

Recollections of the Son Tay Raiders

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This is the original text submitted to the AC Journal. It was editorially shortened and only photos of chief participating commanders were published in the 2nd issue of the 9th volume of the magazine in October 2020.

Almost fifty years ago a special joint service task force conducted a raid into North Vietnam to rescue American prisoners of war who were believed to be incarcerated in a camp at Son Tay. The raiders executed meticulously planned mission in the early morning hours of November 20, 1970 and were shocked to find the prison camp abandoned. It was a devastating experience for all, filled with anger, guilt and apprehension for the wellbeing of all the prisoners that were held by North Vietnam. Their remorseful attitude persisted until they learned about the positive impact of their raid when the first POWs were released more than two years later on February 12, 1973.

In early summer 1970, Brigadier General Donald D. Blackburn, Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities (SACSA) to the Chairman of the Joint Chief Staff (JCS) proposed to Admiral Thomas H. Moorer that a top secret joint feasibility study group be assembled from assets within the Washington area to study recovery of US POWs from North Vietnam. Following several weeks of in-depth study and discussion on such a bold rescue concept, it was determined that a joint Special Operations Force utilizing all DOD assets available could accomplish this special air/ground mission. The Joint Chiefs, and selected individuals, were briefed on the POW rescue plan and with permission of Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird, assembled an ultra-TOP SECRET mission planning group from all services in July 1970. This joint planning group expanded and developed the most daring POW rescue mission code named IVORY COAST.¹



Brigadier General Donald D. Blackburn, Special Assistant for Counter Insurgency and Special Activities. (Veteran Tributes photo)

When the Joint Chiefs of Staff received the IVORY COAST briefing they endorsed it with great enthusiasm and decided to execute it under their own authority. Consequently, this rescue became the first joint military operation in U. S. history conducted under direct control of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.ⁱⁱ They established a special Joint Contingency Task Force (JCTF) to train for this mission in the United States with unprecedented secrecy and without involving any of the commands that were conducting the war in Vietnam. They designated Air Force Brigadier General LeRoy J. Manor as its commander and Army Colonel Arthur D. Simons as his deputy. Their first job was to staff their task force with the most experienced and best qualified volunteers from readily available personnel resources.

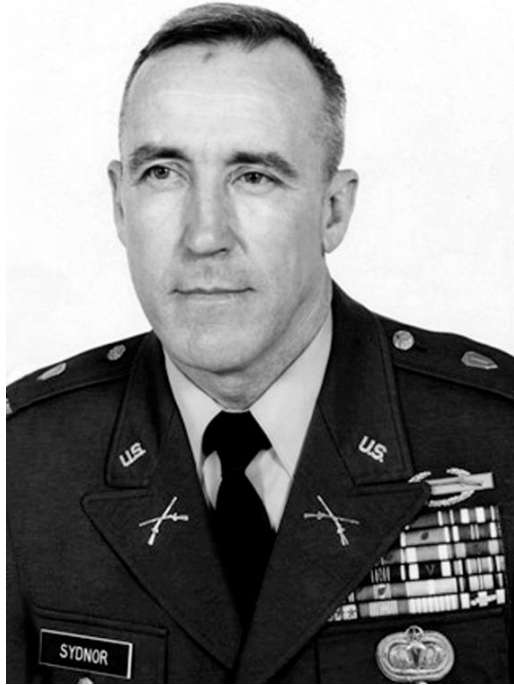


*Brigadier General LeRoy J. Manor,
Commander of the Air Force Special Operations
Forces and Commander of the Joint Contingency
Task Force. (Veteran Tributes photo)*



*Colonel Arthur D. Simons,
Deputy Commander Joint Contingency Task
Force. (Veteran Tributes photo)*

Col. Simons' task to solicit volunteers was relatively easy. First, he selected Lt. Col. Elliott P. Sydnor, Jr. as his Ground Force Commander and Capt. Richard J. Meadows as the Blueboy Assault Group Commander. Both of them came from the Ranger Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia. The rest of his recruits came from one organization at Fort Bragg, NC where he posted notices on bulletin boards throughout the Special Forces areas inviting men to volunteer for a moderately hazardous mission. Almost five hundred responded to this first call. Fewer showed up for the follow-on interviews that reduced the number of selectees to 82 enlisted and 15 officers. These were the best of the very best available at Fort Bragg at that time. Out of the officers, Col. Simons selected Capt. Udo H. Walther to command the Greenleaf Support Group and Capt. Daniel D. Turner to command the Redwine Security Group. He disappointed many by not choosing them for a mission whose purpose was never revealed to any of them during the selection process. Col. Simons, affectionately called "Bull Simons", was already a Special Forces legend with an enviable combat tested leadership whose men would follow him anywhere at any time.



*Lieutenant Colonel Elliott P. Sydnor,
Commander of the Ground Force
of the Joint Contingency Task Force.
(Veteran Tributes photo)*



*Captain Richard A. Meadows,
Commander of the Blueboy Assault
Group.
(Photo: "The Quiet Professional")*



*Captain Udo H. Walther,
Commander of the Greenleaf Support Group.
(Veteran Tributes photo)*



*Captain Daniel D. Turner,
Commander of the Redwine Security Group.
(USAF photo)*

Brig. Gen. Manor had a more challenging recruiting task. As the Commander of the Air Force Special Operations Forces, he provided the training facility at Eglin Air Force Base. However, his required and readily available fighter, helicopter and transport aircrews were spread out not only throughout the USA but also through the Southeast Asia and Germany. He could not duplicate the personal selection process of Col. Simons with everyone. Nevertheless, his volunteers, once assembled, were also the best and the most experienced crews he could have expected. Lt. Col. Albert P. Blosch, Aircraft Commander from the C-130 Combat Talons at Pope AFB led the Strike Formation with A-1E Skyraiders and Maj. Irl L. Franklin from Ramstein AB in Germany led the Assault Formation with the Jolly Green Giant helicopters. Lt. Col. Warner A. Britton from Eglin AFB commanded the Jolly Green Giant helicopters and Maj. Edwin J. Rhein Jr. commanded the A-1E Skyraiders.



