
khiến cho trại giam Hỏa Lò không còn chỗ...



Một số "thẻ căn cước" của phi công Mỹ bị bắt

Page 279. Upper caption: The number of "heroic" American pilots captured as prisoners of war grew with each passing day, so that Hoa Lo prison soon had no room left to hold any more.

Lower caption: A number of "ID cards" belonging to captured American pilots.

In coordination with the victories won by the soldiers and civilians of North Vietnam, the Tet 1968 General Offensive and Uprising launched by the civilians in the south and the Liberation Army of South Vietnam elated our friends throughout the world and brought the image of the Vietnam War home to every American family. U.S.

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President Johnson was forced to announce that he was suspending U.S. air and naval operations against North Vietnam. That same year, the U.S. Government was forced to send a representative to the Paris Conference to sit down to at the table to negotiate peace for Vietnam.

FROM HEARBREAK HOTEL TO HOPE DETENTION CAMP

Mr. “Bengiamin F. Sommo” [Benjamin Schemmer], a high ranking officer in the Pentagon who was also a journalist and a specialist in researching U.S. military history (the person who collected documents and wrote a rather complete book titled “The Raid” about the raid by U.S. troops into Son Tay) provided the following statistics: Among the 365 “heroes of the American air forces” who had the “honor” of residing at Hoa Lo in Hanoi, the oldest were an Air Force captain and a Navy lieutenant junior grade, each of whom had a wife and two children. As for the rest, their average age was 32, and most of them were in the springtime of their lives. 85% of these pilots had flown more than 15 bombing missions against North Vietnam. This means they had committed more than a few war crimes before fate brought them here to “recuperate.”

The French architects and engineers who designed and built the Hoa Lo Prison never thought this facility would be used to detain U.S. pilots – the aristocratic officers of a rich ally and a military superpower. These engineers and architects thus became the
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unintentional recipients of a portion of the honor and glory of Vietnam’s defeat of U.S. airpower. U.S. pilots called Hoa Lo by a very American name: The *Hanoi Hilton*. Many pilots also liked to use another name for Hoa Lo, a name that more accurately reflected their feelings when they first set foot into this facility: *Heartbreak Hotel*. Whether they called it the *Hanoi Hilton* or *Heartbreak Hotel*, however, it was still the same place – the place where the heroes of the U.S. air forces were held when they fell to earth from the skies!

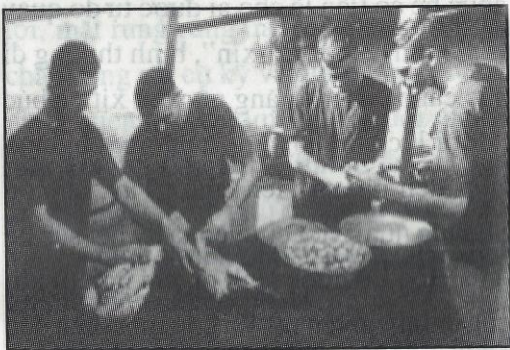
Today, only a very small portion of the Hoa Lo Prison in Hanoi still remains, just enough for people to remember its place in history. The whirlwind of the marketplace during the decade of the 1990s in our nation swept away almost the entire solid concrete and steel structure that had towered over the heart of Hanoi for almost a century. In its
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place was a building dozens of stories tall that was designed and built in the most modern fashion to serve as a tourism services center. I have heard that one former U.S. pilot who visited Hoa Lo expressed his regret when seeing it. If he had known about this plan beforehand, he said, in his position as the director of a wealthy company he would have paid to purchase this entire plot of land and requested that the Government of Vietnam preserve the original outside structure of the Hoa Lo Prison and then invest to convert it into a unique and original tourist attraction. Then he would arrange to bring the several hundred U.S. pilots who had been “residents of Hoa Lo” 30 years before, together with their friends and families, back to visit the building, one by one. The guests would be able to spend a few nights there, enjoy such dishes as Hanoi noodle soup [pho] and boiled tofu dipped in fermented shrimp sauce, and the owner would be able to sit back and just count the money as it rolled in. That truly was a great American-style idea!

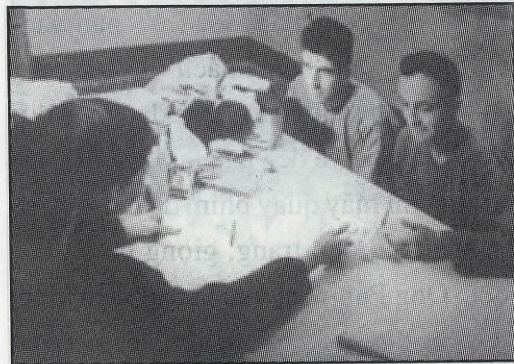
While before the black gate of Hoa Lo was only opened when policemen took the

accused out to court to be tried, received new criminal inmates, or transferred an inmate to another prison, and anyone who wanted to come in to bring food and materials to help a prisoner had to be there at the correct time on the correct day and had to have permission from the prison administrator, now my friends and I can go in to visit all the cells in Hoa Lo Prison anytime we wanted, as long as it is open. Outside the main gate, underneath the gate arch with the words “Maison Centrale,” words left behind by the French when they ran the Hoa Lo Prison, a notice has been put up, written in red and black letters on a white background. The notice says that guests are welcome to visit this historical sight any day of the week except Monday. I am just sorry that the displays

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Tù binh phi công Mỹ tự nấu ăn theo ý muốn...



...Và thường xuyên được nhận quà tiếp tế và thư nhà gửi đến theo chính sách nhân đạo của Việt Nam

about the U.S. pilots held prisoner there are very sparse and very rudimentary. Out of the entire former “Hanoi Hilton,” all that is left is a small room about ten square meters in area. There, one can view a single bed complete with sleeping mat, blanket, and curtains, a glass box with shoes, sandals, books, volleyball net, etc., all things that were formerly used by the U.S. pilot POWs. In addition, there are a number of photographs of the daily activities in the lives of the U.S. pilots held in prison, including cooking, receiving gifts, reading letters from home, praying in the chapel, etc.

Page 283. Upper caption: American pilot POWs were allowed to cook food for themselves according to their own preferences.

Lower caption: And they were regularly allowed to receive care packages and letters from home in accordance with Vietnam’s humanitarian policies.

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A few months before Hoa Lo was razed to clear land for construction, a professional foreign film crew with a complete set of film equipment came to make a documentary film at Hoa Lo. The title of the film sounded rather artificial but was constructive and filled with good will: “Tet in Vietnam: Reconciliation.” I can say that this was virtually a special favor, because it was unprecedented for anyone to be allowed to come in freely to film or photograph this “forbidden area.” Even our own reporters who regularly frequented this part of town sometimes were frightened and intimidated by the heavy gray steel doors and the cold stone walls, to say nothing of Western journalists daring to carry out their craft there. This was something that was extremely unusual from the very moment that Building Number 1 at Hoa Lo was built, and especially since our

government had taken over its administration. Another special feature of this event was that the actors playing the main roles were all American citizens and former “residents” of Hoa Lo. These actors were six American pilots who had previously been “unwilling guests” at Hoa Lo during the war. The director brought them straight in from Noi Bai International Airport to “revisit Hoa Lo” one by one while the film camera was set up to greet them and record their expressions, their emotions, and their tone of their voices. Mr. “Punman” [sic – maybe “Pullman”?], who served both as the director and as the cameraman, said,

“If I hired professional actors, at best I would only get 60% of the spirit of the screenplay and the director’s desire. Here, however, everything was 100% accurate! Even the smiles and the tears...”

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One of the actors was a very familiar face that my readers already know: Lieutenant Junior Grade Everett Alvarez, the respected senior pilot in Hoa Lo, who was now almost sixty years old and whose hair had turned half-gray. After so many years, seeing the old place Mr. Alvarez was so emotional he could not say a word. His eyes filled with tears as his quivering hands touched the old iron bars and as he stood for quite some time facing his old, familiar cell. The author of this article thought as he watched this scene, “If only President Bill Clinton was here to view this scene in person, certainly his government would have decided to remove the trade embargo and normalize relations with Vietnam as soon as he took office!”

One night in early September, Journalist Xuan Ba, the author of the once-famous report, “Curious about Hoa Lo” that was printed in the newspaper Tien Phong, took me to visit the house of the man who had been the “Kitchen God” of Hoa Lo for so many years: Colonel Nguyen Van Hoac (I understand that Mr. Hoac has been a Colonel for

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almost six years already!). The warden of the Hanoi City Public Security Temporary Detention Facility, who bears the title of “Hero,” was waiting for us thanks to a phone call that set up our appointment. In fact, I had on several previous occasions had a chance to meet and work with Mr. Hoac, but each such meeting had been in crowded, public situation. This was the first time I had been to Colonel Hoac’s private residence. For some reason, I had imagined that the colonel’s house must be some grand villa located on a major street in the capital. However, I was mistaken, and I cannot believe how wrong my imagination really was. Xuan Ba took my on a winding trip through all the streets of old Hanoi, then we crawled under the end of the Long Bien Bridge [Paul Doumer Bridge], and finally climbed up on top of the banks of the dike holding in the Red River. It turned out that the home of the colonel was all the way out in the “river beach military region.” If your family register lists you as living “outside the dike,” that is pretty awful! The families living out here worry constantly throughout the course of every rainy season. Every time the radio reports that a flood is coming, they toss and turn all night and cannot ever get a good night’s sleep. It was the same for Colonel Hoac’s house. The place where his family now lives used to be a duckweed pond, filled with garbage, mud, and thick black water several meters deep. As for the issue of pollution, the unsanitary conditions were about as bad as they get. After a lot of work and effort, Colonel Hoac and his wife finally managed to fill in this deep muddy marsh and built a small house where they would live temporarily. I understand that once he was bringing

a close friend over to visit his house when he found that the floodwaters had completely covered the way into the house. In the end, they had to set up chairs, set them up on a pile of bricks outside the gate, and squat on top of the seat of the chairs to hold their conversation. However, that was several years ago. Happily, Colonel Hoac and his wife managed to raise the foundation of the house and build a nice house, so that now they can “roll up their trouser legs to the knee and get a good night’s sleep” during the flood season.

Knowing that I was coming to visit him to talk about the U.S. pilots who had been POWs, Colonel Hoac said immediately,

“I was away [at the front] during the time we were holding U.S. pilots as POWs at Hoa Lo. I was only assigned to take over Hoa Lo in 1990, and by that time the “Hanoi Hilton” no longer had any honored guests!”

“But you frequently met with former U.S. pilot POWs returning to visit Hoa Lo!” Xuan Ba insisted.

“I did receive such visitors, but not often,” Hoac immediately corrected him. “In most cases, they looked at the place from the outside and took photographs, but I only had two official meetings with them. The first time it was with a group that included journalists and a film crew making a documentary. Xuan Ba, you were there to witness that time, and you told everything that happened in a newspaper article. The second time, the person who visited us was John McCain.”

“Which John McCain? Was it the “favored son” (whose father and grandfather had both been admirals in the U.S. Navy) who was shot down and landed in Truc Bach Lake?”

“That’s him! Who else could it be? When I was introduced, I learned he now was a three-star admiral and a U.S. Senator. A real big-shot! My superiors informed me beforehand that he wanted to visit his old cell. Unfortunately, when we checked the records we found that his cell had been redecorated and was now a working office used by the cadre who administered the prison. No matter how hard it was on us, however, we had to accede to his wishes. We all worked together, carrying all the beds, desks, cabinets, and shelves out to allow John McCain to visit it. He confirmed that this was his cell, the room in which he had sat counting the days for so many years. He was very pleased with his visit, so when we shook hands goodbye, he said over and over, ‘Thank you very much. Ha, ha, ha, ha...’” Hoac laughed.

Many people who did not know him said that Colonel Hoac was a difficult man and hard to get close to. All the rumors were completely wrong. On the contrary, Mr. Hoac was very engaging and talkative. Another unusual thing I learned was that he loves poetry, likes to write poetry, and has memorized many romantic poems. I ask you, could such a man who is also so nice every do anything mean or evil to anyone?

“What about the midnight American raid to rescue the POWs at Son Tay? Do you know anything about that?” Xuan Ba asked him.

“At the time of the raid I was a sapper fighting on the battlefield, so I don’t know anything about that. The best thing for you to do is to go to Son Tay yourself and ask about it there.”

* * *

Son Tay city is located about forty kilometers west of Hanoi. The Americans
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would never have paid any attention to this beautiful and quiet province capital if it had not been for one small detention camp in the city. That was the Xa Tac Prison Camp, located in the area of Cong Bridge neighborhood, Van Gia hamlet, Trung Hung village, Son Tay city, Ha Tay province. Initially, this was a reeducation and detention camp for common criminals operated by the Son Tay Province Public Security Office. The camp was of very simple constructions, consisting of just a few rows of Level-Four houses covered with red tile roves and surrounded by a high wall about three meters tall. The camp was located in the middle of a rice field and was surrounded by dikes. In the rainy season Xa Tac was always threatened because if the water rose, it would be flooded. Back then, this area was very empty and there were virtually no families living in the area. To get to Xa Tac from Son Tay city, one had to cross a small bridge across the Tich River. This was the only road, and it was extremely vital from the military defensive standpoint.

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In 1965, after the new province was reestablished, the Xa Tac Prison Camp was administered by Ha Tay Public Security. Some time later, this camp was loaned to the Army and it was used for a very special purpose: to care for several dozen U.S. pilots who were prisoners of war. This use was kept extremely secret. It was so secret that the civilian population around Xa Tac and in Son Tay city at the time were only informed that this was an important “warehouse for military supplies.” Soldiers guarded the camp was guarded very closely, day and night. People spread rumors, guessing that some very valuable “foreign supplies” were stored in Xa Tac. Extremely tight security regulations were maintained at the camp, security of the type “no one inside was allowed to go out and no one outside was allowed to go in.” At night, people occasionally saw tightly enclosed military vehicles driving in and out of the camp to deliver and receive “supplies.”

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Now this “military supply warehouse” and the “foreign supplies” are no longer a secret. After the signing of the Paris Agreement in 1973, the Vietnamese Government returned several hundred pilot POWs to the Americans. How had they been shot down and captured? In what locations were they held? I know that none of the former POWs have forgotten. The joys and sorrows they experienced, the memories that did not fade caused many of them to tell their stories when they got back home. They wrote memoirs and films were made about them. It was the same with the U.S. pilot POWs who were held in the Son Tay Prison Camp in 1970. This fact has provided the author of this article a great deal of documentation so that he can tell the story to his readers.

HOW DID U.S. PILOT POWS INFORM THE PENTAGON THAT THEY WERE BEING HELD IN SON TAY?

In late December 1968, Air Force Major “En Bako” [Elmo Baker] and 11 other pilots were transferred from “Heartbreak Hotel” to a new prison camp during the dark of night. Traveling in the same vehicle was Captain “Carigan” [Larry Carrigan]. It was difficult for them to tell how far they traveled, because the road was terrible, filled with

potholes and ruts. Occasionally the truck carrying the POWs met a few trucks towing anti-aircraft guns driving in the opposite direction, and the truck even encountered trucks towing SAM missiles headed back toward the city.

