

# **Vietnam's Air Defense Missiles Shatter the Son Tay American POW Rescue Mission: An Outstanding Combat Achievement.**

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.

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## **Top Secret Plan to Rescue American Pilot Prisoners at Son Tay**

In mid-1966, under pressure from U.S. public opinion, and especially from the families of American pilots who had been shot down during air attacks on North Vietnam, a special meeting was held at the U.S. Defense Department. Those attending the meeting were intelligence specialists and prisoner rescue specialists from many different services. The purpose of the meeting was to figure out effective ways to collect information on American pilots who had been taken prisoner or had gone missing during the Vietnam War. It was decided that the first two things that had to be done were:

First, determine the names of the pilots who had been captured after they had been shot down in order to relieve at least part of the concerns of their families. Second, determine the locations of prison camps where the pilots were being held in order to eliminate those locations from U.S. bombing target lists in order to avoid

casualties to the prisoners and to eventually figure out a way to rescue these prisoners!

The Pentagon began a feverish search campaign by U.S. intelligence and technical forces, which were mobilized to the maximum extent possible. In 1970 these forces had found the hot news that U.S. intelligence agencies had been waiting for: there were at least two American pilot prison camps located west of Hanoi. One of these camps was in Son Tay city, about 40 kilometers from Hanoi!

The Americans mobilized their best experts to study the Son Tay area. The American military intelligence specialists even built a real-life model and developed a plan to rescue the prisoners being held in this prison camp.



Photograph of the Son Tay Camp taken by U.S. aerial reconnaissance in July 1970

After much discussion and training of commandos, finally a detailed plan for a raid on Son Tay to rescue the American pilot prisoners was completed by the Pentagon. This top-secret campaign was given the name “Ivory Coast.” The “Ivory Coast” campaign were so secret that only President Nixon, National Security

Advisor Kissinger, and a few of the Nixon government's most important Cabinet members knew about the details of the plan.

All of the commandos and the aircraft squadrons were taken to train in a large area (about 465,000 hectares) in northern Florida that included a life-sized model of the Son Tay prison camp area.

Nixon decided that the raid to rescue the prisoners held at Son Tay would be carried out on the night of 20-21 November 1970, a night when the weather in North Vietnam in general and at Son Tay in particular would be the best.

### **Vietnamese Air Defense Missiles Shatter the American Raid**

At 2325 hours on 20 November 1970 six American helicopters carrying 103 commandos took off from the Udorn base in Thailand and flew toward North Vietnam, escorted by AD-6 attack aircraft. Also accompanying the six helicopters was a C-130 navigational aircraft, and there were two C-141s to transport the prisoners of war back from Son Tay [sic].

This entire formation flew at extremely low altitude, flying along the slopes of the mountains in order to avoid detection by Vietnamese radar. According to Pentagon-supplied statistics, the U.S. mobilized a total of more than 100 U.S. Air Force and U.S. Navy aircraft that took off from five airbases in Thailand and three aircraft carriers in the Gulf of Tonkin to suppress Vietnam's air defense and Air Force forces and to bomb and strafe suspect areas to support this campaign. The scale of the Son Tay Raid to rescue American pilots can be seen in the fact it took place in an area of sky covering 300,000 square kilometers over Southeast Asia! Before the helicopters landed at the Son Tay prison camp, the U.S. Navy sent four flights of aircraft to operate off the coast of Haiphong. They dropped flares in the areas of Van Hoa and Long Chau Islands to divert our attention, and many jet aircraft flew at medium altitudes, circling in the Hanoi area, to force us to disperse our defensive efforts.

The air situation at that time was complicated and very tense. In the black of night alarm sirens sounded in the provinces and cities of North Vietnam, accompanied by the roar of engines from flights of jet aircraft and the constant explosions of bombs and anti-aircraft shells.

Fighting at night was harder for our air defense troops because the enemy was equipped with many types of modern night-fighting and night reconnaissance instruments that enabled the enemy to make rather accurate attacks. As for our side, except for our missile troops, our anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) and anti-aircraft machine-gun forces could not see their targets, so they were forced to fire barrages aimed at the sound of aircraft engines or to put a curtain of fire at certain ranges and

certain altitudes to protect vital installations. This meant that their efforts were not very effective.

### **SAM-2 Missiles Leave Their Launchers**

Taking advantage of this situation, the flight of helicopters continued to head toward Son Tay, flying at very low altitude. However, our visual observation post at Suoi Rut heard the sound of unidentified aircraft and quickly alerted the command post. On our B1 intelligence [radar early warning] net, our radars spotted dozens of enemy aircraft flying into North Vietnamese airspace from different directions.

Shortly before 2:00 in the morning on 21 November 1970 our air defense units were given the combat alert order. One of those units, the Hanoi Defense Division's 263rd Missile Regiment armed with SAM-2 missiles, displaying a high state of vigilance, went to Combat Alert Condition 1 [battle stations] faster than did any other unit. Even though it occurred 50 years ago, Vetran Nguyen Huu Hieu [Nguyễn Hữu Hiếu], former Deputy Director of the Hanoi Education and Job Training Bureau, who at that time was a communications private assigned to the 20th Company who was standing combat alert watch to provide constant communications for the 263rd Regiment command post, clearly recalled the details of that event. Hieu said,

