

Memoirs of Colonel General Phung The Tai

An Entire Life Spent Following Uncle Ho: The Memoirs of Colonel General Phung The Tai

By Phung The Tai [Phùng Thế Tài], with The Ky [Thế Kỷ] (ghost writer).



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From book jacket cover: Colonel General Phung The Tai (1920-2014) served as the first commander of the Air Defense-Air Force Service from 1963 to 1967 and then served as Deputy Chief of the General Staff from 1967 to 1987.

Colonel General Phung The Tai

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A Few Confessions and Stories That Are Only Now Being Told

In just two years I will be 90 years old and will have been a Party member for 70 years. It will not be long before I leave this earth to follow Uncle Ho. That is the reason that I wanted to tell people about all of the things that previous books have not been able to discuss about my seventy years of following Uncle Hoi and the Party while serving in many different positions and participating in matters that were so secret we were supposed to keep them until our deaths. ...

North Vietnamese Deputy Chief of the General Staff Recalls the Son Tay Raid.

Why Were the Prisoners Moved out of the Son Tay POW Camp? (Editor's subtitle.)

Another very important event that I wanted to discuss with my readers in this book but was not fully able to do so is the Son Tay Raid, which was conducted on 21 November 1970. There was an article by a certain author that claimed that our intelligence obtained advance information about this raid and that this was why we transferred around 100 prisoners of war to another location, and that was why the raid failed to rescue any prisoners. That's a bunch of bull! That is not true. This raid took us completely by surprise. If we had received advance warning, we would have captured several of their helicopters and all of the enemy commandos. This article was published in the "World Security" [An Ninh The Gioi]. People thought that this story was true, but the story was simply designed to play up the skills and expertise of Vietnam's intelligence agency. However, when one writes a memoir, one must be honest. One cannot write this kind of thing, because one must under no circumstances write things designed just to play up one's own role. For that reason, I would like to take this opportunity to tell my readers the truth, which is that the 20 November raid on the Son Tay prison camp took us completely by surprise.

As for the movement of the captured enemy airmen out of the Son Tay prison camp, in fact that was simply a coincidence, a matter of chance. I personally gave the order to move the prisoners and I closely monitored their movement from beginning to end, from their starting point in Son Tay down to the Nga Tu So prison camp, the location that had previously occupied by the Ministry of Culture's Fa Film movie film organization. The movement of the prisoners took place six months before the raid. It was a special movement that had to be kept absolutely secret and that had to be very meticulously planned.

Two Deputy Directors of the Army Security Department participated in this operation from the time it was in the planning stage, and these two officers accompanied the trucks during the move, with one of them leading the convoy and the other one bringing up the rear. Each truck had four soldiers serving as guards. As I recall, the movement took place one night in May 1970. This means that the movement of the prisoners took place six months before the raid.

Why were the prisoners moved? The story begins sometimes around 20 December 1969 when Hoang Van Tien [Hoàng Văn Tiến], the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, came to see me to discuss granting permission for a priest and two singers (I think that Tom Boye was also part of the group) to come to visit the prisoners for the Christmas holiday and to put on a performance for the entertainment of the prisoners of war. I forwarded this request to Brother Van [General Vo Nguyen Giap] and Brother Dung [General Van Tien Dung] and both of them approved the visit. I then called in the officers from the Army Security Department to discuss the arrangements.

The group arrived in Hanoi on 23 December 1969. At 1730 hours on the afternoon of 24 December 1969 we held a reception for the visitors at the Metropol Hotel and then sent them straight up to Son Tay by car. We also arranged for the captured American airmen to have an early meal. We gave the prisoners a special meal which included barbequed duck, and each prisoner was

given a glass of new rice wine. When they learned that two priests and some American singers were coming to perform for them, the entire camp was filled with shouts of joy and happiness.

I instructed Thai, Deputy Director of the Army Security Department, to place special emphasis on monitoring the activities of the Catholic priest, because it turned out that he went around to each cell, looking in and making furtive glances all around the camp. Later, after the raid took place, we concluded that this group of singers and the accompanying priest had requested this Christmas 1969 visit in order to confirm the exact number of prisoners being held and to determine the layout of the camp to help the Americans plan their big operation. However, I must confess that before the raid we had idea that this is what they were doing.

The Raid to Rescue the POWs and Phung The Tai's Reaction To It. (Editor's subtitle).

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Recently a book titled "The Son Tay Raid" was published in the United States. Only after reading this almost 500-page book did we learn just how careful and meticulous the preparations for this raid had been.

The enemy had trained and practiced for months in the Philippines using a diagram of the Son Tay Prison Camp based on satellite and SR-71 aerial photographs.

On the night of 18 November Admiral Moorer, the person who had been given overall responsibility for this raid, which was codenamed "Operation Kingpin," was summoned to the White House to give President Nixon a personal briefing on the preparations for the raid on the Son Tay prison camp. Also in the Oval Office for this briefing that day were Henry Kissinger, Defense Secretary Laird, CIA Director Richard Helms, and even Secretary State William Rogers.