While lying still in his silent cell, Baker thought of a way to tap on the wood of the walls to contact the prisoners in the adjacent room. Baker informed his friends around him that he had been shot down during his 61st combat mission when his flight bombed Bac Giang, a small city about fifty kilometers from Hanoi Baker introduced

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himself, telling the others that he was 35 years old, a native of the state of “Kennet” [Kansas], that he had a masters degree in electricity [sic] and a bachelor of arts degree. He had been lucky enough to escape from his F-105 “Thunderchief” after it caught fire and just before it exploded. However, as soon as Baker touched the ground under his parachute, he was captured. He was severely injured and was treated by Vietnamese doctors at the Bach Mai Hospital for 30 straight days. Baker also advised the others that before being brought to this location, he had spent twenty-seven months in the POW camps of the People’s Army of Vietnam.

In the adjacent cell, a fellow prisoner used the tap code to introduce himself to Baker:

“I am Air Force Major “Inlytoreo” [Irby Terrell]. I was shot down in January 1968.”

Elated, Baker asked,

“Where are we?”

“This is Camp Hope in Son Tay city,” the prisoner in the other room responded.

“Why do you call it Camp Hope?”

“The name was given to it by the POWs here on Thanksgiving Day, 1968.”

“Are there many POWS here?”

“Several dozen.”

Although this system of tapping on the walls was a little slow, Baker managed to exchange a fair amount of critical information with his fellow prisoners. Their discussion ended when officers of the POW camp came by to inspect the outside of the building and change the guard.

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The next morning, Baker was very surprised when he was given freedom to go out into the yard to clean up and wash. It turned out that the POWs here were still able to talk to one another. During the day, they were usually given minor work tasks out in the yard of the camp, such as breaking bricks, digging ditches, carrying construction materials, etc. During the late afternoon, they were allowed to play volleyball and basketball and to exercise outside in the camp yard. The atmosphere here was a great deal more open and easy-going than it had been in the Heartbreak Hotel in Hanoi. All the new POWs had the same reaction.

More and more U.S. pilot POWs were taken to Son Tay. Camp Hope was being expanded by building a number of surrounding walls, a kitchen and mess hall area, and a water casern for washing and bathing. The prisoners were allowed to participate in the construction, and they helped to build the houses in which they would live.

Baker and a number of other prisoners were given one steel pipe each to break up broken bricks for use in the construction. Baker worked out a way to use these sad,

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solitary sounds, turning the sound from pounding on the bricks into Morse code signals to pass information and talk to other prisoners. For example, he reported that a group of 20 POWs had just arrived the night before from Heartbreak Hotel. Baker also told the other POWs that communicating in this way, using Morse code, was very good, because the soldiers guarding the camp paid absolutely no attention to this and maybe did not even know about it.

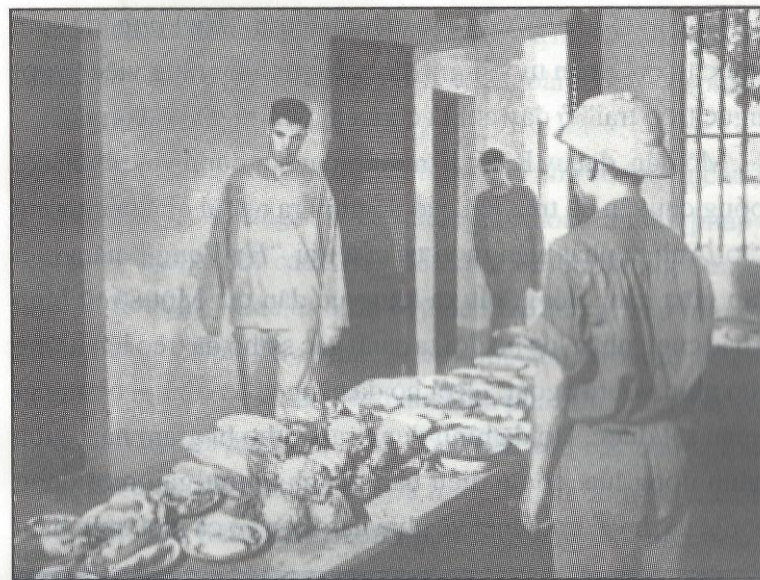
Although the work being performed by the U.S. pilot POWs was not difficult, it was also not any fun, especially for heroes who were used to flashing through the clouds high up in the sky.

Another winter came to Hope Camp in Son Tay. A cold rain fell constantly, making everything damp and uncomfortable. The waters of the Tich River rose high and reached the edge of the walls around the camp, and it looked like the camp might be flooded. To the pilot POWs, this winter was very arduous and difficult. War had ravaged Vietnam for several dozen years, so the lives of our soldiers and civilians were filled with difficulty and hardship. Even though they did not have enough warm clothes, and the families had to mix other food items in with their rice in order to survive, the people tightened their belts and steeled themselves to send everything they could to the front lines to fight the enemy.

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A meal for U.S. pilot POWs.

Le Viet Tien, the former Deputy Chief of Public Security for Ha Tay Province, recalls that every American pilot POW in Son Tay's Hope Camp at that time received a daily food allotment of seven *dong* worth of food a day. This was truly a major effort by our government when you realize that a Ha



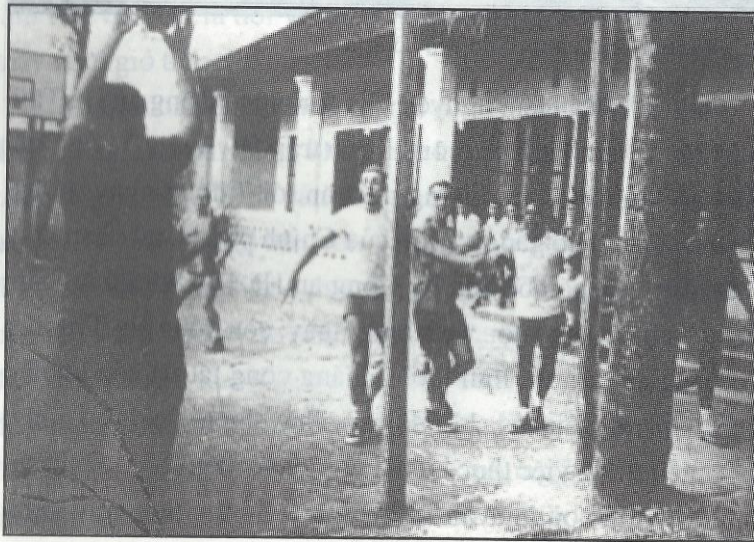
Một bữa ăn của tù binh phi công Mỹ

Tay Province Public Security cadre at that time received a daily portion at the collective mess hall of only 0.5 *dong* worth of food per day and that The Province Public Security Commander received a grand total, including both salary and allotments, of only 115 *dong* each month. However, although we made great efforts to carry out our humanitarian policy toward U.S. POWs, the camp still lacked all types of amenities for their daily lives.

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The greatest dream of the prisoners living at Hope Camp was to return to their

families as soon as possible. They understood that to any attempt to escape from this camp would be crazy and utterly hopeless.



Tù binh phi công Mỹ đang chơi bóng rổ trong trại giam Sơn Tây

Page 296. American pilot POWs playing basketball at the Son Tay Prison Camp.

(Editor's note: This is not at the Son Tay Camp. None of the POWs who were interviewed were able to identify this location)

Once, Captain "Risot Borennoman" [Richard Brenneman], taking advantage of an opportunity while setting up the posts for the

volleyball net, climbed high up a post to be able to look over the wall. He learned that Hope Camp was located in an isolated location out in the middle of an open field and a long way from any residential areas. A number of other POWs took advantage of times when the guards were not paying attention to climb up the walls to look over. They then put together everything that each man had observed. They developed a picture of the camp: it was located in the middle of a rice field, surrounded by dikes, and was very close to a river. There was an electrical transformer station a few hundred meters to the south. Farther away was an area of

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houses that looked like a medical clinic, a school, or some kind of rest and recuperation camp. Outside the west wall of the camp was a small pumping station.

One POW made a suggestion: If only there was a rescue force to come get us! That's right! A rescue is the only solution! But how can we get a rescue force to come here for us. The American POWs all knew that almost every week reconnaissance aircraft flew over this area to take photographs and locate bombing targets in North Vietnam. Therefore, they had to find a way to signal to the photo-analysts that this was a prison camp for U.S. POWs, because if viewed from above, with its rows and small houses and surrounding wall, Camp Hope would look like an ordinary school, a warehouse, or a farm used to grow chickens or ducks.

The hope of "rescue" turned in the mind of every POW, and they discussed with one another every possible way to send a signal to the U.S. military reconnaissance aircraft photographing the area, putting up the rescue signal and alerting them to the POWs' desires. Taking advantage of their work details, while they were out digging wells, digging drainage ditches, and moving earth and rocks, the POWs piled the fresh earth into unusual patterns. Even when they were drying their clothing after washing, they came up with ways to create short letters or words, such as *SOS* (Emergency

Rescue), *K* (Come rescue us), or *SAR* (Search and Rescue) in such a way as these signals could be easily spotted by the photographic analysts. And in the end, all their efforts were not in vain!

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HOW DID THE PENTAGON DETECT THE EXISTENCE OF CAMP HOPE IN SON TAY?

By October 1966, after more than two years of bombing North Vietnam, the U.S. air forces had suffered heavy losses. The U.S. side stated that a total of 264 pilots had been shot down. However, a very worrisome fact was that, of these 264 pilots, only a number of “fortunate” individuals had been captured alive by the Vietnamese side. The rest were considered to be missing in action.

Under pressure from public opinion, and especially from the families of the pilots, an unusual meeting was organized by the U.S. Defense Department. The meeting was attended by a number of intelligence specialist and POW rescue specialists from many different concerned units. The objective of this meeting was to work out an effective way of collecting information about U.S. pilots who had been captured or were missing in action. First of all, two tasks had to be carried out immediately: First, to confirm a list of those pilots who had been captured as prisoner after being shot down in order to help allay the concerns of the families. Second, to determine the location of all prisoner of war camps in order to remove them from the U.S. military bombing target lists. They were very concerned because they had such an excess of bombs and shells that if they were not careful, they might bomb their own people!

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From this point forward, weekly meetings on this subject were held at the Air Force Operations Center in the Pentagon. The meetings were presided over and coordinated by the CIA (the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency) and the DIA (The U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency). Also participating in these meetings were representatives from other agencies, including the State Department, the Treasury Department [literally, the “Finance Ministry”], the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation), the Secret Service, and even a representative of the U.S. Postal Service.

In addition to these regular meetings, U.S. intelligence and technical forces launched an urgent campaign to collect information, mobilizing every possible resource and capability for this task. During this race for information, a U.S. Air Force ground-based intelligence unit with the code-number 1127 was the first to reach the finish line.

The headquarters of Unit 1127 was located on “Benvoi” Base [Fort Belvoir], a heavily guarded installation in the state of Virginia, about twenty kilometers from the White House. Working for Unit 1127 were some of the U.S.’s best and most experienced intelligence professionals. They were responsible for exploiting information collected from Soviet and Eastern European soldiers who had deserted and about U.S. military personnel who were taken prisoner during the Vietnam War.

One element of Unit 1127 was assigned the specific responsibility of studying how to rescue POWs, including U.S. pilots shot down by the opposition. Their mission included drawing up plans for raids to rescue American POWs from prison camps.

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During the years 1966-1970, the specialists of Unit 1127 handled and analyzed mountains of intelligence information collected from many different sources and sent in from all around the world.

Sometime during late 1968, after sifting through many sources of information, U.S. specialists decided that a POW camp for detained pilots was located in a base surrounded by high walls several dozen kilometers west of Hanoi. However, in spite of incredible efforts, they were still unable to precisely identify the specific location of this POW camp.

On 9 May 1970, a technical intelligence specialist named “Noru Colinhbeo” [Norv Clinebell], a veteran in the profession who had served in Laos for many years and was known as a patient searcher, by collating guesses from intelligence sources combined with analyzing aerial photographs taken by reconnaissance aircraft asserted that he had found something hot for which the entire U.S. intelligence community had been waiting: At least two POW camps for U.S. pilots were located west of Hanoi. One of these two

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camps was located in Son Tay city, about forty kilometers from Hanoi.

It should be noted that previously, Clinebell had reported indications of his suspicions to Colonel “Gioocho Iulo” [George Iles, the officer in charge of Unit 1127’s Escape and Evasion element. Colonel Iles himself had patiently searched through the data and compared the aerial photographs taken of the Son Tay city area. He reached the identical conclusion at almost the same time as Clinebell.

The Americans could now celebrate their success in this initial step. They immediately mobilized their best specialists to study the Son Tay area. After analyzing and comparing a tremendous number of old and new aerial photographs taken by reconnaissance aircraft, they all reached the same conclusion: the signs of a POW camp holding U.S. pilots were very clear. On many of the photographs, the specialist could without difficulty clearly read rescue signals, SOS, K, and SAR, created by the pilot POWs. Photographs of how they hung out their clothes to dry and how they arranged piles of earth and rocks in unusual ways contained all the needed information. After assembling all the information and collating it, the U.S. military intelligence specialists had a real diagram to use to assess the situation and to work out a plan to rescue the

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prisoners. To be even more certain, they utilized many different professional measures to confirm the precise location of the Son Tay prison camp. For instance, they collected information disclosed to them by a number of international delegations permitted to visit Vietnam in an effort to achieve peace, the debriefings of a number of pilot POWs who had been released early by the Vietnamese side, letters send by the prisoners to their families, and even obtained statements from a number of Saigon puppet army officers who were natives of the Son Tay area who provided what they remembered. They used all this information to draw a diagram of the camp.

All that was left now was to find a way to give a briefing on this information to that the Pentagon could come up with a plan to decide the fate of the U.S. pilots who were being held prisoner in Hope Camp in Son Tay city. This was the result of many days of work by the POW Monitoring and Assessment Working Group, a special element of the headquarters. In order to arrange a meeting that would be attended by a large number of senior generals in the Pentagon, the Working Group had to systematically find

the “key” to each individual’s “door.” First of all, they made a telephone request to provide a briefing on their plan to Major General “Rotky” [Rocky Trianafellu], Assistant Chief of Staff of the Air Force. Fortunately, he was very supportive and said that the plan to rescue the POWs would certainly be implemented. He assigned Brigadier General “Demre Alen” [James Allen], Deputy Director of Plans and Policy of Office 4D-1062, to handle this matter.

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However, all suspicions had not been dispelled. There were even a number of ferocious arguments between Air Force intelligence analysts and members of the IPWIC Group (Joint Agency POW Intelligence Committee), headed by the DIA. The question that was raised was, “Why wouldn’t the Vietnamese hold the prisoners in Hanoi for easy of administration of the prisoners? Why would they sent the pilot POWs all the way out to a remote area like Son Tay? Was this move unintentional, or was this a trap? Etc...” However, in spite of the heated arguments, no one could deny one fact: U.S. pilot POWs were currently being held in Son Tay city. And the search and confirmation of this fact had been successful! The problem that remained was ...

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WHO WOULD RESCUE THE U.S. PILOT POWS AND HOW WOULD THEY DO IT?