*Lt. Col. Albert P. Blosch,
Aircraft Commander of Strike Force formation,
Combat Talon from Det. 2, 1st Special
Operations Wing, Pope AFB, North Carolina.
(Veteran Tributes photo)*



*Maj. Irl L. Franklin,
Aircraft Commander of the Assault formation,
Combat Talon from the 7th Special Operations
Squadron at Ramstein AB in Germany.
(USAF photo)*

Only a small number of Air Force and Army mission planners were briefed on the rescue mission after their arrival at Eglin AFB. All were stunned by the boldness of the proposal and went to work on it with devoted enthusiasm. They realized that the rescue could become the most important event of their military careers. Planning and training for this unprecedented joint service operation went on simultaneously with many new approaches to getting to the camp without detection, freeing the prisoners and then bringing them home safely. Conceived new air and ground tactics were tested and exercised repeatedly until each participant was completely enmeshed in his assigned role. It did not matter that the trainees did not know the location of their objective area. Many concluded correctly that they were preparing to rescue captives and that their lives depended on keeping utmost secrecy about what they were involved in. Overall morale of the ground troops was bolstered by the fact that two other famous Special Forces leaders, Lt. Col. Elliott P. "Bud"

Sydnor and Capt. Richard A. Meadows joined Col. Simons to lead them. This officer trio had one known thing in common. Not one of them had ever lost a man on their prior combat operations.



*Lt. Col. Warner A Britton,
commander of the Jolly Green Giant
helicopters from the Aerospace Rescue and
Recovery Service at Eglin AFB, Florida.
(Veteran Tributes photo)*



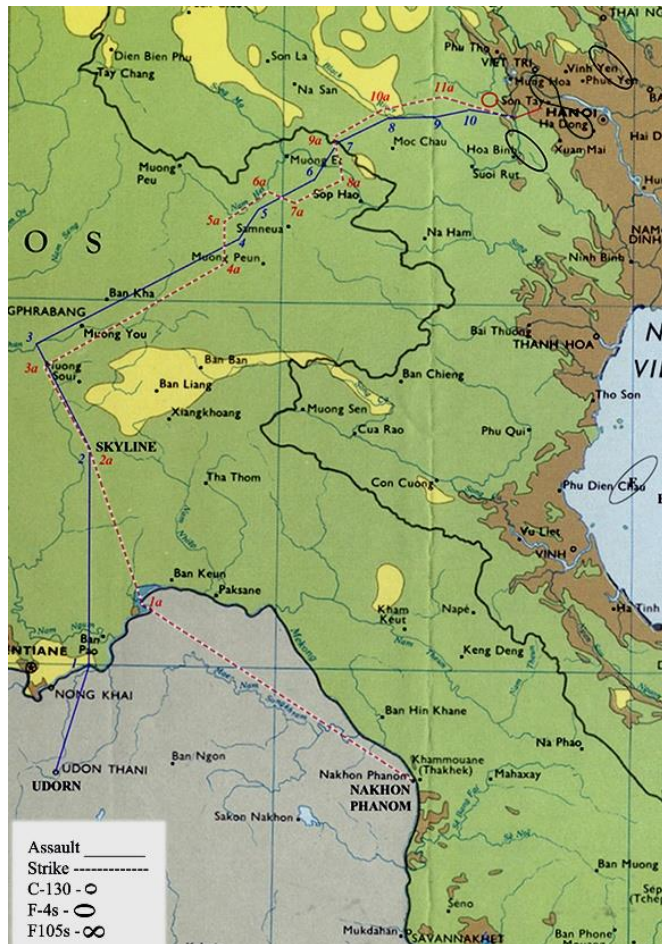
*Maj. Edwin J. Rhein,
commander of the A-1E Skyraiders
from the 1st Special Operations Wing
at Hurlburt Field in Florida.
(Veteran Tributes photo)*

The Air Force contingent of the JCTF did not have such renowned airmen on the staff. They came from organizations that flew in different aircraft and were known for their excellence only within their own circles. Their crew morale was equally high. They knew that they were led by the very best and that they were about to execute a mission that had no precedent in aviation history. Some of them lived at home because they were based at Eglin AFB or at its Hurlburt Field satellite. They lived normal daily lives except that they began to fly at night. The Army troops were confined to their quarters at another satellite named Duke Field where they were isolated from the public as well as from other Air Force personnel stationed in the Eglin AFB area. They conducted daily rigorous group physical training to maintain their body fitness that was equal to that of professional athletes. Air Force personnel were responsible for maintaining their own physical fitness. Jogging on the beach, a round of golf, or even fishing satisfied their recreational body fitness requirements.

Just before deployment to Thailand, the Air Force pilots and navigators were briefed on the Son Tay POW rescue that now had a new code name: OPERATION KINGPIN. This was another exciting time for all those who had been left to speculate about where or when they would get to fly the mission they trained for with such diligence. One reason for their inclusion prior to deployment was the necessity to study the meticulously charted flight routes to and from the target area. They needed to copy master charts of the planners and customize their own maps and logs for the flight. Our Thai deployment base at Takhli was closing down and we did not know what kind of facilities would be available for us to do this detailed work. Consequently, it all had to be done before our arrival. We would be ready except for the incorporation of theater air support

which we had to have from defensive fighters, refueling tankers and airborne monitoring platforms.

