

The Son Tay Raid



"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." - Colonel Arthur "Bull" Simons

"Also I heard the voice of the Lord saying, who shall I send, and who shall go for us? Then said I, here am I, Send me."
Isaiah 6:

History

Son Tay Raid "Quang Ngai"



AN HISTORIC OPERATION

Shortly before midnight on November 20, 1970, at Udorn Royal Thailand Air Base in Northern Thailand, 56 US Army Special Forces Troopers (Green Berets) boarded two USAF HH-53s and one HH-3 for a mission deep into enemy territory to rescue 75 or more Americans held by the North Vietnamese authorities. These Americans, mostly aviators of all services, were being held under conditions that can be best described as horrible in all respects -- torture, diet, lack of medical care and devoid of hope for return to freedom in a timely manner.

One hundred sixteen aircraft from seven airbases and three aircraft carriers comprised the total force. The task force was under the command of the author, Brig General LeRoy J. Manor. The weather was clear, all aircraft had been thoroughly checked and were in a-one condition, the "Red Rocket" message had been received from Washington, the troopers and air crew members were suited up and all exposed skin areas were painted and the command post communications had been checked and ready. The Commander declared the mission ready and ordered the launch.

WHY THE MISSION?

By 1970, the US had secured the names of over 500 Americans held in North Vietnam prisons. Many more were missing and presumed captured. Reports of the cruelty suffered by these men at the hands of their barbarous captors were received along with reports of resultant deaths from various sources. Anxiety, concern and anger among the next of kin, friends of the captives, commanders and government officials were very much in evidence throughout this country. What was being done to alleviate the growing concern? Negotiations were being conducted in Paris on a sporadic basis depending on the mood of the North Vietnamese representatives. An attempt was made to reach an agreement whereby an exchange of prisoners of war could be made. After over two years of such negotiations, the results were ZERO.

The mood of the country demanded that something be done to help these suffering POWs. Was the time ripe for an initiative-- feasible alternative?

THE TASK FORCE

It is often said that being at the right place at the right time can result in unforeseen benefits. I believe this to be true in my case. During 1970 I had a wonderful assignment. I was Commander of the USAF Special Operations Force with Headquarters at Eglin AFB, FL. My responsibilities included the training of all special operations personnel and units of the Air Force and the coordination of these force capabilities with the US Army and US Navy. Joint training exercises were conducted primarily with the Army's Special Forces under the command of Maj General "Flywheel" Flannigan and later Maj General Hank Emmerson.

On 6 August, by telephone, I was summoned to the Pentagon and instructed to report to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at 0800 hours on 8 August. I was told that my Air Staff contact was Brig Gen James Allen. It was requested that on my T-39 flight to Washington on Sunday the 7th I plan a stop at Pope AFB, NC, adjacent to Fort Bragg, to pick up an Army Colonel who, also, had instructions to report at 0800 hours to the

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. His name was Arthur D. "Bull" Simons. Simons was then the G-4 for the US Army XVIII Corps.

Over dinner on Sunday evening at the Andrews AFB Officers' Club Simons and I speculated regarding the purpose of our being summoned to Washington. We suspected that due to the similar circumstances, we were being called for the same purpose. Early on the morning of the 8th I reported to Brig General Allen and "Bull" Simons reported to Allen's counterpart on the Army staff, Brig General Clarke Baldwin.

A brief preview of the reason we were called plus a short meeting with the Chairman's principal staff member for Special Operations, Army Brig General Don Blackburn, prepared us for our meeting with Admiral Thomas Moore, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. I found the Chairman to be a real gentleman-- down to earth, friendly and to the point. He asked us if we were prepared and willing to take on an assignment to explore the feasibility of attempting to rescue some US POWs held by North Vietnam--with the ultimate responsibility of conducting the operation should it be deemed feasible. Our responses were immediately affirmative. He appointed me commander of a joint task force and Col "Bull" Simons as the task force deputy commander. He advised us that the Secretary of Defense, Mr. Melvin Laird, had authorized the formation and training of a task force and that whatever resources we needed were to be made available. Admiral Moore instructed us to advise the JCS as early as possible regarding the feasibility of such an operation, and should it be deemed feasible, when we would be ready to conduct the operation, Both Simons and I were delighted and felt honored with the task placed before us.