In order to answer this question, Major General Allen contacted SACSA. SACSA was a specialized agency responsible for *counterinsurgency and special activities*. Its’ rather massive headquarters was located directly underneath the office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The SACSA Special Assistant was Brigadier General “Donan Boleboc” [Donald Blackburn]. Blackburn had a rather special professional military resume: He was born in the state of Florida. During World War II, Blackburn organized and commanded a Philippino guerrilla unit that fought against the Japanese fascist army until victory was achieved. After returning home, he was promoted to the rank of colonel when he was just 29 years old. A respected and experienced military officer, in 1957 Blackburn was sent to South Vietnam to serve as senior advisor to a general in the Saigon puppet army. In 1960, U.S. President Kennedy assigned Blackburn the responsibility for organizing a military group in Laos. It was there that Blackburn first met Simons, whom Blackburn later recommended to the Pentagon as his choice to serve as commander of the raid to rescue U.S. pilots at Son Tay.

Working under the command of the SACSA Special Assistant, Brigadier General Donald Blackburn, was another rather special individual: Colonel “Maye” [Ed Mayer], a specialist in secret electronic communications who also headed an operational special task force element of SACSA.

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On 25 May 1970, General Allen had a discussion with General Blackburn and Colonel Mayer. After discussing the results of the analysis group from Unit 1127, Allen noticed that Blackburn was very excited. It seemed as if fate had been waiting to assign this mission to this particular individual. Allen asked Blackburn a very concrete question:

“Can we send a team of spies to the Son Tay area ahead of time? They would be

given the mission of confirming the conclusions of Unit 1127 on the ground and then they could “feather the nest” [prepare the way] ahead of the mission.”

Blackburn thought for a moment and then replied,

“That would be very dangerous. As I understand it, virtually all the spies we have in North Vietnam are under the command of DIA. CIA has a number of agents and bases, but they are limited to conducting operations in the area within twenty kilometers of the Lao-Vietnamese border. President Johnson himself made that decision. The mission of rescuing the POWS will be handled by SACSA.

Allen interrupted Blackburn:

“So, what if we use a CIA base in northern Laos to send helicopters carrying a small special missions team to Son Tay.”

“Use helicopters carrying a special mission team? That’s a good idea!” Blackburn agreed.

“We have a source that says a group of POWs from the Son Tay Camp occasionally is sent to Ba Vi to do some kind of work. If a team of spies sent in to

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prepare the way ahead of time spots them and radios for the helicopters to come in, the operation will have to be carried out very quickly, but it is certain to be successful. Those prisoners who are rescued will then be quickly transported to one of our bases in Thailand so they can be returned to the arms of their families.”

“But there is no certainty that the spy team will be able to reach Son Tay quietly. It is very possible they will be picked up by Vietnamese security forces before they are able to carry out their part of the plan. We have already paid a high price for these operations and learned some bitter lessons from them. Certainly you cannot have forgotten that, sir.”

Even though Blackburn did not say it, Allen understood what he was talking about. From 1968 on, after President Johnson was forced to announce that he was suspending air and naval operations against North Vietnam, the U.S. military no longer had the authority that they formerly had to do whatever they wanted, even launching special operations or infiltrating spies. In fact, the U.S. President even forbade re-supply missions to teams of spies (CAS [sic]) (*SOG-Studies and Observation Group*) operating in North Vietnam. Several dozen spies from North Vietnam who had been recruited and carefully trained before being dispatched into North Vietnam to operate were simply abandoned by the Americans. These SOG teams used many different methods of communications to make desperate calls for help from their masters. They were only able to resist for a short time, and then some were arrested, some surrendered, and a small number were able to escape across into the mountain jungles of Northern Laos. Since that time, there had been virtually no

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reports received about their tragic fates!

“I believe that if we send a team of spies in to the Son Tay area they will be captured by North Vietnamese security forces,” Blackburn continued. “If that happens, in the future it will be twice as difficult for us to try to rescue the prisoners. As for sending a special mission team into Son Tay in helicopters, that will not be easy either! Assume they fly in at extremely low altitude, maneuvering through the valleys in the Ba Vi Mountain Range to avoid being detected by North Vietnamese air defense forces, and

assume that the elements of secrecy and surprise prevent North Vietnamese troops in Son Tay from reacting in time. There is still the problem of the armed guards defending the prison camp. They will fight with a spirit of heroism that will be difficult to imagine. Casualties among the U.S. special mission team will be unavoidable, and they could even be completely wiped out if the force is too small and too weak. For that reason, we must have a force that is strong, that is expertly selected and carefully trained, that is adequately equipped, and that is our most elite combat force!”

“If we do that, our effort to rescue the POWs will be delayed, and I am afraid we will miss our opportunity.”

“Why do we only want to rescue a group of prisoners and are not concerned with everyone in the entire camp, if conditions permit us to try?” Blackburn answered General Allen with a question. He then laid out on the table a series of photographs that Unit 1127 had worked very hard to prepare.

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“I believe that Camp Hope in Son Tay city is in a remote location and can be considered to be the most vulnerable. We can conduct a surprise raid into the Son Tay Camp and take out everyone in helicopters!”

Allen was apparently won over by Blackburn’s daring ideas. He sat silent for a long time before finally saying one word: “OK.” However, tremendous problems waited in front of them. Many issues, extremely difficult issues, remained to be resolved. The most immediate problem was how to gain the Pentagon’s faith and support in their plan.

BRIEFINGS, AND THEN MORE BRIEFINGS

It must be remembered that at this time the U.S. was bogged down in the war in Vietnam. An average of 500 U.S. soldiers were being killed every month. During the month of May 1970 alone, a total of 754 U.S. military personnel died on the battlefields of South Vietnam. In addition, the number of troops left in the strategic reserves of the units directly participating in combat operations had fallen to the danger level. U.S. President Nixon was very afraid of receiving another black eye in the face of domestic and international public opinion. For that reason, it would not be easy to get the Pentagon to approve Blackburn and Mayer’s plan to rescue U.S. pilot POWs.

That same day, 25 May 1970, Blackburn and Mayer requested a meeting with General “Uylo” [Wheeler]. Wheeler had been the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff since 1964, before the so-called “Gulf of Tonkin Incident.” Wheeler was one of SACSA’s strongest supporters. While MacNamara was Secretary of Defense, he had successfully presented a number of SACSA operational plans. When the briefing was

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over, Wheeler exclaimed,

“My God! How many battalions will it take to conduct this operation?”

However, Wheeler still provided support to the plan by introducing Blackburn to Admiral “Thomat Moro” [Thomas Moorer], the man who would be replacing Wheeler in the future.

After receiving the “green light,” Blackburn and Mayer immediately requested that DIA provide assistance by supplying additional intelligence information and drafting a plan of action. Just one day later, on 26 May 1970, DIA officially joined the effort with

the vigorous support of Lieutenant General “Donan Bennet” [Donald Bennett], the Director of DIA.

On 27 May 1970, Blackburn and Mayer met with Major General “Gion Vogt” [John Vogt], the Commander of the U.S. Air Force’s Combined Combat Operations Agency. Vogt also exclaimed,

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“My God! When are you going to inform the Administration about this important matter?”

On 1 June 1970, Blackburn and Mayer provided General John Vogt and General Bennet a new briefing including updated information. They weighed and carefully discussed every option raised, including very specific situations involved in the raid to rescue U.S. POWs. The next day, 2 June 1970, Blackburn and Mayer met with and briefed Wheeler once again. Wheeler stated,

“I believe that no one will be able to reject this operation!”

With Wheeler’s permission, on the afternoon of 5 June 1970 Blackburn and Mayer briefed the entire Joint Chiefs of Staff on their plan in a special conference room called the “Tank.” No one asked any questions. The U.S. generals who attended that meeting all agreed that SACSA had to carry out this plan.

This was not the end of the briefings, however. Over the next few days, Blackburn and Mayer had to give additional briefings to the different Assistants to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in order to gain their support (because each of them had control of an entire division of troops!). After this was done, SACSA was finally able to request that personnel be selected, that the force be equipped with various types of weapons and equipment, and that large sums of money from a special fund be requested to support the Son Tay Raid. To ease any problems in carrying out the plan, Blackburn and Mayer also went to CIA Headquarters to meet with the Director’s Assistant for Southeast Asian Affairs, “Giooc Cavo” [George Carver] and his assistant. All these

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effort took up a great deal of their time.

Finally, on 10 July 1970 a special meeting was held in the Pentagon. This meeting was attended by a large number of the highest-ranking generals in the U.S. Defense Department: Admiral Moorer, the new Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; General “Oetmolen” [Westmoreland], the Army Chief of Staff; General “Gion Rian” [John Ryan], the Commander of the Air Force; Admiral “Enmo Dumoat” [Elmo Zumwalt], the Commander of the Navy; and General “Leonac Phochaman” [Leonard P. Chapman], the Marine Corps Commander. They listened intently to the briefing on the POW rescue plan so that they could work together to perfect it before it was submitted to Secretary of Defense “Mevin Ledo” [Melvin Laird].

One week later, the rather complete and detailed plan reached the desk of the U.S. Defense Secretary. Initially, he was concerned about the accuracy of the intelligence reports. He asked himself, “Can the American commandos reach the camp and then get out again? If the plan fails, not only will the number of U.S. POWs in Vietnam not decrease, the number will grow even larger!” However, in the end Laird ordered that work continue to implement the plan. He did not forget to emphasize, however, that this was a large and very risky operation, so it had to be well organized and excellent preparation had to be made. In addition, before the final decision to carry out the plan

was made, the plan had to be presented to President Nixon for his approval.

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This meant that, even though it was almost ten thousand kilometers from the battlefields of Vietnam, only the White House had to power to make the decision to launch the raid to rescue the U.S. POWs at Son Tay.

WHAT DID THE AMERICANS THINK OF OUR FORCES DEFENDING THE SON TAY PRISONER OF WAR CAMP?

After many briefings, finally the Pentagon “gave the green light” for SACSA and the group studying a rescue of the U.S. pilot POWs at Son Tay to take action. It was now late summer of 1970. There was little time left, and General Blackburn understood that it would not be easy to get the final nod from the boss at the White House. President Nixon was very afraid of another scandal. After his decision to send the armed forces to commit aggression against Cambodia in April 1970, the United States was split internally. The student anti-war movement kept Nixon up at night. Meanwhile, the entire nation of the United States demanded that the POW and missing in action problem be resolved.

Blackburn silently prayed that the White House would agree to let him carry out this raid against Son Tay. And just this one action, one time sending troops into North Vietnam, would be enough for him. Commando operations was Blackburn’s profession. It had been in his blood since he was a young man. Even in middle age, he wore a green

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beret bearing a patch showing a human skull and a black flame as he led an SOG team in parachute operations into the jungles along the Lao-Vietnamese border or on cross-border operations into Cambodia. Before the Son Tay raid planning began, Blackburn himself had considered plans to carry out a number of extremely malicious and evil crimes, such as using explosives to destroy the Thac Ba hydro-electric dam and the dikes along the Red River in the middle of the flood season and at the same time causing massive destruction in the center of our capital city, Hanoi. He believed that these crimes were the kind of thing that the U.S. government could use in negotiations with Hanoi at the conference table in Paris.

One could say that Blackburn was like a sly and dangerous old fox. He was one of the primary architects of the Son Tay Raid, and worked on drafting it to the smallest detail.

After collating information from many intelligence sources, the U.S. believed that at the time of the raid we had approximately 12,000 troops stationed in the area around the U.S. POW camp in Son Tay city (this is without counting tens of thousands more who were members of self defense and militia forces and armed with rudimentary and primitive weapons!). These forces included the 12th Infantry Regiment, the Son Tay Artillery School, and a military supply warehouse in Son Tay city with about 1,000 rear services [logistics] cadre and enlisted men. In addition, there were about 500 soldiers and 50 vehicles in an air defense base located southwest of the city. However, the Americans

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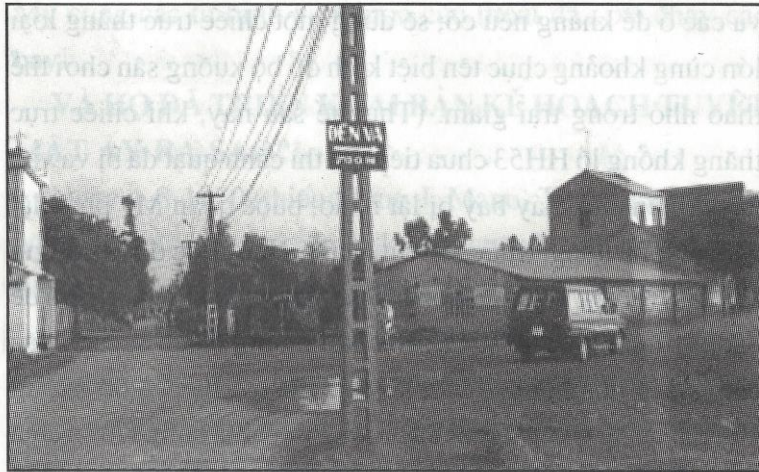
also calculated that it would usually take 30 minutes during daylight for the mobile combat units included among these forces to reach the POW Camp (and naturally they would be even slower at night). That was enough time for the American commandos to

penetrate the POW camp and then withdraw safely.

Another thing that worried the Americans was that the Son Tay Prison Camp was located in between the Hoa Lac and Phuc Yen Airfields. The Phu Yen Airfield in particular was only about 35 kilometers from the Son Tay Camp. The dangerous MiGs that were sitting ready to take off were a major threat and very dangerous to the raid unit. In addition, American military specialists had analyzed North Vietnam's air defense network very carefully. They had calculated the operational capabilities of the SAM missiles, of the anti-aircraft artillery positions, of infantry weapons firing at low-flying aircraft, and they paid particular attention to the radar network's ability to monitor and detect targets. Using this analysis they selected a flight path and flying tactics to allow the heavy, slow helicopters to evade the fire of Vietnam's air defense forces.

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The Den Va [Va Temple] Intersection, located 500 meters south of the prison camp. This is the location where Simons' helicopter, codenamed "Apple One," landed at the "wrong target" on the night of 20 November 1970 and where six cadre from Son Tay city who were recuperating at this location were shot and killed.



Ngã ba Đền Và, cách trại tù binh gần 500m về phía Nam, nơi chiếc trực thăng với mật danh "Quả táo thứ nhất" của Simôn đổ bộ "nhằm mục tiêu" trong đêm 20-11-1970 đã bắn chết 6 cán bộ của thị xã Sơn Tây đang an dưỡng tại đây

According to DIA's experts, the U.S. POW camp in Son Tay consisted of two separate sections. A number of old, level four houses were used as the administrative area of the camp, while a number of other recently constructed and expanded houses were surrounded by a high wall and barbwire. The American POWs were concentrated
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in four rows of houses in this section. The camp had only one telephone line and one cable to supply electricity. DIA believed that there were almost 50 Vietnamese soldiers serving as guards at the prison. Their barracks were located outside the wall on the eastern side of the camp. The entire POW camp had three guard towers, two located next to the wall and one located near the main gate on the eastern side.

