

Sal Binzer's 1994 Visit to the Son Tay POW Camp.

This is Sal Binzer's incomplete story on what he had learned about the Son Tay raid from a tour guide who escorted him to the ruins of the POW camp during his visit to Vietnam in 1994.

I have known Sal since he joined our Special Forces Association's Chapter 51. He never mentioned his visit to Son Tay until I recalled that we were approaching the 50th anniversary of the raid during a Friday evening dinner on 6 November. He said that he had an interesting visit to that camp and that he would give me a part of his memoirs where he recorded that event. Then on the following Wednesday breakfast he handed me a 6 page account with edited background that explained the reason for his visit to Vietnam. I was eager to follow up on his story when I called him on the next day. We never got to the subject because Sal confessed that he was coming down with a flu and that he was not feeling very well. I called him after that about every other day. He was never ready for a conversations because he still did not feel well and was tested positive for corona virus. He was always optimistic about his condition and promised that we would get together for a long discussion about his visit to Vietnam as soon as he got over it. When I called him twice on Wednesday 25 November, he did not answer and did not call me back. Then we found out that he passed away on Thanksgiving Day.

Because he told me to use whatever I could from his document in any future stories I may write about the POW rescue, I will quote parts of his account here.

“The story about the Special Forces raid to rescue POWs from the Son Tay prison camp back in 1970 as reported in the November/December 2020 edition of the VFW Magazine brought the memory of my own visit to the abandoned camp. That was back in 1994, before the US had diplomatic relations with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, or North Vietnam as we called it during the war.

The reason for my 1994 visit was twofold. I worked for a non-profit veteran's organization known as BRAVO, the acronym for Brotherhood Rally of All Veteran Organizations. I was the Editor of its magazine, BRAVO Veterans Outlook, as well as Producer of its television documentaries and weekly programs BRAVO Veterans Forum and BRAVO Sound Off. The television work was seen on cable public access stations and some PBS stations. The organization was based in Calabasas, California.

The opportunity return to Vietnam came about as a business proposition. Henry Truyen, the son-in-law of my former counterpart and other South Vietnamese living in California, proposed establishing connections with an in-country Vietnamese veteran's organization to provide tours for American veterans to visit their former battle and base camp sites as well as the cultural places of North and South Vietnam. Such a tour would benefit BRAVO by enriching its video library and magazine pages, as well as being part of a venture with potential economic value.

The business plan was developed, arrangements made, visas obtained, and Korean Air

Lines was to be involved so they provided complimentary air fare for the development tour. I was a little nervous about returning to Vietnam because the Viet Cong had put out a reward notice, a price on my head, back in 1966 when I was an Adviser in Pleiku Province.” ...

“I cannot remember the actual name of their group after so many years, but it was made up of former Viet Cong and NVA troops, some showing the wounds of war. It was a cordial gathering, good food, beer consumed by their veterans, our group did not drink. Some told of where they engaged US forces and spoke respectfully of our troops. They wanted to have US Veterans return on tours in order to have a profitable business.

The plan for our visit was that two retired NVA officers would be our guides and minders, Lieutenant Colonels Cang for the southern part of our tour, and Le Co for the northern part. They would take us to several places in the south and then north to Hanoi. The organization asked we make a report on the accommodations and dining so they could take corrective measures before the American veterans and their wives began to take part in the tours. We would travel by van along with an interpreter, sometimes a local guide and the two retired Army officers who watched over us very closely. It was also apparent that we were watched by security personnel throughout our trip.” ...

“Arriving in Hanoi the city was decorated for a celebration. Even with my rudimentary Vietnamese language I could read Dien Bien Phu, and realized it was the 50th anniversary of the decisive battle when the Viet Minh defeated the French forces at an outpost.” ...

“On the next day, May 7, our party was taken out of the city on a tour of potential tourist sites. But then came the surprise of the trip. “

We rode for a long distance around forested areas, along what could have been the Red River, then along a curved road, seemingly further away from the city. The woman that was with us, the Regional Tourist Development Director and Le Co did not speak and did not answer where we were headed. Tony Diamond, and I, became a bit nervous. I kept thinking about the price on my head from 1966. The van pulled off the two lane blacktop road into what looked like a run-down motel. We stopped in front of a vacant one story office building and exited the van.