Our first priority was to establish a planning group. Thanks to our high priority on resources we were able to assemble a small group of the most dedicated and innovative planners available. The group represented each of the four services so it was truly "joint." The assembled group consisted of 26 members. Space does not permit recognizing each member and outlining his or her contribution to the concept that developed. Suffice to say that it included such superb performers as Norman Frisbie, Larry Ropka, Ben Kraljev, Art Andraitu, Joe Cataldo, Dick Peshkin, Keith Grime, Warner Britton, William Norman, Richard Beyea, Max Newman and John Knops.

Next we turned our attention to the task force operational element. An early decision was made to assemble an all volunteer force. The ground element would be composed of men from the Army Special Forces and the air element would be from the Air Force. The insertion and extraction of the force, along with the rescued POWs, would be by helicopter.

Eglin Air Force Base, Florida, was selected as the training site. Security was a prime consideration and the Eglin area was well suited because it is a vast area -- one where seeing military personnel wearing different uniforms does not create any speculation that something unusual is being planned. Also, the needed air resources were located primarily at Eglin and nearby Hurlburt Field.

Col Simons and Dr. Joe Cataldo went to Fort Bragg, home of the Army Special Forces and asked for volunteers. We wanted 100 men possessing certain identified skills and preferably having had recent combat experience in Southeast Asia. Approximately 500 men responded. Each was interviewed by Simons, Cataldo and Sergeant Major Pylant. From that group 100 dedicated volunteers were selected. All the required skills were covered. All were in top physical condition.

The ground component commander selected was Lt Colonel "Bud" Sydnor from Fort Benning, Georgia.

Sydnor had an impeccable reputation as a combat leader. Additionally selected to be a member of the task force from Fort Benning was another superb combat leader, Capt Dick Meadow. Meadows would later lead the team that made the risky landing inside the prison compound. At the time we decided that the force needed 100 men we believed that the number might be excessive; however, some degree of redundancy and a reservoir of spares were deemed necessary.

The air element (primary force) would include five HH-53s, one HH-3, two MC-130 Combat Talons and five A-1Es. The selection of crew members for these aircraft was based on experience and proven performance. They were all highly experienced and had recent combat tours. They were assembled and given the same information as that given to the Army troops regarding the purpose of the project and were invited to become participants. All accepted. We then had an all-volunteer force.

PLANNING AND TRAINING

By late August the joint task force was assembled in the Eglin area. Primary activity was at Duke Field, known as Eglin Auxiliary Number 3. A remote, but not far from Duke, site was selected for the construction of a replica of the Son Tay camp. This is where the detailed training was accomplished, including precision helicopter operations.

The Central Intelligence Agency provided a scale model of the Son Tay compound. The model proved to be a valuable device for detailed training of the raiders--especially members of Meadows' assault element.

Ben Krajlev, one of the raid planners, said -- "Aircrew training began with night formation involving dissimilar aircraft. As the crews became comfortable with the phase, low level was introduced as well as objective area tactics which included helicopter landings and extractions; air-drops by the C-130s of flares, fire fight simulators and napalm; and close air support by the A-1s. During this training aircrews flew 1,054 hours without so much as scraping a wing tip or rotor blade - most of it at night with dissimilar aircraft in low level formation while blacked out - a true reflection of the superb skill of each and every aircrew. Training culminated with two five and one-half hour full profile missions flown for the benefit of JCS observers who pronounced the force ready."

Both the planning by the Pentagon group and the training in Florida progressed exceptionally well. Simons and I divided our time between the two. Don Blackburn was most helpful assisting the planners by establishing contacts with the various intelligence agencies and providing guidance to the group. Among the important decisions:

- a. The raid would be conducted during nighttime.
- b. Weather and moonlight were important considerations.

-Weather: Cloudless skies ideal for air refueling.

-Moonlight: Quarter moon/35 degrees above horizon

- c. We must achieve surprise and capitalize on the element of shock.

d. Once launched, the operation must be one of precision with timing and navigational accuracy strictly according to plan.