The American specialists had analyzed and made careful calculations about the terrain in the POW camp and the surrounding area. According to the rescue plan they had worked out, after a number of helicopters circled overhead and destroyed the towers and other pockets of resistance (if any), they would use one large helicopter carrying about ten commandos to land on the small athletic field in the camp. In fact, before the
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massive HH-53 helicopter touched the ground its' rotor struck a tree, causing the

helicopter to turn over. The U.S. troops had to use explosive to destroy this helicopter before they withdrew. In the landing inside the camp was successful, the commando team aboard this helicopter would charge into the detention section to protect the POWs and would open fire before our guards had time to react. A number of other helicopters would land in the open ground outside of the southern wall of the camp. He would divide their forces. One element would destroy the bridge across the Tich River to cut the only road relief forces from inside the city could use to reach the camp. Another team would destroy the electrical transformer station and cut the telephone and electrical lines to isolate the entire area. The rest of the force would use explosives to blast through the walls of the camp and support the team that landed inside the camp in brining out the POWs, including those who had been wounded. If the group of helicopters landing outside the walls of the camp was intercepted and unable to land, or if they landed but were unable to take off again, the POWs who had just been rescued would be taken farther away to escape the encircling enemy and a group of helicopters assigned to circle in the air to provide overhead support would land at a second location to pick them up. All the above activities had to be completed by the American commando troops within a time limit: 26 minutes, meaning that before our troops in Son Tay city had time to reach the area of the prison camp, the American commandos and the newly released prisoners would have already flown away.

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HOW DID THEY GO ABOUT IMPLEMENTING THIS TOP SECRET PLAN?

On 1 August 1970, Brigadier General “J. Mano” [Leroy J. Manor], the Commander of Special Operations Forces at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, received an unexpected telephone call from the Pentagon. He was ordered to come to Washington immediately, although his superiors would not tell him the reason for this trip. As an experienced officer, 49 years old and a veteran of 345 successful flying missions from World War II through the Vietnam War, he was familiar with what this kind of absolute order meant.

At the same moment, at “Boret Base” [Fort Bragg] Infantry Colonel “D. Simons” [Arthur D. Simons], 52 years old, a man who had been a Ranger Company commander fighting in the resistance against the Japanese in the Philippines, also suddenly received an order to travel to Washington immediately to report in to receive a new assignment.

Manor and Simons got acquainted with one another during the flight to Washington. Neither of them knew that they had been chosen to be the primary leaders of the Son Tay Raid Operations Command which would stun the entire United States almost four months later. Also chosen for this Operations Command was Lieutenant Colonel (and Medical Doctor) “Dodep Catado” [Joseph Cataldo]. He was a rather strange individual. He had suddenly appeared at Simons’ office and introduced himself:

“I am Cataldo, and I am the doctor that you need.”

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Simons asked him,

“Do you know why we need a doctor?”

“To carry out some kind of special and dangerous mission,” Cataldo answered.

The Pentagon appointed General Manor as Commander of the Raid Operations

Command. Colonel Simons was appointed Deputy Commander and was personally responsible for training the commando team that would land at the camp and who would lead this team when it flew into Son Tay to rescue the POWs. Lt. Col. Cataldo was responsible for giving medical training to the landing unit and for preparing all equipment that would be needed to treat the POWs during their flight back from Vietnam.

Manor, Simons, and Cataldo carefully selected the personnel who would participate in this operation. They reviewed their backgrounds, their education, their technical skills, their physical condition, their combat experience, and other psychological factors. In particular, all the personnel selected were volunteers. They were not allowed to ask questions and had no idea of what they were going to do, except that it certainly would be a very difficult and dangerous mission. The commanders told them only that if secrecy was not guaranteed they would fail and no one would make it back home. The families of these soldiers only had the vague and general knowledge that their loved ones were about to carry out a special mission and that they would be away from home for three to six months.

Manor himself personally selected the pilots who would participate in the
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operation. In addition to his vast experience and his shark eyes as a professional, he also had a rather useful secret order in his possession. This was a personal letter from General “Don Rayon” [John D. Ryan], the Chief of Staff of the U.S. Air Force. The letter was addressed to all of his subordinate commanders and directed them to give every possible assistance to support Manor’s requests and told them that they were to ask no questions. The pilots selected for the helicopter crews that would participate in the operation all had at least a thousand hours of combat flying experience and had conducted hundreds of missions to rescue pilots shot down over Southeast Asia. These were rescues by professional helicopter pilots who had become legends in the war histories of the U.S. armed forces. A few of the most outstanding examples of these pilots included Lieutenant Colonel “Uocno A. Boritton” [Warner A. Britton], an ace helicopter pilot who was an instructor in rescue operation at Eglin Air Force Base; Lieutenant Colonel “Gion Elison” [John Allison], an outstanding flight instructor in the HH-53 helicopter; Lieutenant Colonel “Ecbe Giolindo” [Herbert Zehnder], who had set a flying record in the HH-3 with a long distance non-stop flight from New York to Paris in 1967; Major “P. M. Donohiu” [Frederick M. Donohue], a man who had more than 6,000 hours of helicopter flight time and who had been selected to serve as a flight instructor for the Apollo program.

In the end, a total of 15 officers (company up through field grade) and 85 NCOs and enlisted men from a unit of “Green Berets” (Rangers [sic]) were selected to prepare for the raid against the POW camp at Son Tay.

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In mid-August 1970, a special message from the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, which had been drafted by Mayer and signed by General Mooter, was sent out to a number of unit commanders. The message alerted these commanders that an “Emergency Operations Team” under the command of General Manor and Colonel Simons was currently engaged in carrying out a special mission. This secret campaign was given a rather romantic code name – “Ivory Coast.” When people heard it, many assumed that

this operation would be carried out in the Middle East or in Africa. No one suspected that the target of “Operation Ivory Coast” was the small, remote city of Son Tay on the other side of the Pacific Ocean!

At that time, even in Washington the details of the plan for “Operation Ivory Coast” were known to only a few of the highest level officials, including President Nixon, National Security Advisor Kissinger, and several Cabinet members. No one in the puppet governmental apparatus in South Vietnam, including Nguyen Van Thieu and his senior general, was authorized to know anything about the plan for the raid to rescue U.S. POWs at Son Tay, from the time of its inception all the way through to the end of the operation. Even U.S. military tactical commanders in Southeast Asia were only informed about the plans for “Operation Ivory Coast” when it was considered most appropriate to inform them. Each person’s knowledge of the plan was restricted to only that portion of the plan that involved his area of responsibility.

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All the personnel and air crews that had been selected to participate in the raid on the Son Tay POW Camp were sent to Fort Bragg in North Carolina for physical training. They were then transferred to Eglin Air Force Base to train in coordination with the flight crews. Eglin Air Force Base covered an area of about 456,000 hectares in northern Florida. The base was also used for training exercises by the U.S. Air Force Air Search and Rescue Center. Almost all every famous helicopter and C-130 rescue or support pilot in the U.S. Air Force had been trained at this location.

So now, how did the “Emergency Joint Operations Team” for “Operation Ivory Coast” conduct its training?

DID THE AMERICANS BUILD A SECOND SON TAY POW CAMP IN THE STATE OF FLORIDA?

By this time, the “Son Tay Target File” filled thousands of file drawers in the raid’s operational headquarters. The files included a large number of blow-up aerial photographs of the entire area from the Lao-Vietnamese border to Son Tay city, and especially of the terrain at the camp and in the surrounding area. These photographs were assembled by specialists into a mosaic, like a map. Each section in this mosaic represented 100 square meters on the ground. These photographs were so clear and

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detailed that one could distinguish each individual brick wall, each individual housing area, each individual draining ditch, and every tree and bush in the POW camp.

In addition to the aerial photographs, Generals Blackburn and Mayer had a sand-table model of the prison camp built and simultaneously made gigantic blow-ups of the target. These were printed carefully but only in a very small number of copies.

This was not enough to satisfy the Americans, however. Simons said that he could not train one hundred troops to attack a remote and dangerous area with just “a sand table toy” and an “exercise map.” He suggested that a full-size, 1 to 1 scale, model of the Son Tay Camp, built exactly like the real camp, should be built for use in practice. At first, the U.S. DIA opposed this suggestion, because the agency was afraid that this might inadvertently expose the target of the raid to curious outsiders and especially that it might be detected by the prying eyes of Soviet technical intelligence satellites. This

concern was not unfounded. The Americans knew very well that the Soviet Cosmos 355 satellite series active during that period was equipped with extremely modern cameras that would allow the satellite to take pictures that would clearly recognize changed in the window of a single house, if that was the target. This observation satellite flew over the area of Eglin Air Force Base twice a day at an altitude of 130 kilometers. However, because of the pressing requirements of his mission, Simons firmly insisted on his recommendation that a life-size, realistic model of the camp had to be built.

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In the end, CIA specialists found a way out of this dilemma. They used light construction materials to build a model of the Son Tay Prison Camp. This model was nicknamed "Barbara." It could be disassembled and hidden quickly and easily. It was build of special canvas and six-foot long wooden 2x4s (a foot is equal to 0.3048 meters). Using these materials, they could easily build the walls and level four houses with even the window openings and the main doors cut every carefully. These were then painted in realistic colors. In order to complete the model, the specialists had to use 710 wooden posts and 1,500 yards of canvas (one yard is equal to 0.914 meters). The flagpole and the

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electrical power poles in the POW camp were built to the exact same size as those in the real camp to familiarize the pilots with the site. They were so careful that they even moved a number of large trees (that were dug up complete with their roots) and planted them at the correct locations inside the POW camp. I understand that this project alone took the CIA specialists several months and 60,000 dollars to build!

Initially, the above model of the Son Tay camp was only put up at night for the soldiers to practice, and it was dismantled and carefully camouflaged during the day to avoid detection by Soviet satellites. Later, daylight exercises were also conducted, but they were very limited and limited to a period of four hours (the time period when the Soviet Cosmos 355 technical intelligence satellites were unable to take photographs). General Manor said,

"Although this was only a temporary architectural project, the model was sufficient to give the soldiers a real feel for what they would see and let them know how they must act when they arrived at a target similar to this one."

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AND HOW DID THEY TRAIN THEIR COMMANDO TROOPS?

On 20 August 1970, the training of the U.S. Air Force and the "Emergency Joint Operations Team" began. Before that date, the personnel in the unit had received priority in food rations as needed and at the same time they concentrated on exercising to build up their bodies to the highest possible level. Every day, Simons forced all 103 volunteers to review the basic exercises for U.S. soldiers and then run several kilometers carrying their packs and weapons. These exercises became harder and harder every day, and the time spent on physical exercise gradually increased. In addition, they had to study how to direct helicopters, communications, signals, raid tactics, methods for breaking locks and busting down doors, escape procedures, and at the end of the day was athletic practice. Simons wanted all of the soldiers in his commando unit to be in perfect physical condition and to be the best fighters in the world.

The pilots in the flight group had the most difficult and complex training exercises. Even though they were all superior pilots, the requirements of this mission were rather special. In order to avoid radar detection and to avoid punishment from North Vietnamese air defenses, Manor demanded that the pilots fly at treetop level, twisting and turning down mountain valleys for hours at a time. They had to do all their

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practice flying at night, under faint moonlight, and they were not allowed to use their radios for communications. This means that they had to maintain complete silence, even with regard to the other aircraft in their formation. Only the slightest error would result in a collision with another aircraft, or the helicopter hitting a mountain, or hitting the rugged hills of northern Georgia.

Flying helicopters at low altitude was difficult, but controlling a C-130 flying at low altitude was even harder. Manor and Simons' plan for Operation Ivory Coast called for three C-130s to participate in the raid. One of them, an HC-130 rescue aircraft, would refuel the helicopters over Laos. The two other C-130s were equipped with special flight equipment and the most modern infrared search system of that era. One of these C-130s would serve as the guide to lead the six helicopters to the Son Tay POW Camp and then would drop illumination and smoke flares to support the operations of the commando unit. The other C-130 would lead a number of jets to conduct bombing and escort missions in the area. The experts calculated that, even though the normal low-altitude flying speed of a C-130 was 250 knots, to support the Son Tay Raid the pilots were forced to fly at a speed of 105 knots, almost stalling speed, so the flight would be extremely dangerous.

So Manor's flight crews had to spend more than 1,000 flying hours practicing "with their hearts in their throats," completing 368 sorties under these extremely difficult conditions.

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On 28 September 1970, the "Emergency Joint Operations Team" began to conduct coordinated training for the attack involving both the infantry and air force elements. Simons jokingly referred to it as "wrestling with the model of the Son Tay POW Camp." Every day they conducted three helicopter landings and at night they performed three more. Simons had the men he was training practice so much that the American troops in his commando unit had memorized the layout of the target they had to attack. Even if they were blindfolded, they would still be able to shoot and hit the correct targets on orders from their commander.

On the night of 6 November 1970, General Manor and Colonel Simons held a final general practice exercise firing live ammunition as Blackburn and Mayer looked on. The helicopters and C-130s flew a distance equivalent to that from a launch base in Thailand across the Lao border all the way to Son Tay. In the midst of the roaring winds of the

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helicopter rotor blades, with flares lighting up the night sky, and with the sound of gunfire blasting their eardrums, the commandos made a surprise landing, entered the POW cells, and then quickly destroyed all targets. Blackburn and Mayer were extremely satisfied with the exercise.

During this same time period, Lt. Col. Cataldo was extremely busy, working hard

to prepare the weapons, equipment, and logistics for the raid. Weapons and equipment included M-60 medium machineguns firing 7.62mm cartridges; light 66mm anti-tank rockets; small, light, folding-stock CAR-15 rifles; a number of casualty-producing mines and satchel charges filled with tremendous explosive power; special night sights that enabled the user to see targets clearly in the dark of night. In addition to the medical kits carried by the American commandos, Cataldo also prepared a number of special blankets, soft shower-shoe style sandals, 100 sets of pajamas and robes; and a store of light but highly nutritious food. All these items were to be there and ready for the POWs to use during the long flight back to the United States.

Now, Operation Ivory Coast entered its final stage.

OFFICIAL APPROVAL AND FINAL DECISION FOR OPERATION IVORY COAST

On 18 November 1970, Admiral Moorer, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, anxiously walked into the White House at 11:00 A.M. He was to brief the
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American President on the entire plan for Operation Ivory Coast. Moorer understood that this was the day on which the final decision would be made about whether the raid to rescue American POWs from the Son Tay Prison Camp would be carried out or not!

Sitting with Nixon in the elegant oval conference room of the Office of the President were National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, Secretary of State William Rogers, CIA Director Richard Helms, and a number of senior aides.

In fact, President Nixon had learned about Operation Ivory Coast more than one month before when, during a visit to Europe, he stopped by the Mediterranean to observe an exercise by the 6th Fleet. Aboard the famous warship “Soporific Phien” [Springfield?], the boss of the White house held a secret discussion with Secretary of Defense Laird and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Moorer. There, for the first time
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the U.S. President received a cursory report on the plans for Operation Ivory Coast, the goal of which was to rescue U.S. pilot POWs being held at Son Tay. Laird emphasized:

“A commando unit has been selected and carefully trained. If you approve this plan, this raid will be carried out within the next four weeks.”