Le Co and the tourist development director told us they brought us to this former POW camp because they thought it could be developed as a wartime historical site and tourist attraction. It was Son Tay. We knew it was historically important to Americans and to our many Special Forces friends. We asked if we could video inside and take photographs and Le Co and the civilian director gave us permission on video tape.

The woman director, who was a very attractive and charming woman with passable English skills, took out keys and opened the gate and we walked into the former POW camp. The place appeared to be cared for and maintained at a low level. The grass was not too overgrown, some administration buildings did have broken glass in the windows, and all doors were padlocked.

The prison barracks that housed the POWs had their big, rusting steel doors chained closed and locked with a big pad lock. John Johnson, our videographer, put the lens of the video camera inside one of the buildings when I held the doors open about three inches. There was some light coming through a window but barely enough to see anything inside. I attempted to take photographs through the opening between the big doors but nothing showed on the negative.” ...

Le Co and I walked about the camp and we talked about the raid soldier to soldier, like historians. We had been together for several days and had become close. I liked Le Co, he was a good man, a good person and as a soldier of his nation fought well. He was an air defense expert, was a commander of Surface to Air Missile sites (SAM), and shot down several of our 52s. He did not boast of that. I had been a Field Artillery officer but at the Artillery School's Career Course we spent two months at Fort Bliss studying missiles and Air Defense Artillery so I was familiar with Le Co's SAM systems. We connected.

Le Co pointed to one of the POW barracks buildings with a damaged roof. One of the helicopters landed inside the camp and its rotor hit the edge of the tile roof, and was never repaired. We walked around the wall, and where part of it had been knocked down a fence replaced the opening. Then at the rear of the camp we stood for a while watching the river that flowed toward the camp, then bent sharply to the right and then back alongside the camp and onto the Red River. Le Co told me the POWs were moved because there was fear the river was going to flood and overflow the camp. We both looked at the river that was full of red muddy water and commented to each other that we would not like to be drowned by that.

As we walked and talked, Le Co told me he was on duty at his SAM site headquarters in the Hanoi area on the night of the raid. He said it was a very confusing situation. He told me that his headquarters could not get any other regional headquarters on the telephone. That in one of the freakish things in the fog of war, the telephone system around the country was being repaired that day and communication was difficult. So when the US Navy began to fly over the port of Haiphong that night and not drop bombs but just drop flares nobody could figure out why. He said they could see the flares but could not talk to the Haiphong area because the phone lines were out. And they did not know about the raid at Son Tay.

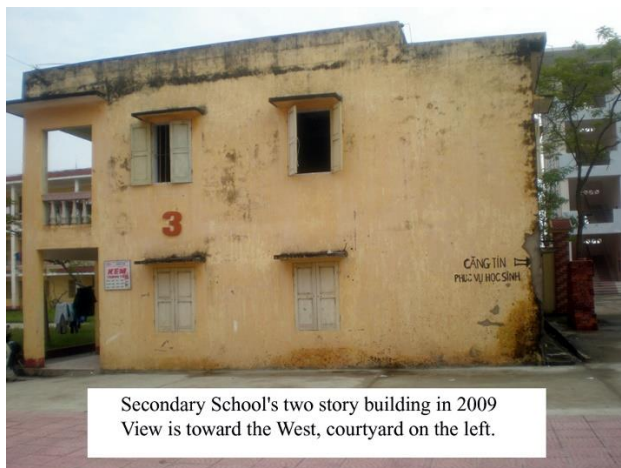
Le Co and I walked out to the highway while the others stood around the van. He pointed to the right of the camp at a two story, yellow building he called a dormitory where foreign troops were living at the time of the Son Tay raid. That building the Special Forces referred to as the "secondary school," and from which about 200 troops charged out from and into the night and engaged in a brisk firefight with the Americans. Le Co told me they were Chinese troops living there and were in Vietnam to learn how to use the Soviet SAM systems the Vietnamese were using. I thought that was revealing, but not surprising, because China was supporting Vietnam during the war and Vietnam was the only country using the Soviet SAM system in combat.”