Incorporation of supporting aircraft into our carefully designed and timed routes to Son Tay was easier than anticipated. Our pre-deployed Pentagon planners approached all respective wing commanders with letters from the Air Force Chief of Staff that directed them to provide all needed aircraft and assistance for a very special mission for the Joint Chiefs of Staff without asking about the purpose for that unusual top level request. They all complied and sent their designated planners on previously arranged shuttle C-130s to Takhli to receive their tasking. The F-4 MIG patrol came from Udorn; F-105 SAM suppressors from Korat; C-135 tankers from U-Tapao; C-130 tankers for helicopters from Cam Rahn Bay; and C-121E radar platforms, on temporary duty to Korat, from McClellan AFB in California. All reacted with great enthusiasm for our plan and the only things they asked from us were the times they needed to be in positions in their designated air space. Jet fighters had specific packages to support operations over North Vietnam and were confident that they would be able to protect the slow flyers at low altitudes. They only needed to coordinate with the C-121E planners whose two aircraft would provide vectoring assistance against enemy MIG interceptors from designated orbits from over the Gul of Tonkin. The C-135 tankers would orbit on their normal tracks over Laos and volunteered to send two tankers to the Yankee Station just in case the Navy required additional fuel to recover all carrier-based aircraft.



Air Force tracks. (Composite photo by John Gargus)



57 USAF Aircraft

2 MC-130E (I)	12 KC-135	2 HH-53
1 HH-3	10 F-4	4 A-1E
5 HH-53	5 F-105	3 C-130
5 A-1E	2 RC-135M	1 T-39
2 HC-130P	1 RC-135	
2 EC-121T		



Earlier in November, Brig. Gen. Blackburn, Brig. Gen. Manor, and Col. Simons made a quick trip to Vietnam to inform General Creighton Abrams, Commander of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) and his staff that, as directed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, they would deploy to the war zone a stateside trained task force whose mission was to rescue American prisoners of war from Son Tay. Their task force would not require any Army support and needed only to borrow Air Force's theater aircraft and normal MIG and SAM fighter protection umbrella for the invading low level formation aircraft. The staging base would be located at Thai Royal Base in Takhli and the raid would be commanded from the Monkey Mountain command post at Da Nang. They would also require the Navy to stage a diversion in the Gulf of Tonkin to distract the enemy's attention from the actual target west of Hanoi. Gen. Abrams and his staff that conducted the war in Vietnam were stunned by the boldness of the plan and gave the trio their unconditional and enthusiastic support.

After Saigon, Brig. Gen. Manor and Col. Simons flew to the Yankee Station to visit Vice Adm. Frederick A. Bardshar to ask him to stage a diversionary mock attack in the Haiphong area. He was most enthusiastic to participate in an effort that promised to free some of his previously shot down and captured pilots. Naval Route Package VI that contained Hanoi and Haiphong would not get a presidential exemption from the bombing pause and the Navy rules of engagement would have the attack bombers drop only enemy distracting illumination flares. Only his MIG patrol and SAM suppressing fighters would be allowed to carry defensive armaments. In addition, to avoid compromising the raid by speculations within the Naval forces in the Pacific, Bardshar was not to coordinate his involvement with the 7th Fleet headquarters at Yokota, Japan and the PACOM in

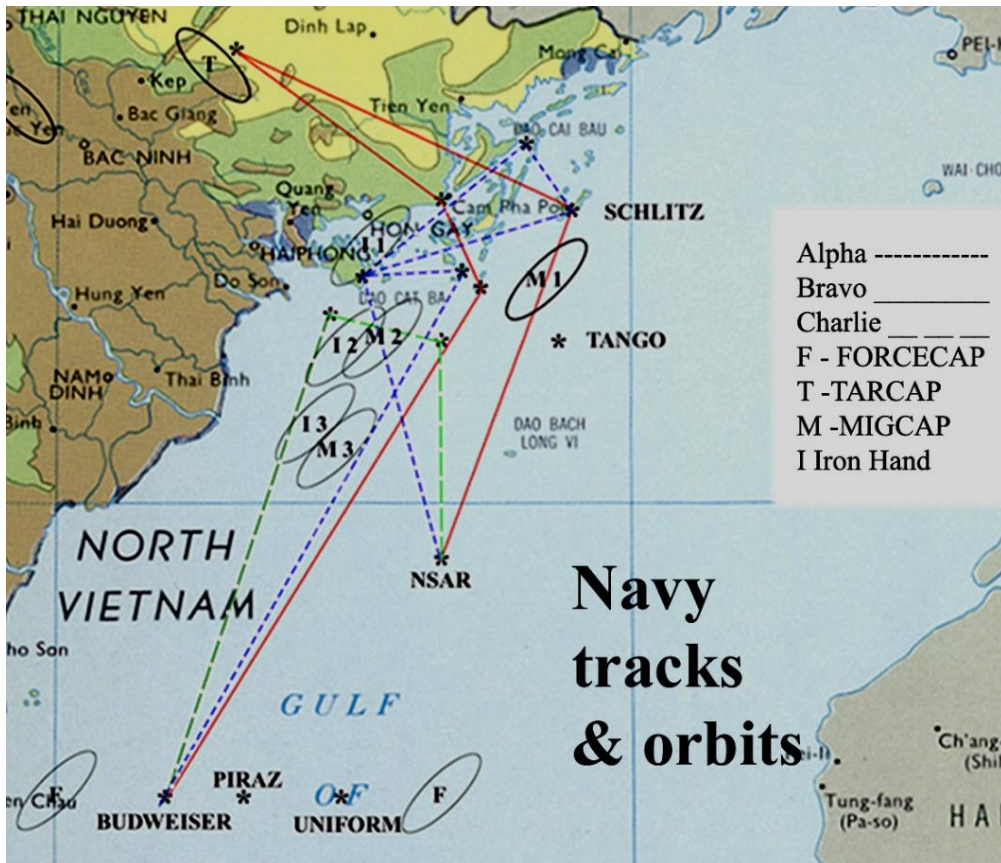
Hawaii. He tasked the legendary Rear Adm. “Jig Dog” James D. Ramage to lead the eventual mock attack.