That day Nixon had listened very carefully, and then sat silent for some time. This was an extremely difficult decision for him to make. Finally, Nixon made a general statement indicating that he approved the raid in principle. However, before officially approving the operation and making the final decision, he said that the Defense Department would have to brief Dr. Kissinger so that the President’s National Security Advisor could provide his ideas on the raid first.

On 8 October 1970 Blackburn, Manor, and Simons briefed Kissinger in the President’s National Security Advisor’s office in the West Wing of the White House. They considered this briefing to be the most difficult thing they did during the entire course of the operation. Kissinger’s assistant, Major General “Alechxang Hatgo” [Alexander Haig] and General Vogt also were present during this important briefing.

One by one, Blackburn, Manor, and Simons briefed Advisor Kissinger on their

own area of responsibility. The doctor and professor famed for his lectures at Harvard University listened very intelligently. He gave another green light with a very important statement:

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“You all do whatever you think is necessary. We will take care of any international complications. No one in the White House is concerned about enemy casualties. You should limit yourselves to just those things that you need, but you should use sufficient force to perform this mission in the most effective way.”

At the end of the discussion, Kissinger suddenly asked,

“Who was the originator of this idea?”

Blackburn, Manor, and Simons all said, “Many people participated in coming up with this plan. It is a joint effort.”

Kissinger concluded with a very significant statement,

“No matter whether the President approves this operation or not, I would like to thank all of you, because you have shown imagination and have come up with a truly unique initiative.”

During this briefing of the U.S. President, Defense Secretary Laird wanted to give the most detailed and complete briefing possible. He was confident that the preparations for this operation had been excellent and he knew that at least he had Advisor Kissinger’s full support. Admiral Moorer had brought a large quantity of diagrams, drawings, and blown-up photographs to the Oval Office. When Nixon signaled his approval to begin the briefing, Moorer began with the sentence,

“Mr. President! The code name of this operation is Kingpin.”

WHAT DID PRESIDENT NIXON THINK AND SAY BEFORE MAKING THE FINAL DECISION?

Because of the outstanding preparations, Admiral Moorer was able to give a rather smooth and engrossing briefing on Operation Ivory Coast, and the participants in the room all listened with rapt attention.

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Moorer gave a very detailed description of the flight path that would be followed by Simons and his commando unit from Thailand to Son Tay city. He described how the U.S. helicopter crews would have to dodge and weave at low level and refuel in the air to avoid being detected by radar and North Vietnam’s air defenses. He described how they would react to the danger if they were detected and shot down before reaching the target. In particular, he discussed the deception operation that would be conducted by U.S. Navy forces, who would use a large force of combat aircraft launched from the fleet off the coast to make a surprise attack against the port of Haiphong to make people believe that there was about to be an amphibious landing along the coast and make Vietnamese air defense forces drop their guar in the Son Tay area. The military operations supporting this raid would be conducted over a massive area covering about 300,000 square miles of Southeast Asia.

When he displayed a large-scale detailed diagram showing the entire Son Tay POW Camp, Admiral Moorer said,

“Mr. President, this is the way we will land and rescue our POWs...”

Nixon listened intently. He seemed to be fascinated by this attractive “party” that would be played out in the skies over a distant nation. However, reality is never as beautiful and dreamy as we imagine. That fact seemed to awaken Nixon from his trance.

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Suddenly, he asked,

“What is the condition of the POWs now being held at Son Tay. Are you certain that we will be able to rescue them?”

Calmly and self-confidently, Moorer replied,

“Mr. President, the Hope Camp in Son Tay is the only location outside of Hanoi where both DIA and CIA are certain that U.S. pilot POWs are being held. It is our understanding that there are currently 70 U.S. pilot POWs in this camp. We have been able to confirm the names and ranks of 61 of these POWs. They include 43 Air Force personnel, 14 Navy personnel, and four Marines. The officer commanding this POW group is Navy Commander “C. D. Claoo” [Claude D. Clower]. This officer was promoted to the rank of Navy Captain right after he was captured. He is the third POW group commanding officer to be elected by the POWs inside the camp. The first two were transferred to other camps by the North Vietnamese...”

Nixon appeared to be emotionally affected by the very detailed information that the Pentagon had been able to collect. Moorer realized that, and with increased self-confidence in his voice, he said,

“Mr. President! The North Vietnamese defense forces that might threaten our assault unit total approximately 12,000 troops, but these troops are dispersed in many locations. It will take at least 30 minutes before any of them will be able to arrive at the POW camp. We have a plan to block them and deal with them in the most effective manner. What is of more concern, and especially to our helicopter crews, are the North Vietnamese MiGs stationed at military airfields like Phuc Yen, Kep, Haiphong, and Vinh.

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However, as we understand it, none of these airfields have a night combat alert network, so their reaction will be extremely slow. In addition, the North Vietnamese Air Force does not have modern equipment to enable their excellent MiG pilots to fight air battles at night. Finally, Admiral Moorer discussed the very important role that weather would play in the raid. He stressed,

“This year, only the time period from 20 to 25 November is truly favorable for this operation. If we miss this opportunity, we will have to wait until March of next year. Major General Manor has established his command post in Danang, and Colonel Simons and his unit are now assembled in Thailand. Everything is ready. If you give us your permission, we will immediately carry out this plan...”

“Mr. President!” Kissinger spoke up to support Moorer. “More than one month ago, I had an opportunity to talk to the commanders of this raid. I believe their preparations have been excellent and that the plan has great prospects for success.”

Secretary of Defense Laird also emphasized,

“Mr. President! The work has been proceeding since May. The planning for this operation has been very specific and detailed, and the plan had been practiced very

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carefully. Almost all of the most senior general officers in the Pentagon have been briefed on this plan, and they all whole-heartedly support it.”

All eyes in the room turned expectantly toward Nixon. The American President was very aware of his great and difficult role at this moment. He raised his said and said slowly,

“Your plan is truly outstanding, and it appears that nothing further needs to be added. I know that everyone is now waiting for the final decision. And I will give you my answer as soon as possible. How much longer can General Manor and his unit wait for a decision without causing additional complications?”

Moorer gave an additional explanation:

“From the standpoint of the weather, the flight crews need to have bright moonlight in order to confirm their flight path and spot the target. In addition, in order to guarantee secrecy, the raid’s communications methods and procedures are very complicated and it will require some time to set up the communications. That is without even considering the time it will take to begin the combat coordination for all the forces that will be supporting the operation. For that reason, a decision is required as soon as possible.”

Nixon replied that he sympathized with Moorer’s concerns. However, the problem was not whether or not to discuss rescuing the POWs, but rather when the operation could be conducted. Nixon sat silent, thinking about something. Then, as if he had suddenly remembered, he asked,

“We are very confident that we will be successful. However, what if this operation fails? Have you prepared what we will say to the public in that event?”

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Moorer hastily answered,

“Please do not worry, Mr. President. We have considered every possible eventuality that could occur during the course of the operation and have prepared ample cover arguments appropriate to each situation.”

Nixon nodded his head and glanced around the room as if wanting to gauge the reactions of each individual present. Then he spoke,

“Personally, I also want to bring all the POWs home. If we are successfully, I could invite everyone to the White House for a celebration party. However, if this operation fails... You all know that the opposition will not leave us in peace. The people will demonstrate and surround the White House like they did six months ago. This time, however, they will certainly be even more violent. The radicals might even knock down the gates and destroy all the furniture [in the White House]. The might even, and please excuse my language, but thousands of these “hippies” will piss all over the elegant carpeting of the office in which we are all now sitting. If that happens, it will be very painful. I never want anything like that to happen, just as I do not one more soldier to be taken prisoner and held in the prison camps in North Vietnam. But, Good Christ! How could we fail to approve such a worthwhile operation on which you have worked for months to prepare? Please give me just a little more time. I am certain that we will carry out this operation. And no matter what happens, I wish you good luck!”

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After saying these words, Nixon stood up and stuck out his hand to shake hands with Admiral Moorer. This was a very special moment about which U.S. historians later commended that this was a “warm and emotional handshake” that this President very rarely offered to anyone while he was in office.

Moorer quickly drove back to the Pentagon. He did not have long to wait. That very afternoon Nixon gave Secretary of Defense Lair approval to carry out the raid. Blackburn and Manor receive this extremely important news during the afternoon of 18 November 1970. The machinery for Operation Kingpin officially started up and began to operate.

TIME IS FIGURED NOT IN HOURS BUT IN MINUTES!

The first thing Mayer did was to quickly draft a very short secret cable, which read: "*Mumbletypg, Amputaie Kingpin.*" Manor gave it to General Vogt for signature. However, Vogt refused to sign it because "I don't understand it." No matter what Mayer said, Vogt was adamant. Mayer had to return to his special office, open his safe, take out the communications plan for Operation Kingpin, and bring it back to show to Vogt. Only then would Vogt finally sign the cable, which was then sent up to Admiral Moorer. After signing the cable, Moorer sent it up to Laird. This cable was sent out at 1730 hours from the Headquarters of the Joint Chiefs of Staff over a special flash communications network.

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At 1800 hours that afternoon, as he drove home from the Pentagon, Blackburn worried about the news that Typhoon Patsy, a very power storm with winds over 100 miles an hour that was then hitting Manila, might move to the west, affecting the Indochina region. At the same time, satellite photographs revealed that a cold front was moving down from China into North Vietnam. These factors could create an area of bad weather that would adversely affect the raid.

Just after he arrived at his home, Blackburn received a "hot-line" telephone call from the Pentagon. Vice Admiral "G. C. Donanson" [James C. Donaldson] informed Blackburn of a telephone call that had been made from a Strategic Air Command (SAC) headquarters in Southeast Asia asking for information about some "operation" that would soon be carried out and said that the "refueling plan and reconnaissance flight paths" needed to be repeated because they did not understand them. Blackburn was shocked. He ran out to his car and sped back to the Pentagon to make adjustments to this extremely exposed communications system that could easily result in a leak.

He returned home after midnight, but Blackburn got only a few hours sleep. At 0411 in the morning of 19 November 1970, he was awoken by a cable sent in by Manor reporting that Simons team was ready but that weather in the Indochina area was deteriorating and becoming a matter of concern.

At 1630 hours that day, General Bennett from DIA called Blackburn into a meeting in Admiral Moorer's office. The Pentagon had just received an intelligence report from Hanoi:

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"It appears that all the U.S. POWs in Camp Hope in Son Tay have been moved to another location."

Both Moorer and Blackburn were stunned by this report.

"My God," Moorer exclaimed. "What kind of garbage are they giving us here?"

Blackburn did not believe the report either (or, more accurately, he did not want to believe it). The execute order had been sent out 24 hours before. Operation Ivory

Coast had to be carried out, no matter what difficulties it faced!

This bad news had been collected by DIA experts from a package of “Dien Bien” cigarettes passed by a person named Nguyen Van Hoang to “Anphoret” [Alfred], a member of the International Control Commission (ICC) and a paid spy for the Americans, who then brought it out from Hanoi. When this package of cigarettes was examined by DIA experts in Washington, they found that it contained a coded message from the POWs advising the numbers of POWs being held in each camp. Special note was made of the fact that Hope Camp in Son Tay was not included in the list of POW camps, and instead about 150 POWs appeared in a new camp called Dong Hoi.

Blackburn did not believe this assessment. He suggested that Moorer allow him to make another report at 0600 hours the next morning before the U.S. Secretary of Defense decided whether or not to postpone the raid. To check the results of analysis of the source, Blackburn sent a message to Mayer requesting that he redo the analysis, right from the beginning. However, by that time it was already 1730 hours and all the specialists working in Room 2D-921 in DIA had all gone home. “Call them all back to
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the office to work. I must have their results tonight!” Blackburn, unable to maintain his composure, shouted into the telephone.

At 0356 hours on the morning of 20 November 1970, Manor sent a cable from Danang back to the Pentagon. The cable said:

“The raid will be conducted 24 hours ahead of schedule. The U.S. Pacific Command has been alerted. Simons and his unit are ready to board their aircraft.”

In spite of their weariness and the fact that it was still dark, Blackburn and Mayer jumped into their cars and sped back to the Pentagon. The first thing that General Blackburn did was to order Mayer to call all of the duty officers in the command center in to inform them that Operation Kingpin would be executed that day.

At 0500 in the morning, Blackburn strode through the doors into the office of the DIA intelligence analysts. All of them could see how tired he was from lack of sleep.

“I have no more time to wait!” General Blackburn said in a harsh tone of voice. “I want you to give me a short, concise answer: ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’”

Some of the people were disconcerted. They hemmed and hawed, answering, “Yes, but...”

“If the answer is ‘Yes,’ why do you then say ‘but’?” Blackburn interrupted. “This is ridiculous! Do you realize that we are now engaged in a dangerous game? Every second spent here affects the lives of hundreds of people on the other side of the Pacific Ocean!”

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It was now time for Blackburn to meet with Moorer. General Bennet also came, with two briefcases of documents in his hand. When asked what he thought beforehand, he himself was hesitant and waffled in his answer:

“The briefcase in my left hand contain documents that asset that our POWs have been moved out of Son Tay, but the documents in the briefcase in my right hand state the opposite.”

“So what do you think we should do?”

“I recommend that we carry out the operation.”

Blackburn felt as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

During breakfast, Moorer reported to Laird the negative reports involving Operation Kingpin. However, he still stressed that we had a 50% chance of success.

Laird had to make a difficult choice on the two important decisions regarding Operation Kingpin that had been placed on his desk. If he decided to execute the operation, the message had to be sent out before 0918 hours, Washington time. If he decided to postpone the operation, that order had to be sent out by 1008 hours. Unable to delay any longer, Laird used his special telephone line to call the White House and asked to speak to Nixon. He briefed the President of the United States on the pessimistic reports he had just received. However, Laird also stressed that pressing reasons that they needed to resolve the POW question and said that all hope was not lost for a success. Nixon agreed to carry out Operation Kingpin, but requested that he be kept constantly informed on the progress of the operation.

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SECRECY UP UNTIL THE FINAL MINUTE AND HOW THE RAID BEGAN!

At exactly 0300 hours in the morning on 18 November 1970, Thailand local time (meaning 12:00 noon, Washington local time), Manor and Simons were both at the Takhli Airfield, a rather modern Air Force base at that time, to greet the raid teams. They had just flown a distance of more than 9,500 miles in 23 hours, and they were tired. After walking off the rear ramp of a C-141, the entire U.S. commando team was loaded onto two tightly-sealed buses and driven straight into an empty but discreet and tightly-guarded compound.

At this point in time, outside of Manor and Simons, only three other members of the commando unit (Cataldo, "Saino" [Sydnor?], and "Medao" [Meadows] knew the target of the raid. The other personnel only had a vague guess that they were at some location in Southeast Asia. On orders from the commander, they were allowed to sleep for six hours to restore their strength. No one was allowed to ask questions or to show curiosity about anything! During the remaining time they were reminded about disciplinary procedures, reviewed their exercises for the raid itself, and then prepared their weapons and equipment. They were not allowed to waste a single minute of time.

At 0303 in the morning on 19 November 1970, General Manor was awakened to receive an extremely important flash message. This was the cable notifying him that the President of the United States had approved the execution of the Son Tay Raid. Manor understood that from this moment on, he would play the decisive role in the success or failure of Operation Kingpin.

