

# American Flag - Son Tay Participant Story

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*I wrote this story for the Son Tay Raid Association responding to a standing request to its members to submit their biographical stories for some future enclosure in a raid related document. It was published in the Southern California SENTINEL, magazine of the 78<sup>th</sup> Chapter of the Special Forces Association in November 2019. (1119 Sentinel News 2.pdf)*

I have an American flag that I carried with me on the Son Tay raid. It was signed by most of the participating raiders and by many former POWs. The names on this flag belong to the finest professional American soldiers who had the guts to come to the aid of their colleagues that suffered in captivity and to those who endured its inhumane hardships with enviable honor. This is the story of this flag.



I was born in Czechoslovakia. Because my mother was an American citizen by birth, I inherited a legal claim to US citizenship. All I needed to do was to establish residency anywhere in the USA before I reached my sixteenth birthday.

My father was a schoolteacher who was actively involved in the political life of the country. His hopes to be elected a representative in the national parliament were dashed in February 1948 when the Communist seized control of the government and

began a systematic crackdown on politically ambitious citizens such as my father. My parents reassessed our family's fate and concluded that any hope for a meaningful future for their three children rested on their inherited claim to American citizenship. Consequently, they obtained American passports for all three of us.

My departure for the USA became the family's top priority. I was already past my fifteenth birthday and my chances for getting a required exit visa were non-existent. So, without my knowledge, my father engineered a scheme with the US consulate to get me out of the country. They arranged for me to travel with a tour group of Americans who were returning to the US from a visit to their Slovak families. As soon as we crossed into West Germany I learned from a sobbing man that I had just escaped by using a tour space vacated by his deceased wife. She died during their visit and I took her cabin space on the Queen Elisabeth for the transatlantic trip to the USA. My father kept that detail from me. He must have feared that I would become nervous at the border crossing and jeopardize my escape passage to freedom. So, instead of feeling a great joy for my successful crossing to the free side of the Iron Curtain, I felt frightening apprehension for the consequences that would befall my family.

Official reaction to my escape was immediate. I was declared a traitor. The US passports of my brother and sister were confiscated. My father's teaching credentials were withdrawn. First, he had to attend a rehabilitation course for teachers. But that was not enough. His past activities as an official of the Democratic Party made him unfit to teach young people. The state gave him a new menial job as a road mender. In order to humiliate him, the authorities had him push a wheelbarrow and fill in potholes in front of the high school of which he had been the principal. His former colleagues were directed to have their students come to the windows to see what fate befalls opponents of their regime. Thereafter the persecution of my father took an appearance of an episode from Orwell's famous book 1984. He lost his military commission and was reduced in rank from a 1<sup>st</sup> Lt to a Private. He was stripped of his decorations for the participation in the Slovak National Uprising against the Germans. The obliteration of his life's accomplishments was so complete, that when he retired in 1968, his pension entitlements went back only to the day when he was issued a wheelbarrow and a shovel as a road mender. His honor was posthumously reinstated after the demise of Communism in 1989, but the historical documents of his lifetime still do not bear his name. During my recent visit to my family home, which is now in Slovakia, I discovered that his wartime unit, in which he served as its deputy commander, did not have a deputy commander. His name is not on any lists of soldiers who fought in the uprising. To top it off, a book commemorating the 700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his native village lists the names of all teachers who ever taught in its small elementary school except his own. This must have been his biggest put down because he was living in the village at the time of this anniversary. The fact that he became a teacher who got to teach in the same school where he got his beginnings was considered by him to be his proudest accomplishment.

After I joined my maternal grandmother in Ohio, I resolved to take advantage of every opportunity that my new country offered to me. I learned English and worked my way through college. My original plans were to go into diplomatic service with the State

Department. But my hopes for a diplomatic career were shattered during my sophomore year when a State Department visitor came to visit our political science department. He was surprised to meet me. He had served in Czechoslovakia. He knew my father and was in on the deception that got me out of that country. He was also there when the local authorities confiscated the US passports of my brother and sister. This act caused the US Embassy to protest, but the protests were not followed up once they realized that their intervention was causing increased hardships for my family. He informed me that I would probably never get a clearance to work at the State Department because my immediate family remained behind the Iron Curtain.

With my original career plans shattered, I decided to continue with my Air Force ROTC training and fulfill the military service obligation that it entailed. Once on active duty in navigator training I applied for a regular commission. I was very pleasantly surprised when my application was accepted because with it came a Top Secret clearance which, I was led to believe, would be beyond my reach because of my family background.

The start of the war in Vietnam found me in a very comfortable setting as an AFROTC instructor at Texas A&M University. There I saw many Air Force officers who, upon completion of their engineering studies through AFIT, were sent to Vietnam to fly aircraft that were not of their own choosing. I had a good friend who had flown a C-130 from Hawaii on his prior assignment catching intelligence satellites returning from orbits in space. Together we decided that we would pick the aircraft we wanted to fly during our Vietnam tour. Then after we saw the Air Force film that featured ground to air rescue capability of the Fulton Recovery System we decided to curtail our ROTC tours and volunteered to go to Vietnam in that C-130 Combat Talon program. It turned out to be the best career decision I had ever made. My tour in Vietnam was very productive. As a refugee from Communism, who had lived under its oppressive rule for almost two years, I felt compassion for the Vietnamese people who were resisting the life style my family had to endure. Here was my opportunity to fight back. Our aircraft and our missions were highly classified. We had the capability to penetrate into the enemy territory without detection and carry out some amazing operations. I always felt that we were contributing greatly and successfully toward the war effort. I soon became a mission planner. This made me that much more involved in everything that our crews did and helped me to grow professionally in areas I had not previously envisioned.