I question the 200 troops charging to join the firefight at the POW camp. Such assistance

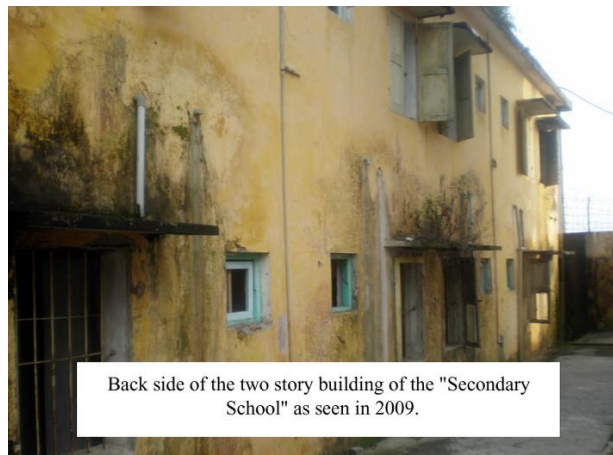
to the defenders of the camp never materialized. The 200-man figure is first mentioned in Ben Schemmer's book on the raid. He interviewed Special Forces Colonel "Bull" Simons who gave him this number as his estimate of the housing capacity of the mistakenly attacked "secondary school". I know this because I joined Colonel Simons on three lectures on the raid given at the USAF's Special Operations School at Hurlburt Field in Florida. Who were the soldiers at that school and how many were killed? That question always came up every time we spoke and he dismissed it in many ways. "No way we killed every one. If we killed all 200 of them then who was left to assist someone else who was also under attack? Who would charge blindly into a firefight not knowing what was happening? We don't know if they were Russians or Chinese. They were not Vietnamese and as third country nationals, they were not combat ready troops." Nevertheless, stories about our troops eliminating some 200 Chinese or Russians are still being told. Sal Binzer must have been a recipient of such raid misinformation.

What really interests me is the information that the tour guide volunteered about the nationality of the "secondary school" occupants on the night of the attack. For the first time in 50 years since the raid I ran across information from a former North Vietnamese soldier with background in SAM defenses who identified its occupants as Chinese. None of the North Vietnamese war histories identify them as foreign nationals. Some claim that they were invalids and recuperating troops from the battles in the south. Our diplomatic channels, even with former POW Douglas B. Peterson, who became our Ambassador to Vietnam in 1997, failed to have that government reveal who occupied that facility. No one from the North Vietnamese government or military circles ever expressed a published account of who was there.

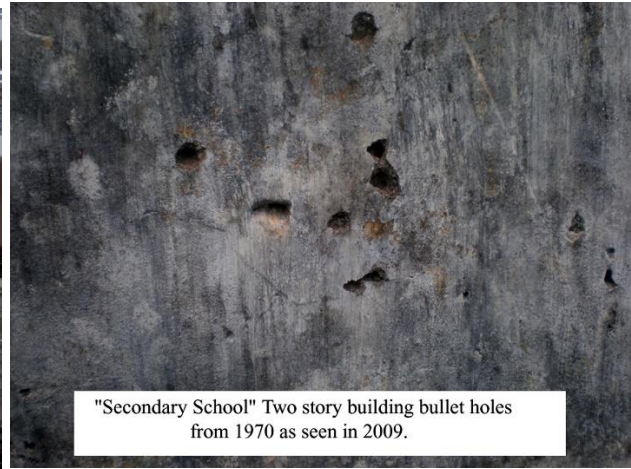
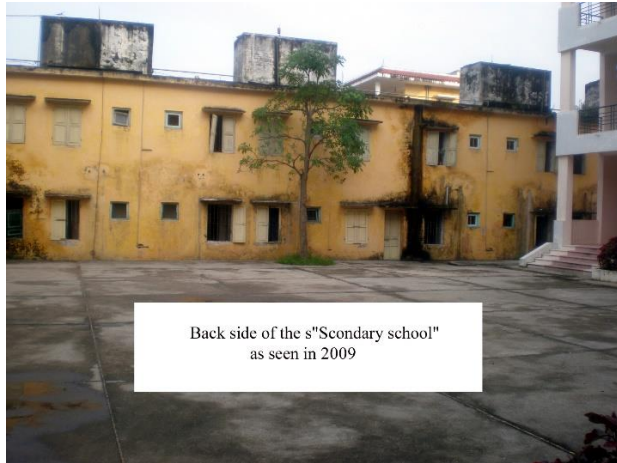
Following photographs of the "Secondary School" were made by visiting Bobby Thrower. He did not get a photograph of the front of the building. His tour guides brought him into the compound from the east entrance. He took photos of the east wall and the backside of the building. When he came to the front, he photographed the bullet holes. He intended to step back to take a picture from the front, but his guides did not allow him to walk across the courtyard to take more photographs. Although the color of the buildings was somewhat fresher the compound in general was as it had been when Sal Binzer visited the Son Tay POW camp in 1994.