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At 0625 hours that morning, Manor sent a message to Admiral "Bathac" [Bardshar] aboard the aircraft carrier *Oriskany*: "NCA has approved." This message meant that the Navy's force of deception aircraft were about to enter the game! A few days before many of the pilots in units under Bardshar's command received a special order with very strange content: The aircraft bombing Haiphong, Quang Ninh, etc. on this occasion would not be allowed to use air to ground weapons, but instead would use only illumination flares and electronic jamming missiles!

This was the first time in two years, since 31 October 1968, that the U.S. Navy would conduct such a massive operation in the skies over North Vietnam.

The weather experts predicted that by Saturday night, 21 November 1970, Typhoon Patsy would be only 100 miles from Vietnam. The storm brought with it a violent windstorm that would sweep through the southern portion of Southeast Asia. In addition, a cold front might also move down into North Vietnam. If the operation waited until that date to launch, the flights would not be able to take off because the skies would be covered with clouds, there would be high winds, and there would be no moonlight visible at night. These weather conditions would last for an entire week. The only time possible was the night of 20-21 November 1971. And Manor had decided to launch the operation at that moment.

At 1556 hours on 20 November 1970, Manor sent a cable to the Pacific Command and to the Pentagon's Operations Center informing them of the date and the hour when Operation Kingpin would be executed. He then boarded an aircraft to fly to the raid command post, located in Danang.

After lunchtime that same day, Doctor Cataldo forced all personnel in the commando unit to take a light sleeping pill and to go to bed and close their eyes. At 1700 hours they were awakened for dinner. Cataldo advised all of them to eat a lot in order to have the strength for the operation that night. At 1800 hours the entire unit gathered to be briefed on the mission order. For the first time, the American soldiers in this commando unit learned the truth:

“We will be personally participating in an operation to rescue approximately 70 U.S. pilot POWs being held in the Son Tay Prison Camp. The target is located inside North Vietnam, 23 miles west of Hanoi...”

After reading the mission orders and explaining some vital points, Simons made a very brief speech:

According to orders, the commando teams had to leave behind all their money, documents, and personal items. They were loaded onto enclosed buses and driven to the airfield in silence. Before boarding the waiting four-engine C-130 aircraft, every man was instructed to check his weapons and equipment one final time.

The C-130 began rolling down the runway at 2232 hours to fly to Udorn. There, under the command of General Manor, the commando teams were transferred to three of the five helicopters waiting there. Nearby were two C-141 casualty evacuation aircraft that would be used to transport the POWs home after the Son Tay raid.

At 2325 hours, from his command post in Danang, General Manor reported to the Pentagon,

“The last HH-53 helicopter carrying the assault teams left Udorn Airfield at 2318 hours... Operation Kingpin has begun.”

WHAT THE AMERICANS DID DURING THE NIGHT THAT SON TAY WILL NEVER FORGET

The formation of commando helicopter, guided by a C-130, crept through the night skies like a gang of thieves. Simons sat on a helicopter code-named “Apple One” and began to sleep in order to maintain his strength. According to the plan, including the time for the aerial refueling in Lao airspace, they would land in Son Tay in exactly three

hours.

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The pilots in Simons' flight crew never imagined that they were just one of more than 100 aircraft of all types that the Pentagon had mobilized to participate in this operation. These aircraft – helicopters, C-130s, A-1s, F-105s, F-4s, etc. – had taken off from five Air Force bases in Thailand and three aircraft carriers in the Gulf of Tonkin. The entire operation now covered an area of the skies over Southeast Asia totaling 300,000 square kilometers.

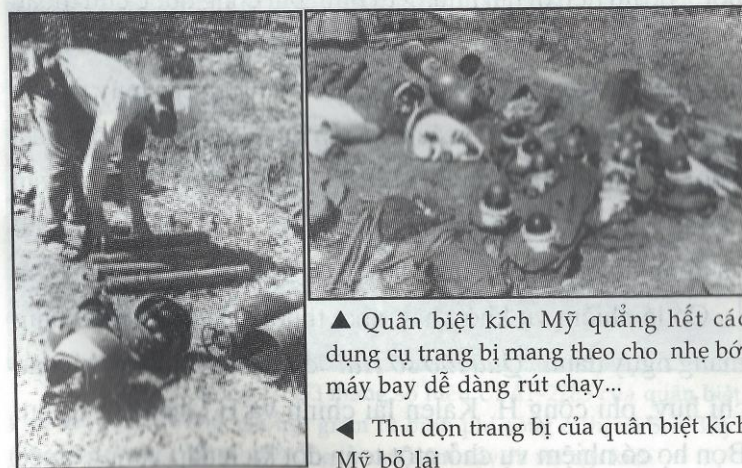
Donohue, the pilot of “Apple Three,” began to descend in altitude when he entered North Vietnamese airspace. “Apple Four” and “Apple Five” flew behind his helicopter. When they were at an altitude of about 500 feet (one foot equals 0.3048 meters), the American pilots could see the moon reflecting off the surface of the Da River and the vast Tam Dao Mountain Range. This was their checkpoint and showed that they were exactly on course.

When he was just about two miles from the target, Donohue slowed “Apple Three” to allow the Combat Talon C-130 and the two other helicopters to speed past and prepare to drop illumination flares. At that moment his watch read 2:17 on 21 November 1970. The formation carrying Simons' commando team had reached Son Tay one minute ahead of schedule. The Americans believed that this was the time that the troops guarding the POW camp would be changing their guard shifts, so they would be taken by surprise and would not have time to react.

Under the blinding light of illumination flares fired by the C-130, the formation of American helicopters flew at treetop level, their rotors churning the air into loud eddies that shattered the night silence.

*Page 347. Right caption:
U.S. commandos discarded
all their equipment to
lighten their aircraft in
order to make their escape
easier.*

*Left caption: Collecting
equipment left behind by
the American commandos.*



After a few tense seconds trying to orient his aircraft to ensure that he was really at the POW camp, Donohue realized that he was off course and was about 400 meters south of the actual target. There was an installation at this location that looked like the prison camp, but he did not see the small river outside the walls that the DIA specialists had described. He immediately turned “Apple Three” around. Now Donohue and Captain “Tom Oandoron” [Thomas Waldron], his co-pilot, saw the Son Tay POW camp with its three prominent guard towers. The only difference was that the trees and vegetation inside the camp looked a lot greener and taller than what they had imagined

back in the United States. Maybe they had grown during the recent rainy season!

“Prepare to open fire!” Donohue said quickly over the aircraft intercom. At the same time he reduced his rotor speed. “Fire!”

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“Apple Three” began to shake as soon as this terse order was given. The two Gatling guns, one on each side of the helicopter, opened fire viciously.

“I hit it! It’s collapsed already!” the gunners shouted excitedly. Donohue glanced out and saw that the guard towers had completely collapsed as the helicopter flashed by.

“Apple Three” had completed its mission of opening the assault. It climbed and flew east about 1.5 miles, located an empty field, and landed. A group of other helicopters were already waiting there, all leaving their rotor blades turning. Their mission was to wait to pick up the prisoners after they were brought out of the camp and then carry them away. According to the pre-arranged plan, all personnel in the flight crew were ordered to be ready to jettison all the equipment they carried to lighten the aircraft in the event necessary in order to evacuate the rescued POWs.



Xác chiếc trực thăng HH53 mang số hiệu USAF-2785 của quân biệt kích Mỹ bỏ lại trong sân trại giam tù binh phi công ở thị xã Sơn Tây. (Ảnh chụp ngày 21-11-1970, ngay sau đêm xảy ra vụ tập kích)

Page 349. The wreckage of HH-53 helicopter bearing serial number USAF-2785 left being by the American commandos at the prison camp for U.S. pilots in Son Tay city. (This photograph was taken on 21 November 1970, the morning after the raid.) (Editor’s note: It was HH-3 helicopter not HH-53.)

Donohue turned up the volume on his radio. After three hours of flying in radio silence, all the radios carried by the different commando teams were switched on. All the frequencies, FM, EM, VHF, UHF, etc., were filled with noise echoing out amidst the sound of gunfire and the noise of the engines and the turning rotors of the helicopters.

Perhaps the most difficult mission was that assigned to the helicopter code-named “Apple Two,” commanded by Captain Dick Meadows. The chief pilot of “Apple Two” was “H. Kalen” [Herbert Kalen] and the co-pilot was “H. Giendo” [Herbert Zehnder] [sic]. Their mission was to transport an assault team to land on the small field inside the POW camp right after “Apple Three” destroyed all the guard tower targets. The

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extremely important mission of this assault team was to suppress and eliminate Vietnamese soldiers inside the camp and to immediately reach the cells in order to protect the POWs. After this was accomplished, they would attack from the inside while another

force attacked from the outside, blasting through the outside wall of the camp in order to take the newly rescued POWs outside the walls.

According to the plan that the American intelligence specialists had calculated very carefully, if the massive HH-53 helicopter managed to land in the small field inside the camp without injuring the commando team, their mission would be considered a success. A quantity of powerful C-4 explosives was packed under the floor of the aircraft (to guard against the opposition defusing the charge) along with two time fuses so that Meadows could destroy the aircraft after completing the mission. It was rumored that a
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high-ranking Army officer did not approve of this plan because he thought it was wasteful and too expensive. General Blackburn was infuriated. He demanded a private meeting with this officer so that they could “have it out.” The officer “sincerely” encouraged Blackburn to use an infantry UH-1 helicopter, which cost only 350,000 dollars per aircraft, rather than the Air Force HH-53, which cost almost one million dollars. Blackburn almost went crazy. He said that the cost was not more important than the lives of the one hundred U.S. pilot POWs being held in Son Tay. At that point in time, the U.S. armed forces had lost no fewer than 3,000 helicopters of all types during the Vietnam War. The U.S. was a rich nation – the loss of one more helicopter was like losing a rusty nail! However, the loss of one soldiers, and especially of one pilot, would truly be terrible.

To return to the situation in Son Tay, in spite of his greatest efforts, Pilot H. Kalen was unable to direct “Apple Two” down into the yard inside the prison camp as he wanted. During the last seconds before the helicopter touched down, the claw [sic] of the helicopter hit a steel cable stretched across the yard (like a clothesline), and the 62-foot long rotor blade sliced into the trunks of several trees, chopping them into bits and throwing leaves and branches all around. There was the sound of a loud crash. The
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helicopter flipped over in the yard of the POW camp, shattering the glass in the cockpit windows and the doors. The helicopter engine roared and shook like a wounded wild beast. The shattered rotor blades chopped up several more large trees before they finally stopped turning.

Page 351. The rotor blades of the giant HH-53 helicopter laying amidst the wreckage of the aircraft.



Cánh quạt của chiếc trực thăng HH53 khổng lồ lẫn trong đống xác máy bay

The terrible crash threw one U.S. soldiers several meters out of the helicopter, while another soldier suffered a broken ankle. Captain Meadows was bruised all over, but he was able to stand up and get out of the damaged aircraft. Meadows ran more than ten meters away from the helicopter before he stopped and knelt down on the ground.

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He aimed his battery-powered bullhorn toward the detention compound and began to broadcast, speaking rapidly but trying to remain calm:

“Attention! Attention! We are Americans! We have come to rescue you and take you away from here! For your own safety, you are all requested to lay flat on the floor! We will enter your cells in a few minutes!”

While Meadows continued to repeat this announcement over and over again, the other 13 members of his assault team, with assault rifles at the ready, quickly spread out to the cells and to the main gate area. They blasted away at anything suspicious that they encountered during their advance.

“Attention! Attention! We Are Americans. We have come to rescue you and take you away from here...We will enter your cells in a few minutes.”

Meadows voice echoed through the camp, mingled with the sounds of gunfire and of the beat of helicopter rotors. There was, however, no sound of reply from the POWs. The cells remained suspiciously silent!

Meadows looked at his watch. The raid had not lasted for almost three minutes. According to the plan, Simons’ team should have arrived by now, but for some reason they seemed to have disappeared.

Suddenly, there was a blinding flash and the sound of a loud explosion. Meadows
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saw that a large hole had been blown through the south wall. A team of American commandos charged through the acrid smoke, but it was Lieutenant Colonel “Eliot Saino’s” [Eliot Sydnor] team.

It turned out that the helicopter codenamed “Apple One,” carrying Simons’ 22-man team, had landed by mistake at a location 400 meters south of the target. The DIA specialists had marked this location on the map as a “high school” (In fact, this facility had formerly been the Son Tay Province Party School. After Ha Tay province was formed, the school had been turned into a rest and recuperation area for cadre). Before the raid, Simons had reminded the pilots that from the air this location looked very similar to the target so they had to be extremely careful. Ironically, however, the one who actually made the mistake was veteran pilot “Uocno Britton” [Warner Britton], who was carrying Simons’ team. Simons finally recognized the error after the helicopter had landed the team outside the wall and flown away. He had been surprised when he did not hear Dick Meadows voice over the bullhorn calling to the POWs to lie down to avoid friendly fire and did not hear the sound of gunfire from within the compound. To make sure, Simons ordered his team to blast a hole in the wall and assault the interior of the compound. There, before they pulled back out of the facility, the American commandos committed a barbaric crime: they shot and killed five recuperating cadre as they lay asleep. In five minutes, they destroyed the facility, turning it into a blazing inferno!

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When the helicopter “Apple One” returned to transport Simons’ team to the correct location, the raid was already eight minutes old. Simons immediately radioed to

Dick Meadows and Eliot Sydnor, ordering them to return to “Plan One” (Previously, after realizing that Simons had landed at the wrong location, Eliot Sydnor decided to divide his team in two to replace Simons’ team and made a radio call requesting permission to implement “Plan Two”).

Following the plan precisely, after establishing a light command post, Simons hastily sent a group of soldiers to destroy the bridge over the Tich River with explosives. Meanwhile, Sydnor’s team had destroyed the electrical transformer station and all the nearby electrical poles, cutting off all electrical supply to the POW camp and the surrounding area. Even though it had not been part of the plan, this group of soldiers used explosives to also destroy a irrigation water pumping station nearby (This was truly the act of aggressors who were professional thieves and saboteurs!).

This was not all they did, however. During their advance, one soldier in Simons group kicked in a door and charged into one of three scattered civilian homes in the entire area, because he saw that this house still had its lights on. A mother and three small children were sleeping soundly. Awakened by the sound of gunfire, the mother and her children were terrified and quickly crawled under the bed to hide. The American shined a flashlight under the bed and saw them. He savagely pulled the trigger of his assault rifle, emptying an entire magazine of ammunition into the woman and her three children. Mrs. Nguyen Thi An, 48 years old, and her daughter Le Thu Huong, 12 years old, died
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immediately. Another daughter, 15-year old Le Thu Nga, and a son, nine-year old Le Viet Tuan, were hit by many bullets and severely wounded.

At that same time, after making his calls over the bullhorn, Dick Meadows ordered his team to break the locks and enter every cell. Almost every room was empty. However, in one small room the American commandos found six shirtless men in bed asleep. They were soldiers assigned to maintain the prison camp after the American POWs were transferred to another location, and all of them were listed in the category of recovering soldiers (sick, wounded, and recuperating personnel withdrawn from all different locations. This meant that they could not participate in combat operations or work details and so were usually not issued weapons). Meadows commando team opened fire, killing all six of these men, who were completely unarmed!

