

## “Flying Soldier 2: A Memoir”

*Mr. Merle Pribbanow, translator of North Vietnamese military histories, gave me (John Gargus) this story to use in any articles I may write about the Son Tay raid.*

By Pham Phu Thai [Phạm Phú Thái]

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Deputy Chief of the General Staff  
Colonel General Phung The Tai<sup>1</sup>

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During the early morning hours of 21 November 1970 a US Air Force Special Operations unit carried out the Son Tay Raid, designed to free hundreds of American airmen prisoners of war that they believed were being held there. At around 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning we were woken up by explosions - the sounds of anti-aircraft guns being fired echoed through the still night air. These were followed by several very loud explosions that seem to shake the very ground in the mountain ravine where our quarters were located. I jumped up and ran outside. Looking off to the southwest, I could clearly see rays of white light like that from parachute flares along with the pink glow of fires burning on the ground. I heard the echoes of scattered bursts of fire from anti-aircraft guns, and several surface-to-air missiles streaked upward into the night sky. Everyone looked

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<sup>1</sup> Translator's Note: General Phung The Tai commanded the Air Defense-Air Force Service from 1963 to 1967, after which he was promoted to Deputy Chief of the General Staff, but he still maintained a supervisory role over the Air Defense-Air Force Service.

toward the regimental headquarters command post, which had just been moved to a place near our quarters in Area E, for answers to what was happening, but we received no explanations.

Immediately thereafter, we were ordered to a higher level of combat readiness and additional pilots were added to the combat alert duty watches. The only thing we knew about the events of that night came from a few dribbles of internal information that said, “American commandos with more than a hundred aircraft supporting them conducted a raid aimed at freeing American prisoners of war being held at a prison camp near Son Tay. However, we had advance information and had guessed their plan (?), so we had moved the prisoners, almost 100 of them, to another location.

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That is not all! We also shot down two of their aircraft, and one of their helicopters crashed on the grounds of the prison camp because of a mistake made while landing!”

Long afterward, after the war ended, I had a chance to talk to Colonel General Phung The Tai when he came to visit the Headquarters of the Air Defense-Air Force Service after the two branches [Air Defense and Air Force] had been reunified,<sup>2</sup> and I asked him about this incident. I asked,

“Sir, is it true that in late 1970 we tricked the Americans into conducting a raid to try to free their captured pilots?”

“That’s a bunch of crap!” he replied, looking at me with a cold expression on his face. “That’s all a bunch of lies! We were taken by surprise! That is what really happened.”

I persisted, asking,

“If we did not have advance knowledge, then why did we move the prisoners of war out of the camp before the raid? And how were we able to shoot down several American aircraft?”

My questions seemed to have struck a nerve. His expression turned into a scowl, and he replied in a harsh tone,

“Who told you those things?” Then, apparently feeling that he had been a little too harsh, he told me in a calmer tone of voice,

“Our having moved the prisoners of war to another location was just a lucky coincidence. Prior to the raid, in late 1969, after receiving many requests, we agreed to allow them to send a delegation to visit the prisoners of war. The group included a priest, and an American singer also accompanied the delegation. However, we sent people to accompany them to monitor their actions. We did not detect any major infractions that we could use to accuse members of the delegation of violating our rules. The only thing was that the priest demanded to be allowed to see

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<sup>2</sup> Translator’s Note: The Air Defense-Air Force Service was split into two separate military services, Air Defense and Air Force, in 1977. The two services were reunited in 1999 to again become the Air Defense-Air Force Service.

their quarters and to look into all of the cells. The move of the American airmen prisoners was simply the result of a string of coincidences.

First was the fact that the prison camp needed repairs.

Second, we had a policy of moving the prisoners from one camp to another every five or six months, or maybe once a year.

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Third, there was some kind of problem with the people assigned to guard and administer the camp, a problem that ran from top to bottom. We did not feel right about the situation, so we decided to move the prisoners, just to be on the safe side. Later we learned that they (the Americans) had spent one entire year preparing for this attempt to rescue the prisoners of war.”

The general then asked me. “So it seems that you must read the book, “The Son Tay Raid”, right? The one published by the Public Security Publishing House?”

I smiled and replied, “Sir, I read it. But I skimmed through it to read about the main events. The way the author wrote it gave me a headache, because he ran on and on, filling the story with all kinds of crap!”

The general laughed and said, “I had the same reaction! He wrote it in the American style, which is not our style!”

I then changed the subject and asked, “So I see that you have a new set of teeth. Can you eat dog? We’d like to invite you to dine with us. The [Air Defense-Air Force] Service Headquarters year-end review banquet is going to serve dog, prepared just the way you like it!”

“I can still eat dog, and I still love it. Whenever you hold your banquet be sure to invite me!” He then laughed out loud....

*MiG-21 pilot (Phạm Phú Thái) who wrote this memoir is an interesting type. At the age of 15 he was recruited as a prospective North Vietnamese Air Force fighter pilot. At that time he had just completed the 8th Grade in school (at that time the North Vietnamese students graduated from high school after completing the 10th Grade). By the time he had turned 16 years old he was in the Krasnodar Aviation Training Center attending the first months of his ground school flight training program. Just after he turned 18 he graduated from Krasnodar as a MiG-21 pilot and a few months later he was flying MiG-21 combat missions in North Vietnam while still a private first class (the North Vietnamese required that officers had to be Communist Party members and he had not yet been inducted into the Party). By the end of the war, he had been credited with shooting four American aircraft (all during 1972) and he himself had been shot down twice.*

*Merle Pribbanow*