*“My assignment at that time was as duty communicator responsible for communications in the regimental command post. I recall that the regimental command post was in a partially-underground bunker on the grounds of the Thuong Pagoda (the official name is the Quang Phuc Pagoda) in Thanh Liet Village, Thanh Tri District, on the outskirts of Hanoi. That night in the command post, Regimental Chief of Communications Vu Truong Tu [Vũ Trường Tu] was the duty combat operations officer. He closely monitored the intelligence reports coming in from the B1 net, and he quickly reported to the regiment commander so that he would order the regiment's missile battalion's to go on combat alert. I still remember the quick, decisive actions of Regiment Commander Nguyen Hong Quang [Nguyễn Hồng Quảng], who personally commanded the fighting that night.”*

With the regiment commander personally assigning specific targets, all three of the 263rd Regiment's firing battalions - the 41st, the 43rd, and the 44th - were able to detect the enemy targets. Flights of enemy aircraft that had been assigned to suppress our air defenses fired dozens of Shrike anti-radar missiles at our missile launch sites, forcing our missile guidance operators to repeatedly take counter-measures.

At 0239 hours the 43rd Missile Battalion, located at its Chem launch site (in Tu Liem District, Hanoi City) detected a target flying into the range of the battalion's missiles. The battalion immediately fired two missiles that shot down one F-4, which

crashed on the spot. 13 minutes later, the 44th Missile Battalion, located at the Yen Nghia launch site in Hoai Duc District, in what was formerly called Ha Tay Province), accurately locked onto another target that was approaching. Firing just one missile, the battalion destroyed one F-4, turning it into a flaming torch that crashed into a mountainside.

Senior Colonel Ngo Van Khoat [Ngô Văn Khoát], a veteran who at that time was a duty communications specialist working in the regimental headquarters' P405 radio relay van, responsible for ensuring communications from the regiment down to the missile battalion, described the situation:

*“I had been assigned to the 263rd Missile Regiment for a little less than two months, so that night was the first time that I learned what a battle fought by a missile unit was like. I was standing the night duty watch in the van when over my earphones I heard one of the battalions report to the regiment that it had locked onto a target. The regiment commander in the regimental command post ordered the battalion to destroy the target. I recall that it was just two-three minutes later that I heard the battalion commander report back that ‘The target has been destroyed.’ I could hear the cheers from inside the regimental command post and from inside the battalion headquarters over my earphones. I was so excited that I shouted, ‘Brothers! We won victory!’ At that time my entire squad, which was sleeping downstairs, woke up. When I told them what had happened they all got excited. After that, no one slept for the rest of the night. The next morning higher authority informed us that the night before the U.S. Air Force had conducted a surprise raid on Son Tay aimed at rescuing prisoners that we were holding there, but the raid had failed because the sky pirates who were being held in that prison camp had previously been moved to another location. In addition to that failure, the report from higher authority said that because our 263rd Regiment had quickly gone on combat alert, we had shot down two F-4 jet fighters.”*

In the face of the ferocious resistance put up by our air defense missiles, the American jets were forced to disperse their formations and move farther away. Unfortunately, the 41st Missile Battalion, which that night was located at the Mau Luong launch site in Thanh Oai District, in what was then Ha Tay Province), had picked up a target at long range. The target return signal, which was very clear on the radar scope, was flying slowly toward Son Tay. The battalion was in good position to fire, but because it had lost communications with the regiment command post and was unable to confirm whether this was a friendly or an enemy aircraft, the battalion did not fire because it was afraid of hitting one of our own aircraft.

At the same time, because this raid was so unexpected, virtually all of the other missile and AAA units of the division did not act fast enough to engage the enemy. Because of its high state of combat readiness, the 263rd Missile Regiment was able to open fire and score successes that night. As a result, Chief of State Ton

Duc Thang awarded the 263rd Missile Regiment a floral wreath for its performance. The Air Defense-Air Force Service Command Headquarters awarded the regiment two banners commemorating this especially outstanding achievement!



The author along with comrades-in-arms from the 263rd Regiment. Nguyen Huu Hieu is the individual on the far right. Senior Colonel Ngo Van Khoat is the individual on the far left.

The American Son Tay raid was carried out with rather good precision, but it failed to achieve its goal. The commandos landed at an empty prison camp because the American pilot prisoners had previously been moved to another location and the U.S.'s aerial reconnaissance had failed to detect this move!

The Americans carelessly slaughtered a number of civilians who lived near the prison camp and then used explosive to destroy a helicopter that had crashed. Leaving behind a number of pieces of gear and equipment, they climbed aboard the remaining helicopters and hastily fled the area.

This all was because the U.S. did not know that some time before, as the result of a number of suspicious actions by the U.S. and by a number of foreign visitors to Vietnam who had sought information about captured American pilots, along with other intelligence reports, we had been put on our guard. We had made preparations and had quietly moved the prisoners of war to another location. At the same time we had secretly deployed forces to ambush the American forces. However, after

waiting for a while with nothing happening, our forces had been withdrawn and sent off to carry out other missions.

One could say that this was an American failure in a massive campaign that had been so very carefully prepared and planned. Not only did they fail to rescue any pilot prisoners, they lost one helicopter that crashed accidentally and two jet aircraft that were shot down.

As for our side, after defeating the American plot to rescue their pilots, we quickly strengthened our communications network and our ground security systems in order to be able to better deal with a similar situation in the future. However, from that time on to the moment that they were forced to sign the Paris Agreement and end the war in Vietnam in January 1973, the American never dared to undertake such a risky adventure again.



The helicopter that crashed and was abandoned by the American commandos at Son Tay.