First Sergeant “Kemmo” [Kemmer] was the first person ordered to check the POW cells. To his surprise, every one of the cells was empty. There was no sign that any American POWs were living there.

First Lieutenant “Petrie” [Petrie], the team leader, was standing guard outside. Anxiously, he called in,

“Have you found anyone? Do you see anyone?”

Kemmer’s answer was short and sweet:

“I don’t see shit!”

Petrie didn’t believe it. He hastily charged in and personally shined his flashlight
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into every room. It was true – every room was completely empty! A number of the cell doors had been left open, the floor was covered with dust and dirt, and the atmosphere reeked with mildew and decay. It was hard to tell how long the cells had been empty. Perhaps a few weeks, but it could have been for only a few days.

After a period of hopelessly searching and inspecting the area, Meadows had to

report over his radio,

“The camp is empty. We have not found a single U.S. POW!”

“We have not found a single POW!” “We have not found a single POW!” His sentence was repeated over and over again and transmitted from one person to the next, until it finally hit Simons like a bolt from the blue and stunning him completely.

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Simons did not believe it and asked again,

“Have you checked carefully?”

His voice has suddenly become soft.

“I am inside one of the cells right now!” Meadows shouted angrily over the radio.

His watch revealed that it had now been 18 minutes since the raid began. Simons ordered several soldiers who were carrying cameras to enter the cells and photograph them, and he personally went into the detention compound to make one final check with a feeling of hopelessness and discouragement in the pit of his stomach.

Simons’ communications officer sent a cable that had not been part of the plan to General Manor at his operations command post in Danang: “There are no POWs here!” Then Simons ordered the entire assault team to withdraw and board the helicopters.

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HOW DID THE PENTAGON RECEIVE THE NEWS THAT THE SON TAY RAID HAD FAILED?

When the Son Tay raid began at 2325 hours on 20 November 1970, General Manor sent a cable to the Pentagon to report that, “Operation Kingpin has begun.” It was then noontime in Washington D.C. Almost all of the senior officials in the Pentagon were present in the Command Center: Secretary Laird, Deputy Secretary “Devit Pacco” [David Packard], National Security Advisor Kissinger, the Air Force Commander, the Marine Corps Commander, the Army Chief of Staff, etc. They ate lunch in the office. The only subject of conversation between them was the Son Tay Raid. Occasionally someone would look at his watch as they anxiously waited for information.

General Manor sent a series of three cables back from Vietnam reporting the excellent progress of the operation, making the atmosphere in the conference room of the Operations Center happy and filled with hope. However, the hope and joy of the generals in the Pentagon lasted only a little more than three hours. General Manor’s fourth cable, reporting that, “The U.S. assault teams are now leaving Son Tay,” made everyone in the room so anxious none of them could sit still. Less than 30 minutes later a final cable arrived that threw a “bucket of cold water” that shocked them all: “We did not rescue

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any pilot POWs! ”This report caused the entire Command Center to stop in shocked silence. No one wanted to believe that the cable they had just received was true. However, they had no way to check it, because from the moment that the American commando teams lifted off from Vietnamese soil, they maintain strict radio silence and no communications were allowed.

I would like to add that at that moment General Manor’s operations command post in Danang was enveloped in an atmosphere of bitter disappointment. This was the first time in the military career of this “old fox” general that he had tasted such a bitter

failure. He had been shocked and confused and simply did not know what action he needed to take every since he received the cable from Simons: “Zero prisoners!” Simon’s cable had been drafted inside the empty Son Tay prison camp. At first, even Simons was concerned and uncertain about this wording, because the operations communications code did not have provision for the use of the word “Zero.” If fact, when he received the cable General Manor did not understand it and he quickly sent a message asking for a repeat, because he thought that perhaps Simons’ communications officer had left out one or two numbers in from of the “Zero.” Simons patiently sent the exact same message again before making a last count of the American commando troops as they boarded the helicopter.

The last American helicopter left Son Tay at 2:44 in the morning on 21 November 1970. The raid had taken only 27 minutes, exactly as planned. Six minutes later, there was a bright flash and a loud explosion in the former POW camp. A powerful C-4 explosive charge with a time delay fuse had destroyed the HH-53 sitting in the courtyard of the prison camp.

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All that was left of the cockpit of the giant HH-53 helicopter was a pile of junk. (Photograph taken on 21 November 1970, the morning after the raid.)



Buồng lái của chiếc trực thăng khổng lồ HH53 chỉ còn là đồng phế liệu. (Ảnh chụp ngày 21-11-1970 ngay sau đêm xảy ra vụ tập kích)

WHY WERE THE U.S PILOT POWS TRANSFERRED OUT OF SON TAY CAMP BEFORE THE RAID TOOK PLACE?

That was a question that tormented the most senior officials in the Pentagon after the failure of the raid and gave the Boss in the White House the reputation of being a “liar” in the eyes of the public.

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In fact, throughout the time while feverish preparations were being made for “Operation Ivory Coast,” U.S. military specialists constantly collected intelligence information, and in particular the continued to analyze aerial photographs taken by reconnaissance aircraft. They had noticed that, beginning in June 1970, there were indications of a “decrease in outside activity the camp courtyard” at the Son Tay POW camp. Before the raid was carried out, daily photographs, both with ordinary and infrared cameras, were taken of the Son Tay POW Camp. The infrared aerial photographs revealed that there were still

people inside the cells. However, the infrared film used at that time had a weakness: it could not determine whether those people were Vietnamese or Americans. Admiral Moorer made this admission about this matter:

“Our intelligence information was extremely accurate. However, it was not possible for us to confirm where the U.S. POWs were located since they were constantly being moved. In spite of that, however, we still decided to recommend an operation to rescue them.”

A number of DIA specialists believed that there was a simple reason for the evacuation of the POWs from Hope Camp in Son Tay. It was an accidental coincidence – the POWs were evacuated because of flooding that was caused by artificial rain-making operations that were part of a CIA “Weather Warfare” program! Because of security principles, the DIA specialists working on Operation Ivory Coast were never informed by the CIA about these artificial rain-making operations. This was the reason for the tragic-comic “hoist by their own petard” situation that my readers saw in the last section of this article!

The POWs later said that the constant rains throughout the summer of 1970, caused by the criminal plans of the CIA, had threatened to flood the camp. The waters of the Tich River had reached the very walls of the prison camp and movement, transportation, and supply began extremely difficult. Because they had been in use for so long, a number of the Level Four houses deteriorated and began to crumble.

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The walls of the prison cells were pockmarked by scars made by bullets fired by the American commandos.

(Editor’s note: Tall trees behind this building confirm that this was the lookalike barracks building at the “secondary school”.)



Tường nhà của các phòng giam dày đặc những vết đạn tiểu liên do quân biệt kích Mỹ bắn

One noontime, the POWs were given orders to take down the clotheslines, the volley-ball net, and all the other equipment. This equipment, together with pigs, chickens, pots and pans, etc., was all loaded onto small trucks. That night, the first group of POWs boarded a bus. The evacuation was carried out in a quiet and orderly fashion, and the movement took an entire month. The POWs were taken to a refurbished military barracks located only 15 kilometers from Camp Hope. The POWs gave the new camp a very American name: Camp Faith. At this new camp, they could clearly hear the sound of the helicopter engines and rotors and the sound of gunfire, and they saw bright lights in the sky over Camp Hope on the night of the Son Tay raid.



Rất nhiều thứ vũ khí, trang bị quân biệt kích Mỹ đã bỏ lại để rút chạy cho nhanh

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A large number of different types of weapons and equipment were discarded by the American commandos so that they could make a quick escape.

A number of U.S. military specialists maintain that Vietnamese intelligence received advance word that this raid would take place. The only thing the Vietnamese
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did not know was exactly when the raid was planned. That was the reason Colonel Simon's commando team was able to get in and back out as described in the account above.

So how did Vietnamese intelligence learn of the plot to conduct the Son Tay raid? Listen to the words of [Public Security] Major General (Thieu Tuong) Nguyen Don Tu, who served as Chief of the Research Section of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam's Delegation to the Paris Peace Talks.

"During the period I worked in Paris I regularly read and studied secret documents sent to our delegation by progressive [liberal] American friends. Among these documents were volumes of minutes from Congressional hearings. These volumes were thousands of pages long, printed in very small type, and very difficult to read. However, they contained many pages that discussed the war in Vietnam. These pages provided our delegation additional information for use in our struggle at the conference table.



Thiếu tướng Nguyễn Đôn Tư

Major General Nguyen Don Tu.

"Sometime during the last quarter of 1970, in a secret volume sent to us by our American friends, I found information which talked about the construction in the United States of a mock-up of a prisoner of war camp in North Vietnam. I analyzed this item
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and then began to make guesses about what it meant: Perhaps the U.S. Government wanted to see with their own eyes how U.S. prisoners of war held in Vietnam had to live in order to demand that we treat their people properly? Or was there some other, more important reason for building this camp?

"In a volume of minutes of a Congressional Committee hearing I found many sections had been censored, either lined out or whited out. These censored sections were interspersed among sections that were made public. The main thrust of the sections that remained revealed that the Committee was closely questioning the Administration about what kind of action might lead a number of socialist nations to send troops to North Vietnam. The representative of the administration replied that such an eventuality was impossible.

"When I reached this point in my reading, I recalled that after the Korean War the U.S. was very afraid of becoming involved in a ground war against China on the Asian continent. During the Vietnam War U.S. policy had been to restrict operations by its ground forces to South Vietnam only. It would use only its air forces and puppet spies and commandos against North Vietnam. This was because the U.S. believed that if it used ground troops to attack North Vietnam the Socialist nations were certain to send troops to assist Vietnam, which lead to a ground war against the armies of the Socialist nations - something the U.S. still wanted to avoid.

"This meant it was very possible the U.S. Senators were worried that the military intended to send ground forces to attack North Vietnam. In fact, however, on the battlefields of Vietnam at that time, and under considerable pressure, the U.S. armed forces were conducting a gradual troop withdrawal. The troops were being replaced by

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the "Vietnamization" program and "using Vietnamese to fight Vietnamese." In this case, what was the target of the military operation using ground forces for an attack in North Vietnam? Would they attack our capital, Hanoi, the nerve center of the entire nation? Would they attack the port of Haiphong to destroy our supply warehouses and block our source of military aid? Would they attack the southern portion of Military Region Four to destroy our convoys of weapons and food being sent to the battlefields of South Vietnam?

"All these possibilities were very unlikely, especially after the failure of the U.S. operation into the Parrot's Beak area which was intended to expand the war into Cambodia, an operation for which Nixon encountered violent opposition from U.S. public opinion. It was certain Nixon was not stupid enough to do something so risky and dangerous without the support of Congress and U.S. public opinion! ...

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"After reaching this point, I made a connection between this item and the construction of a mock-up of a Vietnamese prisoner of war camp in the U.S. I knew there was a U.S. POW camp in Son Tay, and the layout of the mock-up might match the Son Tay camp. The U.S. military had organized operations to rescue a number of pilots immediately after they had been shot down in Vietnam. Now, excessive greed had led the Pentagon to attempt such a risky military operation. This daring military plan had been taken to the Congress for discussion, which was the reason many pages of the Congressional minutes had been censored and many sections excised. If I was right, the sooner this report was sent back "home" the better!

"Luckily, right after I reached this conclusion the Chief of our Delegation informed me that the next day one of our people would fly directly back to Hanoi. I immediately sat down and wrote a report detailing the information I had compiled, including the following section:

"Information from U.S. Congressional minutes reveals that the enemy has a plan to conduct a raid against the Son Tay Prison Camp to rescue U.S. prisoners of war. Precautions should be taken against this possibility."

"Later, after I returned home, I learned that the U.S. prisoners had been transferred out of the Son Tay camp even before I sent back my report. It turned out that



Ông Gia Huy tại Tây Âu năm 1969

our people back home had already received intelligence information on this top-secret plan to rescue U.S. POW's. About two weeks later the raid was carried out just as I had predicted."

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Mr. Gia Huy in Western Europe, 1969.

In addition, here is the story told by Gia Huy, a covert intelligence officer working for the Ministry of Public Security:

"In mid-1968 Comrade Minister [of Public Security] Tran Quoc Hoan personally dispatched me abroad to work in a number of Western European countries. The next Christmas I asked a friend who spoke good English to accompany me and serve as my interpreter during a visit to the "American House" (*Maisons Etats-Unis*) in the International Compound on "Giuocdang" [Jordan?] Boulevard in Paris where a conference on "War and Peace" was to be held. At the conference I checked out a number of anti-war protesters and was quickly able to make friends with a number of active supporters. The first of these were two American students named L and G who were majoring in History. L had been forced to take a job as a houseboy for an elderly couple in the 3rd Precinct to support himself while he was attending classes. G still hadn't found a job, so I immediately got him a job as a dishwasher at a restaurant owned by an overseas Vietnamese. These two students now only had to work a couple of hours a day to make enough to continue their studies.

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"In order to help Vietnam combat the U.S., after returning from their summer vacation in the U.S. these two students personally delivered into my hands a rather complete set of documents consisting of class schedules, class plans, name lists, and ID photographs of a number of Saigon puppet intelligence personnel who were attending training classes in the state of Illinois. I do not know how they obtained these documents.

"In late 1969, while attending an anti-war conference in Geneva, Switzerland which was chaired jointly by Mrs. "Voaron" [sic] and PhD of Medicine [sic] "Ontrama" [sic], I happened to make the acquaintance of Mr. R, a former DIA (U.S. Defense

Intelligence Agency) employee who had recently completed a tour of duty in Vietnam. R was now a journalist working for a respected U.S. magazine. R had been drafted into the U.S. armed forces and sent to Vietnam to "put down the Viet Cong insurrection" and "help an ally" (the Saigon puppet regime). R had personally witnessed many crimes committed by the U.S. military against Vietnamese civilians. The things he had seen turned him against this unjust war, and he very much wanted to do something to help the Vietnamese people.

"In mid-October 1970, during a news conference being held by the Spokesman of the Delegation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in Paris, R sought me out. Our eyes met. He signaled that he needed to meet me right away. I went to the toilet. R quickly followed me. Instead of his usual handshake, R held out his hand with two fingers extended. A small piece of paper, folded into quarters, was clasped between his fingers. I understood his intent and slipped the paper into my hand. R leaned close and whispered into my ear, "This information is very important" and then quickly left the restroom.

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I stood there and quickly read this "hot" information, then threw the paper into the toilet and flushed it away.

"Returning to the press conference, I mentally reviewed the important information written on that piece of paper:

"The U.S. Defense Department is currently making urgent preparations for a raid to be launched into an area northwest of Hanoi to rescue U.S. pilots who are being held as prisoners of war. According to a Vietnamese priest in Belgium, DIA has selected a number of experienced Western European commando officers to take part in this operation."

"I wracked my brain while considering this information. I knew that the soldiers and civilians of North Vietnam had shot down many U.S. aircraft and captured many pilots. Naturally we had prison camps, but the truth was that I had no idea where these prison camps were located.