*Vice Adm. Frederick A. Bardshar,
Commander of the TF 77 in the Gulf of Tonkin.
(Veteran Tributes photo)*



*Rear Adm. James D. Ramage,
Commander of the USS Oriskany
(Veteran Tributes photo)*





59 US Navy Aircraft

- 27 A-7 6EKA-3B**
- 10 A-6 2E-1B**
- 6 F-8 1KA-3B**
- 6 F-4 1 EP-3**



Brig. Gen. Manor had to advance the time of the raid by 24 hours because typhoon Patsy was headed toward North Vietnam. We were ready for this. Everyone went to immediate crew rest that was followed by a gathering of all participants at the base theater. Brig. Gen. Manor and his staff were already airborne on their way to the Monkey Mountain command post and Col. Simons was in charge. He aimed his short remarks at the Green Berets who were finally going to learn exactly where he was going to take them. “We are going to rescue 70 American prisoners of war, maybe more, from a camp called Son Tay. This is something American prisoners have a right to expect from their fellow soldiers. The target is 23 miles west of Hanoi.” There was a silent pause until everyone caught his breath and then the whole theater erupted into a spontaneous, uncontrollable, and thunderous applause. The Air Force men joined in making it very memorable moment for all. These men finally learned what they were about to do that night and demonstrated their eagerness to get it done. I stood on one side of the stage and saw their excited faces. They were men like no other I had ever seen before. However, a sobering and realistic thought invaded my mind. I stopped my cheering and wondered how many of them would not see the next sunrise and be brought back to Fort Bragg in rubber body bags. In the midst of all that commotion, it was time for a silent prayer.

Up until that time the Air Force planning staff believed that “Bull” Simons should have been with Brig. Gen. Manor on the plane heading for Da Nang and not on the ground with the troops. But the display of loyalty to this leader was so evident that it convinced us that the only thing he could do was to be among the final 56 destined to touch down at Son Tay. His men clearly expected that. They wanted him on the ground with them in spite of the fact that he again reaffirmed that Lt. Col. Sydnor, and not he himself, would be their commander on the ground. They volunteered for a secret mission because “Bull” Simons was looking for fighting men. They responded. He selected them from among so many. Then he drove them through the most demanding and rigorous training for this monumental rescue mission. Now he had to go with them and be one of them.

There were more private prayers from many of us as we made our way through the mountains into the Red River Valley to the unsuspecting target just west of Hanoi. Some pretended to sleep, but they did not. All had private thoughts, as they did many times before when different

helicopters took them to other life-threatening engagements. This time they were better prepared than ever. They knew the terrain and even the doors and windows of the buildings they would soon be assaulting. Our electronic warfare officers and radio operators monitored enemy radar transmissions and confirmed that our two flight formations (one Combat Talon C-130 was escorting 6 helicopters and the other five A-1E fighters) were not yet detected and that there was intensive activity in the east beyond Hanoi. That was the Navy diverting enemy's attention from us. As we descended from the mountains into the Red River Valley, the cockpit crews saw the lit up Son Tay City, then Hanoi and farther still on the horizon Haiphong. Many flares launched by navy fighters illuminated the far coastal horizon.

Initially everything went well. We delivered the ground troops to the prison complex and once the radio silence was broken, we began to monitor their communications. Our C-130's task was to orbit within the sight of Son Tay and record all radio frequencies used by the ground and airborne raiders. At first we heard only sporadic shouts of code words with background gunfire. And then came the incredible transmission from Capt. Meadows: "Negative items!" This meant that there were no prisoners. We did not believe it thinking that there was no one only in the first secured building. The ground commander Sydnor asked for confirmation. That came again very clearly: "Negative items". There were no prisoners at the Son Tay Camp. We still refused to believe it. Men who assaulted the empty prison compound were devastated. "It was like getting an unexpected swift kick in the gut," claimed very seasoned veteran Joe Lupiak and the rookie Terry Buckler echoed the same sentiment. Then we heard Lt. Col. "Bud" Sydnor order his men to pull back for exfiltration. He also called for the helicopters to come and get them. We were stunned by this development that was soon amplified by a warning from our electronic warfare officer that the enemy was about to launch surface to air missile at our high flying aircraft.

Brig. Gen. Manor's staff at the Monkey Mountain command post did not believe the first transmission either. Just after they took up their positions in the command post they received freshly downloaded photo intelligence from an SR-71 at Yokota Japan. It was transmitted by our DIA photo interpreter Maj. Andraitis and relayed through Col. Frisbie, who was our alternate airborne commander on board of C-135 Combat Apple over the Gulf of Tonkin. Andraitis confirmed that the air defense positions around the camp were not manned and that the infrared imagery showed an occupied compound.ⁱⁱⁱ They also asked for confirmation for the stunning transmission from Capt. Meadows who was now inside of the empty prison camp. All staff members were devastated and desperate. There was nothing they could do to influence the raid events that followed.