Prior to my arrival in Vietnam I attended the AF Survival School at Fairchild AFB with other members of my crew. There I learned how it must be like to become a prisoner of war and how such fate would apply to me. School's instructors quickly focused on my accent and became convinced of my origins somewhere in Eastern Europe. They became very determined to break me. On the other hand I thought that I was too tough and too smart for them. But I must have given myself away by my facial reaction when two of them tried to speak with each other about my attitude in a very basic and poorly annunciated Russian. They placed me in a tight, pie-slice box where I had to kneel down and lower my head just above the knees. I don't recall how long they kept me there, but the process was repeated five times in smaller and smaller boxes with

the only rest and stretch out periods coming during repeated interrogations. Once, when I resisted squeezing my body into the box, they shoved the sliding door on the protruding soles of my feet causing long lasting bruise marks. But the greatest damage to my body came from the hemorrhoids I developed in that crouched position. They bled and got so bad that when I went to see a doctor on my first full day in Vietnam, he recommended sending me to a hospital in the Philippines. I would have none of that. We all trained as a crew and I could not just leave them after a few hours in the combat zone. The flight surgeon appreciated my crew loyalty and agreed to a long treatment. It took full three months before my body got back to normal.

The main lesson I learned at Fairchild was that I could never allow myself to be captured by the enemy. I convinced myself that I would not survive in captivity. I would certainly become a prized prisoner, one who had already been declared a traitor by their Communist comrades. My family would be dragged into some adverse propaganda scheme and be subjected to a new wave of repression. I rationalized that since I would not survive my ordeal, it would be better not to even begin captivity that had so much adverse potential not just for my family in Czechoslovakia, but also for my own at home in Texas. Consequently I resolved that I would never surrender and if necessary, provoke the would-be captors with my 38 caliber pistol into killing me. That seemed simple enough, but the problem was that, if forced down, I would not be alone. There were eleven of us on each crew. All of us together did not have enough pistol power to ward off the enemy armed with AK-47s. Eventually the time would come to give up in order to save the lives of the crew. My private agenda in such a scenario would be counterproductive. I would not be a good companion to have around under those circumstances. But once I had a taste of our challenging special operations and became our unit's mission planner, I developed such confidence in our aircraft's capabilities and crewmembers' skills that I stopped concerning myself with those thoughts. I never shared my apprehensions about becoming a POW with anyone.

My post Vietnam assignment was to Pope AFB where I became a Combat Talon instructor for new Vietnam bound crews. My specialty was the terrain following radar. With this new duty and my mission planning experience in Vietnam I became the prime candidate for the Son Tay POW rescue mission. Believing that the USAF was developing something new that was going to involve our terrain following radar, I readily volunteered for whatever laid ahead. I was thrilled beyond description when I became a part of the small mission-planning group that was read in on the focus of the mission. I knew instantly that our aircraft could lead the necessary force into Son Tay without detection. During my Vietnam tour I flew into the Red River Valley and flight planned missions for other crews into the same part of North Vietnam. What a noble cause that would be to bring out some of those who suffered the unfortunate fate of a POW! As a soldier I couldn't ask for a better task. As an American with my background, I could perform no nobler duty for my country than this one.

We had an outstanding mission planning team. We planned for every eventuality and trained repetitiously, devising safe maneuvers for our odd flight formations. Once the MIG cap with the Wild Weasels, F-4s and the Navy from the Gulf of Tonkin got

incorporated into the overall plan, we knew that the safety of the low flying helicopters and the A-1Es of the raiding force was assured. The F-105, Wild Weasels and the F-4s would draw the AAA and SAM fire and insure that the MIGs would stay on the ground. Our two C-130s had the capability to take care of themselves. My only concern for the C-130s was the possibility that someone from the MIG cap could get shot down and require a Fulton recovery. That would call for one of the C-130s to drop a recovery kit and then return for a pick up. Should this occur in a hostile environment, in an area with AAA and small arms coverage, the low and slow flying C-130 on a predictable course to intercept the balloon supported lift line would be in serious trouble. But then how many North Vietnamese would know that we had such a capability? And how much could they see at night? I felt that we still had the element of surprise on our side and pull it off just like we used to do it in demonstrations and in training. That, however, would not be true if the downed crew needed assistance from the A-1Es. Their fire suppression would pinpoint the area our C-130 would have to fly through.

I prepared myself even for this unlikely turn of events. As a soldier, I want to have a US flag at my funeral. So I went to the BX at Eglin and bought a 3x5 flag that I would take with me on the mission. As on my prior tour in Vietnam, I again never shared my apprehensions about becoming a POW with anyone. When the time came to get dressed, I wrapped the flag around my chest and flew with it around me. In this way I was assured that if my end would come, be it suddenly, or during evasion, I would have the Old Glory on my body.

I still have this flag. It has become one of my most prized possessions. I took it off my body after landing at Udorn and started collecting signatures of my fellow raiders on its white canvas border. Then while I lived in Austin, Texas, Dick Dutton invited me to the NAM-POW reunion. There I began collecting signatures of Son Tay POWs in the white stars of my flag. Later I began soliciting signatures from all former POWs. My quest for them is not yet completed. My family agreed to donate this flag to the Maine Military Museum in South Portland, Maine after I join the ranks of all my raid colleagues who predeceased me.



*Raider signatures are on white canvas border of the flag.  
Son Tay POW signatures are inside of the stars.  
White stripes have signatures of NAM/POWs.*