"The next morning I was in Brussels, Belgium, to look up a former guerrilla officer who had fought against the German fascists during the Second World War and who was very sympathetic towards Vietnam. He enthusiastically told me, "There aren't many airborne commandos in this area, but there are a few who are rather well-known in military circles. One is "Phongten" [Fontaine?], a Belgian citizen of French extraction. He is a military intelligence specialist and is skilled in training airborne commandos. He worked with U.S. intelligence during the Second World War. After the war Fontaine joined the U.S. Army. During the early 1960's he was sent to South Vietnam and Laos a number of times to train commandos there. I have heard that, even though he retired some time ago, the Americans recently invited Fontaine to participate in some kind of special mission."

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"During this period those who gathered international news all said that if you wanted to know what was happening in Washington D.C., all you needed to do was to go to Paris or London, because these two locations were the news capitals of the world. Making a connection to the slip of paper the journalist named R had passed to me, I concluded that R's "hot" information had a basis in fact, but it wasn't clear when this plan

was to be carried out.

"I decided to quickly send the following report back "home": *The enemy may be planning to parachute troops into Vietnam on a raid to rescue American prisoners being held northwest of Hanoi. This report is being submitted for your analysis and evaluation.*"

"Later, when I returned home to report on the results of my mission, Minister Tran Quoc Hoan personally decorated me. The Minister told me that the information I had sent back had fitted very well with suspicions which had already been raised by a number of reports from other sources saying that the enemy might launch a raid against Son Tay but which we had not yet been able to confirm. After weighing this information, higher authorities decided to secretly evacuate the American pilots being held at the Son Tay prison camp to a back-up camp, leaving behind only a unit stationed there full-time to maintain the camp and be prepared to combat the enemy when he mounted his raid. The evacuation of the American prisoners of war was carried out exactly according to plan. As for the unit on permanent combat alert, at first the unit had been very serious in carrying out its mission, but because we did not know the exact date of the raid, after a few weeks of maintaining constant full combat alert our troops dropped their vigilance and turned the camp over to another element. When the enemy did attack the camp the unfortunate incident of which the readers are aware occurred."

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However, the situation was different for the Pentagon. Because of the extremely extensive, and expensive, preparation for the Son Tay Raid, and because of heavy pressure from American public opinion, the failure to rescue even one single pilot POW was a humiliating and embarrassing failure. Even though they had "anticipated the negative consequences" that might result from the raid, both Nixon and Kissinger were heavily criticized by the opposition, the Congress, and U.S. public opinion. To deal with this problem, to try to redeem a shred of honor, and to allay public opinion, the Pentagon held a big "press conference" to "issue commendations" and even to pin medals on General Manor and Colonel Simon's unsuccessful commando team that had so rashly violated North Vietnamese territory.

Pentagon military experts tried out every possible argument to explain their failure. Some people said that it was because the American side had been overconfident and had placed too much faith in modern military science and technology. Others said that the U.S. had failed because Hanoi had been warned ahead of time. Still other said that it was simply a coincidence that the American POWs had been evacuated from the Son Tay Prison Camp before the raid took place.

In support, to many Americans the reason for the failure of the Son Tay Raid is still a mystery, and they call it one of the biggest mysteries of the Vietnam War!

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"POSTSCRIPT TO THE RAID TO RESCUE U.S. PILOT POWS AT SON TAY" OR "THE FINAL SECRET"

Almost thirty years has passed, but Mrs. Tran Thi Nghien still cannot forget that terrible night. A talkative person and a woman with an excellent memory, Mr. Nghien

told us everything about that night, as if it had just happened the night before.

“My house was near the main gate into the POW camp. Back then, the Xa Tac area was empty and very poor. I made my living selling chickens, so people usually called me “Chicken Nghien.” I remember that the supply soldiers in the camp often asked me to purchase chickens and potatoes for them. They usually bought large quantities, and the chickens and potatoes had to be the best quality before they would accept them. Only after peace was restored did I learn that they were buying these things for U.S. POWs.

“The night of the American raid, a young soldier who was carrying a pack asked me the way to prison camp. He introduced himself as Tuc. He said he was from Nghe An province, had just graduated with a degree in construction engineering, and had received orders to report to this location. Because Tuc did not have time to eat with his unit, I invited him to have dinner with my family. I remember that meal, because we had some very delicious goose meat with our rice.



Bà Trần Thị Nghiê - một nhân chứng của "Vụ tập kích Sơn Tây" đang kể lại với tác giả bài viết

Mrs. Tran Thi Nghien, a witness to the “Son Tay Raid,” telling her story to the author of this article.

“That night, which I remember was the 23rd day of the tenth lunar month, the moon was very bright and it was cold. Even with a thick blanket we still felt cold, making it difficult to sleep. During the middle of the night, I suddenly woke up because I heard the roar of a propeller-

driven aircraft flying over my house. I looked through the corner of a window and saw many bright lights, and then there came the sound of gunfire, so loud it hurt my ears. I saw big, tall men wearing steel helmets. They were yelling things that I couldn’t understand and running back and forth. My husband, Can Huu An, whispered in my ear,

“They are not our troops conducting a practice exercise”.(During this period our troops often conducted practice exercises in the Son Tay area.) “I think American commandos have landed. Take the children and hide quickly!”

I was so terrified I got all flustered. We ran first and sat in the clothes closet to hide, and then we crawled underneath the bed and didn’t even dare to breathe.”

The next morning, Mr. Nghien was stunned when she heard Mrs. Tinh, her neighbor, screaming and crying, telling everyone that the pirates had broken into Mrs. An’s house and shot everyone in the house.

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“Those shot were my wife and my children!” Le Viet Tien remembers. “At that time I was the Deputy Commander of the Ha Tay Province Public Security Office. That night I was sleeping at my headquarters in Ha Dong city when I received the news. I hurried home immediately and reached Son Tay before dawn. Public Security officers from the city informed me that of the four people in my family, two were dead and two were severely wounded. They advised me not to go to my house, because they were afraid the sight would be so painful that I could no longer perform my duties.”

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Upper caption: Mr. Le Viet Tien and his two children, Le Thi Thu Nga and Le Viet Tuan. Photograph taken at his home in November 1998.



▲ Ông Lê Việt Tiến cùng hai người con là Lê Thị Thu Nga và Lê Việt Tuấn chụp tại nhà riêng, tháng 11-1998

◀ Ông Lê Việt Tiến cùng hai con là Lê Thị Thu Nga và Lê Việt Tuấn, sau khi được cứu chữa tại bệnh viện Việt Đức năm 1970

Lower caption: Mr. Le Viet Tien and his two children, Le Thi Thu Nga and Le Viet Tuan, after they were treated at the Viet Duc [Vietnamese-German] Hospital in 1970.

However, Le Viet Tien demanded that he had to go there personally to make the necessary arrangements. Even today, many of his colleagues and friends from that time still do not know where he got

the strength and the will to stay calm and rational at a time like that! On the one hand, he made the arrangements for his two seriously wounded children to be sent to a hospital for treatment, and on the other he personally made all the arrangements for the funeral of his wife and daughter.

During that period, people seldom gathered in large groups for fear of being targeted by American aircraft. However, thousands of the residents of Son Tay gathered for the funeral of the wife and daughter of Le Viet Tien. They silently formed a long procession and walked four or five kilometers behind the vehicle carrying the bodies of Mrs. Bich An and her daughter, Thu Huong. Although he was greatly moved by the emotional display by the people of the city, Le Viet Tien would not allow this long line of people to escort his wife and child to their final resting place in such a dangerous situation. He worked patiently to persuade everyone to quickly disperse and return home,

in case the American planes returned to commit more crimes. At the time of the Son Tay
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raid, Le Viet Tien's two oldest sons, Le Thanh and Le Viet Hung, were studying in the Soviet Union. Because of the wartime conditions, it was very difficult for them to maintain contact with their family. It usually took several months between the time a letter was sent and the time a response was received. Afraid that his sons would be so grief-stricken by the news that it would affect their studies, and even their health, Tien forbade all his relatives from sending the sad news to Thanh and Hung. It also should be
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added that, because of the wartime conditions, our newspapers and our other media outlets never revealed a single detail about the "Son Tay POW raid." Only those cadre whose responsibilities required it were given a limited amount of information in accordance with a strict security system. It was different on the American side. After the unsuccessful commando teams returned from the raid, as a sop to public opinion the Pentagon held a press conference and ostentatiously held awards ceremonies for a number of the commanding officers and the leaders of the raid. Almost all the foreign press, including newspapers in the Soviet Union, printed the news that American troops had carried out the "Son Tay Raid." These reports provided the first news that Le Viet Tien's two oldest sons received on this incident. They immediately wrote letters home to their friends, and not long thereafter they learned the sad truth. However, they had to bite their lips and swallow their sorrow in order to continue their studies and gain as much knowledge as they could so they could serve the nation when they returned home. Now, almost thirty years later, both of Tien's sons have successful careers: One is Deputy Director of the General Department of People's Police in the Ministry of Public Security, and the other is the Director of a petroleum products processing and commercial company that is part of the Vietnam General Petroleum and Gas Company and simultaneously chairman of the board of directors of three joint enterprises with foreign nations in Vietnam.

But let us return to Le Viet Tien's two children who were seriously wounded in 1970. At that time, Le Thi Thu Nga was 15 years old and in the ninth grade, while Le Viet Tuan was just nine years old and in the third grade. The daughter, Nga, had a piece
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of the bone in her left temple destroyed by a bullet fired by the American commandos. The boy, Tuan, suffered a fractured skull in the area of the left ear and he also lost one eye. Both of the children had extremely grave head injuries.

Ms. Thu Nga remembers:

"It was a Saturday night, and not only was it a weekend holiday, it was also Vietnam's Teacher's Day. Like all other areas, we students had the day off to celebrate the holiday honoring our teachers. I remember that my younger sister, Thu Huong, went with a friend to visit her teacher and didn't get home until very late. That night, we had been sleeping for a while when we heard the roar of aircraft overhead and the sound of guns firing wildly all over the area. The electricity went out, but suddenly the skies lit up like it was daylight. Later I learned that the light was from American illumination flares. Because our school constantly reviewed our lessons on the need for vigilance, we guessed that something very dangerous was happening. My mother quickly got all of us to crawl under the bed to avoid bullets and shrapnel. The bed in our house sat up high on

top of bricks, so I was able to sit there with by knees folded up and nod off to sleep. Then, however, I heard the voices of many people talking and running outside. A moment later, suddenly the door of our house burst open. Several tall, hulking men charged into the room. Then a flashlight swept the room, accompanied by the sound of a gun firing, and the explosion of a grenade rang in my ears. I was so afraid that I closed my eyes. A moment later, I clearly heard the voice of my mother moaning in pain, ‘My children ... Mother is wounded ... I think I’m going to die...’

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“I was even more frightened when I saw my little brother, Viet Tuan, with his head laying limply on top of me. Every place I put my hand there was blood. I don’t know what I was thinking at the time, but I used all my strength to carry my little brother, Tuan, out to the front of the house. After resting for a little while, I carried him onward in the direction of the gate to the prison camp. When I got close to Mrs. Nghien’s house, I met a number of soldiers. I didn’t realize at the time that I was also seriously wounded and that there was blood running down my face. I was only able to say, ‘Uncles, go save my mother and my sister. They are still in the house,’ and then I fainted. In my stupor, I could still feel myself being lifted into a car, being bandaged and getting shots, and I knew I was being treated for my wounds.”

“Initially, I took my two children to Military Hospital 105 in Son Tay, about one kilometer from my house,” said Le Viet Tien as he continued the story. “After they received initial treatment and their wounds were bandaged, I requested that they both be sent to the Viet-Duc Hospital [Vietnamese-East German Hospital] for follow-on

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treatment. After my two wounded children were admitted to the hospital, I hastily returned to Son Tay to make the funeral arrangements for my wife and daughter. The funeral was held the very same day, 21 November 1970. I probably should emphasize that this was the only funeral held for any of the victims who were murdered by the American commandos during the Son Tay Raid.



Đám tang những nạn nhân bị quân biệt kích Mỹ sát hại

Funeral for the victims murdered by U.S. commandos.

Because it was not possible to do anything else under the circumstances, the eleven other victims were simply placed in coffins and buried. “These other victims included Tuc, the construction engineer from Nghe An,” Mrs. Nghien said emotionally. “That night, he had just had dinner at my house and made an appointment with us to visit Va Temple [Den Va]. The next morning, however, he was dead, before he had a chance to do anything. Suddenly, 21 November became a death anniversary for this hamlet. Every year on that date every house in Xa Tac lights an incense stick. As for me, I

always light incense to pray for all six soldiers, and I put out six bowls and six sets of chopsticks on a food tray as an offering with my prayers. It was not until last year (1997) that Tuc's relatives dug up his remains and took them back to bury them at his native village."

As for Le Viet Tuan, he recounts that:

"Even though I was very young back then, I still can clearly remember the treatment my sister and I received in the hospital. Both of us had our heads shaved completely before they sent us in for the operations on our skulls. We then had to lay for many days without moving at all, with bandages completely covering our bodies and with constant IVs running into our arms. Many people who saw us did not believe either of us would survive. However, after two months of treatment, the Viet Duc Hospital allowed us to go home to celebrate Tet. After that, I had to return to Military Hospital 103 for
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follow-up treatment for another month before my condition temporarily stabilized. I use the word "temporarily stabilized" because even today, almost 30 years later, I still have frequent head pain and my vision goes black every time the weather changes. I still have some small bullet fragments inside my body, and every once in a while they become inflamed. My sister, Thu Nga, has the same problems. If she lifts up her hair on the right side of her head, you can see a deep furrow in the side of her head. That is the place where she lost a piece of her skull. If ever something hard accidentally hits her head in that location, it could kill her."

Before the 28th death anniversary of the victims of the "U.S. POW Raid on Son Tay," the author went to visit a small house on Alley 50, Ngoc Khanh Ward, Ba Dinh Precinct, Hanoi city. This is where Le Viet Tien currently lives and enjoys his children and grandchildren in his old age. He is also the honored recipient of a 50-year Party
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membership pin. Before he retired, this veteran Public Security cadre was the Deputy Director of Hanoi City Public Security. Although this year he is almost eighty, Viet Tien is still healthy, and his mind is clear. He told me that every year on 21 November, many people of Son Tay quietly visit him to light an incense stick on the family altar. And he always proudly tells his guests,

"My daughter Thu Ngao is now a teacher at the Ngoc Ha Elementary School. Her husband is a Public Security major who works in Ba Dinh Precinct. My son Viet Tuan is a worked at the Giang Vo Electronic Company, and his wife works at the General Oil and Gas Company of Vietnam."

There are two other rather special things that Viet Tien does not tell you about but that his neighbors all know. First, on Sundays and holidays his two successful oldest sons often come to visit on foot or by bicycle (Viet Tien does not like them to come by car or motorcycle because he does not like the noise and does not want to disturb the other residents). They sit talking and listening to their father's advice. Second, after his beloved wife was murdered by the American commandos, even though he was a man who was well-known for being "strong, handsome, and with a good position in society," he never once even thought about taking a new wife and instead devoted his attention solely to serving his profession and raising his children.

Son Tay and Hanoi, June-December 1998.