Exit from Son Tay was orderly and very exciting. Very disheartened ground troops were suddenly frightened just before boarding their helicopters by the sound of nearby SAMs that just began to launch. It was such thundering noise that had never before been heard by any American ground troops on any prior operations. Florida training did not prepare anyone for that. Then, once airborne, the "SAM, SAM, SAM" warning calls from A-1 pilots continued and many believed that the missiles were aimed at them. Our C-130 crew in the radio monitoring orbit heard repeated assurances from their EWO, whose sensors detected every missile launch, that the missiles were not launched at any of them. Unfortunately, the helicopter crews could not hear his comforting assurances. They saw only occasional explosions of white phosphorus bombs that the departing A-1s were jettisoning into the hillsides towards which the helicopters were headed. Then someone believed that he saw a MIG interceptor and sounded another alarm. The C-135 Combat Apple monitors from over the Gulf of Tonkin listened in on communications for MIG interceptors and

jumped in immediately to announce to all that there were no MIGs (No “bandits” taking off from the “Bull’s Eye”). But that did not prevent the helicopter pilots from descending and hugging the terrain until they reached the safety of the mountains. Then, thanks to the available moonlight they could see the white fog filled valley floors which contrasted sharply with protruding dark mountain peaks and ridgelines. They then took precautions not to cast moonlight shadows on the fog because those could be easily seen by any pursuing enemy interceptors.

Once everyone was safely in the mountains, we experienced another sobering excitement. One lucky SAM ruptured a fuel tank of one of the F-105s forcing it to exit the area and attempt a refueling hookup with an orbiting C-135 tanker over Laos. Unfortunately, the aircraft flamed out within the sight of the tanker and the two crew members bailed out after gliding as far into Laos as they could. They parachuted safely and landed about one mile apart. Our radio monitoring C-130 that was the last aircraft to exit from the Red River Valley had the capability to pick up downed two man crew with the Fulton Recovery System. Its crew completed a drop checklist for a two man nighttime kit carried on board just for that purpose. However, that was not necessary. There were our own eager Jolly Green Giant helicopters with trained crews that did recoveries of downed crews throughout the Southeast Asia. All they needed was daylight that would come very soon. Both crewmembers were safe on the ground using survival radios to communicate with the empty spare helicopters. These refueled from the C-130 tanker that was waiting for the returning fleet and then picked up the pilot and his back-seater at first light without incident.

We witnessed a very unusually depressing sight after landing at Udorn when the van that brought our C-130 crew to the place where the Florida trained flight crews gathered for debriefing. Men were sitting on the street curb in groups or alone, not saying anything to the newcomers. In front of the building where we expected to be debriefed was a Red Cross coffee and donut stand adorned with small flags and buntings that included a “Welcome Home” banner. It was unattended and no one seemed to be patronizing it. Occasional permanent party airmen that walked through would stop and survey us with amazement witnessing a mixture of officers and enlisted men, some without headgear and otherwise carelessly dressed in sweaty flight suits with rolled up sleeves and pant legs. Some would even render us salutes, which we did not return. So, they continued on, but before getting out of sight, they would stop and look back at what they had just seen. We looked like an athletic team that had just lost its most important game of the season through no one player’s fault. We all looked angry and disheartened. Why, oh why did things turn out this way? We did everything right, just as we were expected to do. And it was all for nothing! Now what? What damage have we done to those that we were supposed to free? Will they suffer even more at the hands of their captors because of our daring invasion of their homeland?

Skyraider pilot Maj. John Waresch strayed to a location on the tarmac where the Army raiders came out of their helicopters and mixed in with them before they boarded a shuttle C-130 for their own debriefing at Takhli. This is how he recorded the somber scene in his published memoirs: “The sun was coming up by then and we all wandered out onto the ramp. Sat down on the cement cross legged, Indian-style, in circles of about ten, us in our reeking sweat-soaked flight suits, and the grunts with their blackened faces, guns, grenades and what-have-you hanging off them. They were bleeding from every square inch of exposed skin from dozens of cuts, scrapes, and bruises. We all just sat mumbling to each other. No stories were being told. We had all just done it, seen it or heard it and knew what had happened. Then someone came out and handed a bottle to each of the circles. Everyone took a sip and passed it around and around and around, till

it was empty. All of us were still just mumbling to ourselves and to each other. I can't attest to what was going on at the other circles but there wasn't a dry eye at ours. A tear running down every cheek; a gallant effort with nothing to show. To hell and back for naught."^{iv}

Our task force weatherman, Maj. Grimes, who acted as the liaison between the Army and the Air Force, also joined the troops he worked with at Eglin AFB. In an interview by Air Weather Service historian John Fuller he stated: "John, these are the toughest, most dedicated, meanest, vilest, orneriest, greatest fighting men you've ever seen in your life. When (they) got down on the ground the camouflage streaked because the tears were running down their faces... And (on) some of the troops the tears were just streaming. They didn't say anything. Others were just weeping like babes."^v

Eventually we were summoned to come inside. We crowded into the entry hallway to hear Brig. Gen. Manor and Col. Simons who tried to lift up our spirits. They thanked us for a well-executed mission and confirmed that we had only two minor raider injuries and that the two men who had bailed out from their damaged F-105 were back at Udorn in good health. They said all the right things, but even though they were very sincere about praising our effort, we took it as something our leaders were expected to do. The only thing we felt good about was that we would be home with our families for Thanksgiving.

C-121E "College Eye" participants did not join our aircrews at Udorn to share in the anguishing disappointment that prevailed there. Their role in the raid was a tale of deception craftily orchestrated by Lt. Col. Homer Willet who was Pentagon's project officer for a new modification of their aircraft. Both deployed EC-121s were modified to provide direct encrypted data link to the ground based command post on their monitoring and controlling of friendly aircraft in aerial combat. This is one thing that could not be done in the skies at home. Consequently, crews that deployed from McClellan AFB believed that they were coming to Korat to conduct operational testing on their new electronic equipment. If all went well with the equipment check out they would get an opportunity to participate in a real mission assisting aircraft over North Vietnam. So, once in the air on the night of the promised actual operational mission, they were informed by their respective weapons controllers (who were also their designated planners sent to Takhli) that they were to assist a joint task force to free American prisoners from Son Tay. They were all stunned by this revelation and greeted their unexpected challenge with enthusiasm. Great disappointment affected the crew of one aircraft that had to abort and land at Da Nang. The other monitored the raid from its orbit over the Gulf of Tonkin, however, their equipment did not perform properly because of intensive electronic jamming from the naval ships and aircraft that interfered with their new equipment's frequencies. They did not join the aircrews of other aircraft at Udorn because they returned to Korat. Then, because of existing secrecy, they did not learn the details of the raid until they returned home to McClellan AFB in California.