Admiral Moorer spread out a large diagram of the entire Son Tay prison camp and said, "Mr. President, the commander of the assault team is certain that this special operation will be successful. He personally selected every individual who is participating in the raid. All of the soldiers are volunteers. They are determined and they will not make even a single mistake. The practice exercise for this plan went smoothly. All of the pilots and aircrew were also individually selected, and all of the aircraft commanders are volunteers."

At this point Kissinger added, "Mr. President. More than a month ago I spoke to the two commanders of this raid, Colonel Simon and Major General Manor. He [sic] says that the chances of success are 97%. I understand that they have practiced this mission more than 100 times."

To conclude, Moorer added, "Mr. President. There are 70 American prisoners of war being held in the Son Tay Camp. Out of this total, we know the names and service affiliations of 61 of the prisoners: there are 43 Air Force personnel, 14 Navy personnel, and four Marines. Navy Commander C.D. Co-lao-o [Claude Clower], who was promoted to the rank of Captain after he was captured, is currently the senior officer in charge of these prisoners of war. In January and in May of this year two officers from this group were transferred to other places."

Once again Nixon seemed to be very moved by the tremendous details that the Pentagon had been able to collect about the target of this raid. After a period of deep thought, the President said to Admiral Moorer,

“I know that you have been working on this plan for months. I personally would also like to have our beloved pilots brought back home. My God! If this raid succeeds, we can invite all of the captured airmen to have Thanksgiving dinner here, right here in the White House.”

The raid was conducted from 0203 hours to 0330 hours on the morning of 21 November 1970.

Before the helicopters landed to rescue the airmen at Son Tay, the enemy sent four flights of aircraft to operate along the coast of Haiphong and drop flares in the area of Van Hoa Island and Long Chau in order to divert the attention of our air defense forces. Then many flights of jet aircraft flew in from the southwest and medium altitude and circled over areas west and northwest of Hanoi. These aircraft were there to provide support and to attract the attention of our air defense forces. Meanwhile, a number of helicopters flew in at very low altitude from Laos and headed for Son Tay.

Our visual observation post at Suoi Rut heard the sound of engines and quickly alerted higher-level command posts.

At the 361st Air Defense Division, when he received this information Deputy Division Commander Dinh Dinh Sanh ordered the entire division to go to Combat Alert Condition [all personnel at their battle stations, ready to fire] right away. Between 0218 and 0226 hours the entire division was ready for battle.

At 0239 hours the 43rd Battalion/263rd Missile Regiment fired two missiles that downed one enemy aircraft. At 0252 hours the 44th Battalion fired a missile that shot down another enemy aircraft. However, neither aircraft crashed on the spot.

The 41st Battalion/263rd Missile Battalion picked up a target at long range. The radar return signal was very clear as the target flew toward Son Tay. The battalion could have fired at this target, but the battalion commander believed that it was one of our own aircraft and so he did not fire. Then the battalion detected a target at a range of 32 kilometers. Conditions would have allowed the battalion to fire, but the unit detected that the enemy aircraft had fired a Shrike so it did not fire, thereby missing an opportunity to destroy the enemy aircraft.

The Air Defense Officers Academy and Hoa Lac Airfield both spotted strange helicopters but were not able to report this to the Air Defense Headquarters command post because the enemy had cut the telephone line and these unit's radios did not have a communications session on their schedule at that time of the night.

A particular problem developed at the 53rd Battalion/267th Missile Regiment at Haiphong. The duty radio communications relay soldier fell asleep, and the regiment had to send a man by

car to deliver the combat order to the battalion, so the battalion was 58 minutes late in going to Combat Alert Condition 1.

Even though we were able to shoot down two enemy aircraft (and one enemy helicopter shattered its main rotor when it hit an electrical power line as it was trying to land inside the prison camp compound, so the helicopter crashed).

However, our air defense troops allowed six enemy helicopters to fly in at low altitude to land at the prison camp. This was a serious shortcoming and error on the part of our air defense and air force troops. The primary reason for this error was that our spirit of vigilance and combat readiness was not high and because we had never anticipated that the enemy would send helicopters escorted by fighter aircraft to penetrate so deeply into our interior in order to try to rescue their airmen. That is why, when this situation developed unexpectedly, our commanders at all levels were caught off guard and were on the defensive. We had no concrete plans for fighting enemy forces on the ground, commanders did not respond to the situation in a flexible manner, and we did not use our air force fighters to attack the enemy.

This was a profound lesson for our air defense-air force troops in many different areas, and especially in preparing for and carrying out battles against enemy forces landing by air inside our rear areas in North Vietnam.

When the raid took place, I was away on a working trip to Military Region 4 with Van Tien Dung. Vo Nguyen Giap sent me an urgent message instructing me to return to Hanoi right away and summoning me to come in to brief him on the raid. All I could do when I got there was to hang my head in shame and accept responsibility. However, I still strove to defend myself by saying that we had received not a single report from Department 2 [the Military Intelligence Department] to alert us that this raid was coming.

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 scott 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. ...