Secondary School's two story building in 2009
View is toward the West, courtyard on the left.



Back side of the two story building of the "Secondary School" as seen in 2009.



Sal Binzer described his tour guides as “*two retired Army officers who watched over us very closely.*” Retired Lt. Col. Le Co just happened to be a career soldier in SAM defense. Was he purposely matched with Binzer whose air defense background must have been investigated before he received approval to visit Vietnam? They hit it off very well. Was Le Co gathering intelligence information from a friendly American veteran? I asked my friend Merle Pribbenow, who has been providing me translations of Vietnamese histories, books and articles about the raid, to search for Le Co on 1 December. Very promptly I received an amazing three document reply.

Senior Colonel Le Co is one of the national heroes in Vietnam. On December 16, 2012 he was featured on a TV interview which celebrated the 40th anniversary of North Vietnamese victories during B-52 bombing of Hanoi (Linebacker II). From Saigon Giai Phong [Liberated Saigon] newspaper, 16 December 2012 reported:

“Senior Colonel Le Co, former air defense missile combat training officer, who shared with us the research used to shoot down B-52s. He was one of those whose helped to write the “Red Book” [the manual for shooting down B-52s], recording his experience in fighting B-52s in the Vinh Linh-Quang Tri area in May 1966 [sic - should read “May 1968”], who predicted the direction from which the enemy aircraft would make their attack and came up with plans to fight back that were successfully employed five years later.”

Senior Colonel Le Co may still be alive. On February 3, 2020 he was honored for his 70th year as a member of the Communist Party. Here is how it was reported on Ho Chi Minh City Party Committee website:



*Senior Colonel Le Co [Lê Cổ], former Air Defense-Air Force Service Combat Training Officer:
Maintaining the Moral Quality of a Communist.*

“I am honored to be a member of the Vietnamese Communist Party. From the time I was very young I joined the revolution and participated in the fight against the French colonialists and the American imperialists. As one of Uncle Ho’s soldiers, I have always maintained my revolutionary ideology and have carried out Uncle Ho’s teaching. Uncle Ho said, “Our army is loyal to the Party, subservient to the people, and prepared to fight and to die for the independence and freedom of the Fatherland and for socialism. The army will accomplish every mission, overcome every obstacle, and defeat every enemy.” ...Filled with pride for the fact that I am a Party member who has been awarded the 70 Year Party Membership medallion, I hope that our youth today will be able to build on the successes and the revolutionary moral qualities of the Vietnamese Communist Party, that they will be proud to be citizens of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, and that they will defend our Fatherland’s territorial sovereignty.”

Sal Binzer never found out what a distinguished tour guide he had. Le Co continued to serve his party and nation when he posed as a tour guide for Binzer's BRAVO visit to Vietnam. Did he inadvertently reveal a long held secret by identifying the occupants of the "secondary school" as Chinese? He was the only known high ranking soldier to comment about who occupied that facility on the night of the raid. As an eventual Air Defense-Air Force Service Combat Training Officer for the SAM training school west of Son Tay, he would have known the nationality of trainees who had been quartered in the "secondary school".