The F-4, F-105, C-135 and C-130 tanker crews also missed the debriefing for Florida crewmembers. Their support missions were a part of their wartime tasking, except that the target area was located in the forbidden bombing pause zone of North Vietnam. Only their unit's planners knew about the POW rescue and they were not allowed to inform them about the intent of the mission they laid out for them. They knew only that they were supporting a very special and highly classified operation west of Hanoi. Once in their designated orbits, they listened to intermittent radio chatter from the ground and even though they were preoccupied by dodging 16 SAMs that

were launched against them, some concluded correctly that the ongoing ground operation was designed to rescue their POW colleagues. They performed magnificently and provided protective umbrella designed to keep the enemy MIG interceptors on the ground. Certainly they were disappointed that the prison was found empty. However, because they did not join the dejected raiding aircraft crews on the ground at Udorn, they had the satisfaction that they performed their assigned part of the rescue mission well in what became the most important and memorable mission of their year-long Southeast Asia tour.

The U. S. Navy and its carrier-based airmen from the Gulf of Tonkin were also kept in the dark on the intent of their unusual flare dispensing attack. Vice Adm. Bardshar promised Col. Simons and Brig. Gen. Manor credible mock attack on the coastline in the Haiphong area to draw attention away from the raiders who would fly into Son Tay from Laos through the mountains in the west. He welcomed the opportunity to launch his aircraft into the forbidden Hanoi – Haiphong area whose target were off limits to his airmen because of a two-year bombing pause. His aircrews were most enthusiastic to fly into this forbidden zone and sensed that something very important was about to happen in this protracted war. Their enthusiasm was shared by the support personnel who were awed by the fireworks they witnessed from the three carriers and their support ships. The Navy surpassed our expectations by launching 59 of the 7th Fleet aircraft from the Yankee Station and from Da Nang. That was two more than the 57 aircraft flown by the Air Force. Flare dropping diversionary aircraft drew 20 enemy launched SAMs. This attack turned out to be the largest naval nighttime operation up to that point in the war. As such, it was a memorable event for everyone at the Yankee station, however, unlike the men who expended so much effort in preparing themselves for the raid, they did not experience the same degree of disappointment and guilt over the failure to bring anyone home.

It was a long way home for the C-130 crews and support personnel from Pope AFB with stop overs in Okinawa, Hawaii, and Norton AFB in California. They talked a lot about the failed rescue and feared that the raid would lead to even harsher treatment for the men they had hoped to bring home. They were ready to do it again in spite of realistic doubts that the JCTF could be reassembled again without compromising any repeat rescue efforts. Not yet knowing what kind of news coverage would expect them at home, they were ready do deny participation in the raid if that became necessary. In any case they were committed to secrecy and would not reveal any details of the secret plan they had just carried out. Some blamed faulty intelligence for this failure.

Because all of the returnees were now under the same secrecy obligation, those of us who had participated in air operational planning had to defend the intelligence isolation we chose to employ during our preparation in Florida. It became necessary to stop asking about the POWs at Son Tay for fear of creating suspicions that could compromise the rescue attempt. Capt. Jacobs, our DIA photo interpreter, plotted three low altitude tracks of Buffalo Hunter photographing missions whose flight paths formed a perfect six legged “X” right over the camp. He presented his discovery to the DIA chiefs, which caused the suspension of further overflights of that location. Jacobs also noted reduced activity on the latest photographs, but the high-altitude SR-71 infrared photography shoved that the camp was still occupied.^{vi} On the night of the raid SR-71 fresh photos showed the same and they also revealed that the anti-aircraft positions around the camp were still unoccupied. This was the indication we needed to have as proof that our raid had not been compromised. Our security precautions were prudent, but they prevented us from available day to day information on the status of prison camps in North Vietnam.

We received a heroic welcome from our families and members of our assigned units once we returned home. The families were glad to have us back and our colleagues were curious about how we did it. Unfortunately, we were not free to talk about many aircraft modifications, new equipment we used as well as the joint tactics we developed for the raid. News articles about these topics were speculative and mostly inaccurate. Vietnam War critics had a field day questioning and attacking the political intent of the raid. Prominent members of Congress joined in on the fray and some resulting editorials were quite vicious.

Pete Hamill of *New York Daily News* wrote: “The North Vietnamese have been particularly stupid about giving information on the prisoners. Wives live on in some strange limbo, not knowing whether they are widows or still married to living human beings. But the one certain way to guarantee that there will be no further information is to pull dumb stunts out of "Buzz Sawyer" and "Steve Canyon." Laird brought the two clowns in charge of the operation before the cameras yesterday, treating them like returned heroes...” And also: “It is of course typical of this whole disgusting war that we again treat a failure as if it were a victory.”^{vii}

Frank Mankiewicz and Tom Braden of *Washington Post* compared it to a popular TV series: “It was indeed like Mission Impossible – the technology was perfect, even down to the locks blown off the empty cells – but as so often happens in real life, it failed. The question is, why was it attempted at all?” --- “In the opinion of one of the few Americans who has been involved in making this kind of decision, the effort represented "complete stupidity" if it was more than a political gesture.” --- “Why, then, was it attempted? There are only two possible explanations. Sen. J. William Fulbright (D-Ark.) pointed to one, when he said the problem "isn't with the machinery or the technology; it's the brains and judgment that are lacking." But there is another reason, and it is expressed, if fancifully, at the beginning of this column. It is to make Mr. Nixon seem "tough" in Vietnam, thus protecting his right flank as he disengages. It may be smart politics, but it is dangerous business.”^{viii}

A favorable account by *Los Angeles Times* reporter Stewart H. Loory summarized the early positive outcomes of the raid. He pointed out that the attempted rescue put the POW issue on the front pages and informed the public about their state. The bold raid showed the North Vietnamese that no part of their territory was secure from a military attack. And finally he speculated that it boosted the morale of the POWs and their wives at home because of how much we cared for them. However, there were also concerns among the POW families. Even though they approved of the raid and were grateful to the men who participated in it, they did not endorse repeats because of perceived lack of intelligence to insure success.^{ix}

With that kind of media publicity our concerns about the after effects of the raid on the lives of prisoners continued to pry on our minds. We got disbursed, going to follow on assignments. We even lost touch with each other and kept maintaining our silence. However, we knew all along that our raid succeeded in surprising the North Vietnamese defense forces and caused confusion in their response to our presence. Because our raid was followed by an unrelated retaliatory bombing of targets north of the DMZ (demilitarized zone) on the following morning, their initial conclusion was that the long existing bombing pause for the Hanoi-Haiphong area had ended. This was also the belief of the residents of Son Tay and Hanoi who were alerted to seek shelters. Relatives of Son Tay residents who visited them many years later heard their stories that

differ from our historical accounts. They were startled by the attack and also by the revelation that there had been a camp for American prisoners of war west of their town. They knew only of a closely guarded facility on the other side of the bridge that was visited by trucks during the dark of night and believed that the place was used for storage of war materials.

We now know that as a result of the raid the Vietnamese moved all the prisoners to downtown Hanoi, where they were herded into crowded rooms to avoid possible repeat raids on other camps. We convinced them that we had the capability to try again. The raid was a rude awakening for their defense forces. They were critical of their performance, which is now recorded in their military histories. One such account reads as follows:

“Although we managed to shoot down two enemy aircraft, our air defense forces allowed six low-flying enemy helicopters to raid the detention camp for enemy pilots at Son Tay. This was a severe shortcoming on the part of our air defense-air force troops. The primary reason for this shortcoming was a low spirit of combat readiness and our failure to anticipate that the enemy would use helicopters supported by fighters to make such a deep penetration into our rear area to rescue their pilots.”

“It was for this reason that, when the situation developed, our commanders at all levels reacted passively and clumsily to engage enemy forces in the air, and we had no specific plan to engage enemy forces on the ground. Our commanders lacked flexibility in their handling of the situation; we did not utilize our air force fighters to engage the enemy; our communications arrangements proved to be weak; our combat effectiveness was low; and we failed to shoot down any enemy aircraft on the spot.”^x

Perhaps the best summary of how the raid affected the top echelons of the North Vietnamese military can be found in the memoirs of Colonel General Phung The Tai (1920-2014) who claimed to be responsible for moving the POWs out of Son Tay. He served as the first commander of the Air Defense-Air Force Service from 1963 to 1967 and then as Deputy Chief of the General Staff from 1967 to 1987.

“This may have been the most painful, most humiliating incident of my entire military career. For several days after the raid I could neither eat nor sleep. Sometimes I just sat in my office thinking about how almost one hundred American commandos had arrogantly swept through the prison camp carrying pliers and hammers, knocking down walls and destroying rooms, and then had climbed back onto their helicopters and got away scot free – it almost drove me crazy. I gnashed my teeth and pounded my fist on my desk as I told myself, “If we had just had some advance warning, we would have gotten all six of their helicopters and captured this entire team of their most elite commandos. We would have been so happy...”

“However, I told myself that at least it was fortunate that I had transferred the prisoners to another location so that at least Nixon had not been able to recover them. If I had not done this, then a thousand years would not have been enough time for me to get over my anger and my shame about this incident. ...”^{xi}

With all our concerns about probable harm we brought upon the prisoners, we hoped that our government was making progress at the Paris peace talks where their treatment was a big negotiating issue. Our rescue attempt made it very clear how much our country cared for their

wellbeing. In spite of the growing popular opposition to the war people supported the POWs and urged the government to obtain their release. They bought POW/MIA bracelets engraved with names of missing soldiers and wore them on their wrists to show their sympathies. Wives of the missing formed National League of POW/MIA Families and lobbied the government for action and even traveled to Paris to present their concerns to the Vietnamese negotiators. However, the government did not publicize what our intelligence agencies were able to glean about the state of their incarceration. If there was anything positive about their status, it was not advantageous to admit it. Their well-publicized inhumane treatment continued to be a good bargaining chip for our peace negotiators. Those who suspected that the lot of the prisoners might have improved were the ones who were aware that there was an increase in the exchange of letters and mailings of packages to the prisoners. We had to wait until the Operation Homecoming in 1973 when the returnees told us about the positive effects on their lives as a result of the Son Tay raid.

There is no better person to comment about how much was known about the status of American prisoners of war in Vietnam than Dr. Roger Schields who served as Department of Defense's Deputy Secretary for International Economic and POW/MIA Affairs from 1971 to 1977 and who orchestrated their repatriation during Operation Homecoming. He was most helpful to me by confirming many conclusions the raiders were able to reach by interacting with the POWs after their release. He dismissed my own post raid insecure and gloomy feelings with his first opening e-mail: "You are writing about an event that I believe will become legendary, if it hasn't already achieved that status. No one that I am acquainted with who has any fundamental knowledge of the raid believes it was anything less than a great success."^{xii}

Dr. Schields confirmed that our government knew that the treatment of American POWs showed improvement after the death of Ho Chi Minh. There was no retaliation for the raid and the conditions of captivity improved even more. To avoid future raids the North Vietnamese concentrated them in fewer and more secure locations where their ability to communicate improved immeasurably and where they were able to support one another. However, in spite of these learned improvements the government remained skeptical because these could be reversed. Dr. Schields commented that even though the gleaned intelligence pieces turned out to be remarkably accurate, there was no way to confirm that they were true until the POWs came home and confirmed their factuality. For that reason they were very cautious about what favorable information was being provided even to the families. They did not publicly acknowledge improvement in their treatment because they did not have assurances that these changes were permanent. Their policy was "to continue to hold the communists' feet to the fire. That policy had yielded positive results, and there was no reason to change it."^{xiii}

We learned from the repatriated POWs that they were able to form the 4th POW Wing in the Hanoi Hilton. Dr. Schields acknowledged that their ability to organize "took a quantum leap forward after the raid when our men were gathered together in larger groups and the ability to communicate increased geometrically." However, this was one of the intelligence indicators that was not fully confirmed until after their repatriation.^{xiv}

We were all spread out throughout the Western World when the first of the 591 POWs departed from Hanoi on February 12, 1973. We were overjoyed and anticipated their stories that seemed to be coming too slowly. We also hoped to meet some of them. Thanks to Mr. Ross Perot that moment arrived for some of us who were able to accept his all-expenses-paid-for invitation to the POW welcome home celebration in San Francisco on April 27. It was a heroes' appreciation

time by the crowd along a ticker tape parade with former prisoners and raiders in motorized cable cars with clanging bells and wailing sirens of escorting police motorcycles. The crowd pressed forward from the sidewalk to shake hands and give flags to the jubilant and very appreciative veterans of the just ended war.



San Francisco parade with Colonel Arthur D. "Bull" Simons. (Courtesy of Ross Perot)



Gen. Manor and Col. Robinson Risner, Son Tay POWs in a cable car. (Courtesy of Ross Perot)



Son Tay raiders, SFCs Lawhon, Buckler, Erickson and Adderly with wives. (Courtesy of Ross Perot)

CSM Galen C. Kittleson and Lt. Col. Herbert D. Kalen. (Courtesy of Ryland Dreibelbis)

As exciting as this parade was, it could not rival the eventual face to face get together between the raiders and their now free colleagues that took place in spectator free environment of the Fairmont hotel dining room. There they sheared hugs, kisses and many happy tears. It was an unforgettable sight. Here were men who had suffered so much during their imprisonment, serving their country faithfully under most difficult conditions and then those who had risked their lives by volunteering for a hazardous mission to free them from that captivity. The Son Tay raid finally ended in this hotel dining room,

We thank you Mr. Perot for arranging this unforgettable reunion and regret that you will no longer be with us at the 50th anniversary of the Son Tay raid. We also thank you for devoting so much of your life and resources to support the raiders and the families of the former POWs and for the following kind words you wrote in the introduction of the first book about the raid that was authored by Heather David.

“The men who participated in the Son Tay raid are excellent examples of unselfish courage to every citizen of this country. Each man’s life was at stake on a mission whose purpose was humanitarian – not military. What other nation produces such men – men who will literally lay down their lives for others?... Each citizen in our country should think about the decision-making process each raider had to go through. We should be grateful that we live in a nation that produces men of such courage - men of such concern. Perhaps the best way to measure the courage of these men is to simply ask, ”Would I go? Would I run risk of having my wife become a widow, my children fatherless?”^{xv}

When Mr. Perot wrote these words for the introduction to the very first book about the Son Tay raid titled “Operation Rescue”, he was obviously focusing attention primarily on those raiders who had volunteered and prepared themselves for the raid in Florida. Many more men were needed to support the raid’s execution as part of their normal operational tasking during their tour of duty in Southeast Asia. Because of mission security, very few of them knew what was at stake before they took off in their planes on what turned out to be the most memorable mission of their careers. Nevertheless, they all experienced great disappointment over the outcome of this rescue attempt and had the same misgivings as the rest about how the raid affected the lives of the POWs as a result of this daring attack on North Vietnam

ⁱ James H. Morris, e-mail to author, April 7, 2019.

ⁱⁱ Benjamin F. Schemmer, *The Raid*, rev. ed. New York, Ballantine Books, 2002, 126.

ⁱⁱⁱ Norman H. Frisbie, “Son Tay Raid June-November 1970”, Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL, 2003, 17.

^{iv} John C. Waresch, “A-1s and the Son Tay Raid”, *Ivory Coast Newsletter*, Spring, 2000.

^v John F. Fuller, “Keith R. Grimes, Special Operations Weatherman: An Oral Autobiography”, Military Airlift Command, Scott AFB, IL, March 1978, 196.

^{vi} James A. Jacobs, e-mail to author, October 26, 2016.

^{vii} Pete Hamill, “Pete Hamill’s Editorial”, *New York Daily News*,

^{viii} Frank Mankiewicz and Tom Braden, “Mission Incredible”, *Washington Post*, December 1, 1971.

^{ix} Stewart H. Loory, “Story Behind Raid on Son Tay Prison – The Problem of Intelligence”, *Los Angeles Times*, [Texas A&M University press](#) 5 February 1971.

^x Huu, Sr. Col. (NVA) et al, *History of the Air Defense Service, Volume II*, People's Army Publishing House,

Hanoi, 1993 pages 242-243.

^{xi} Phung The Tai, Col. Gen. (NVA). “*An Entire Life Spent Following Uncle Ho: The Memoirs of Colonel General Phung The Tai.*” Hanoi: Literary Studies Publishing House and Bac Ha Books, 2014 (Second Printing) Page 42-4

^{xii} Roger Schields, e-mail to author, February 2, 2019.

^{xiii} **Ibid**

^{xiv} **Ibid**

^{xv} Heather David, *Operation Rescue*, New York, Pinnacle Books, 1971, 8.

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