The importance of light conditions led us to select a "window" during which the desired conditions would prevail. The period was 21-25 October, with the same conditions during 21-25 November. The date of 21 October was selected. With the counsel of Blackburn, Simons and me, the air and ground element leaders and the planners deemed the mission to be feasible. Blackburn arranged for our meeting with the JCS on 16 September 1970. We indicated the mission was feasible, outlined our concept and reported we would be ready to execute on the night of 21 October. No changes to our concept were suggested. The plan was approved. We briefed Mr. Laird, Secretary of Defense, on 24 September and obtained his approval without change to our concept. Higher level approval would still be required. On 8 October we briefed the plan at the White House. It was presented to the National Security Advisor, Dr. Henry Kissinger, and Brig General Alexander Haig, his military assistant. We received an enthusiastic response. I indicated that final approval would be necessary within the next 24 hours in order to execute on 21 October. Kissinger responded that it would not be possible to get President Nixon's approval by the next evening because he was not available, but that he was confident we would have it in time to make our next "window" which was 21 November. The delay was a disappointment largely because of constant concern about an intelligence compromise. On the plus side was an extra 30 days available for additional rehearsals, more intelligence, plan refinement and possible equipment improvements. We made numerous refinements during the extra 30 day period. The two most important were adding the FLIR (Forward Looking Infra Red) equipment on the MC-130 and obtaining a suitable night sight for the weapons. Dr. Cataldo refined his plans for providing care for the rescued POWs, who were expected to be in a debilitated condition.

We received authorization to visit COMUSMACV, General Creighton Abrams, and his Air Deputy, General Lucius Clay, Jr., on 1 November 1970. Simons, Blackburn and I flew to Saigon for this purpose. We stopped in Hawaii enroute and re-briefed Admiral John McCain (CINCPAC). The plan was well received by Abrams and Clay. They assured their full support.

Next, Simons and I made arrangements to confer with the U.S. Navy Commander of Task Force 77, which operated in the Tonkin Gulf. We visited Admiral Fred Bardshar on the flagship Oriskany. We briefed the Admiral on our project and solicited his participation. We requested that concurrent with the raiding force approaching the Hanoi area from a westerly direction, he launch a force from the carriers and make a feint toward the North Vietnamese coast. The purpose was to deceive the air defense system of North Vietnam. Such a raid, which would appear on their radar, would convince them that an attack from the east was imminent and cause them to be unaware of our raid approaching at low level from the west. The admiral agreed.

DEPLOYMENT

On 10 November the two MC-130s departed from Eglin-destination Takhli, Thailand. Transportation to move the task force and its equipment for the mission was arranged personally between me and General Jack Catton Commander, of the Military Airlift Command. Transport consisted of four C-141s. They departed Eglin on 14 November and arrived at Takhli two days later. By 17 November the force had closed at Takhli. A CIA operated secure compound was made available. It was here that final preparations were made.

F-105 Wild Weasel aircraft were added with the mission of engaging surface to air missiles (SAM's) should

those batteries become active. F-4s were added to provide protection against possible MIG interference. The F-105s were from a unit at Korat, the F-4s from Ubon and the A-1Es were based at Nakhon Phanom. All bases were in Thailand. KC-135 tankers were provided by a SAC unit at Utapao, Thailand, a base south of Bangkok. The helicopters originated from various bases and were brought to Udorn and prepared for the mission.

The CIA compound at Takhli became a beehive of activity. Weapons and other equipment checks were carefully conducted. Ammunition was issued. Simons, Sydnor and Meadows made the final selection of the force numbers. Of the original 100 SF members of the force, 56 were selected for the mission. This was unwelcome news for the 44 trained and ready, but not selected. It was known from the beginning that the size of the force would be limited to only the number considered essential for the task.

The "Red Rocket" message was received. This meant that President Nixon had given his final approval to launch the mission. The major decision, which was mine to make, was when to launch. The planned date of, late the night of, November 21st now appeared to be in jeopardy. A typhoon in the area of the Philippines and moving slowly toward the mainland was forecast to bring bad weather to North Vietnam by the night of the 21st. The weather over the Tonkin Gulf would certainly be such to prevent the US Navy from launching the diversionary force. The weather enroute to and at the objective area would be unsuitable. It was a grim situation.

Keith Grimes, the task force weather officer, and weather support personnel from the 1st Weather Wing exhaustively analyzed the weather patterns. They predicted formation of a high pressure area over Vietnam and the Tonkin Gulf which would dominate the weather conditions and provide suitable mission conditions prior to arrival of the typhoon weather. The good weather, however, would prevail on 20 November--not 21 November. I made the decision to advance mission launch by 24 hours. Thus, D-day became 20 November instead of 21 November as previously planned. I informed all participants (US Navy and all supporting activities) and Admirals Moorer and McCain. Weather conditions confirmed that the decision was a correct one.

EXECUTION

Final briefings were conducted on 20 November. All were told the exact location of the objective area and that the latest information indicated between 70 and 80 POWs should be at that location -- the Son Tay Prison. While we were confident that the plan had not been compromised, we would not be certain until we made the landing. If the enemy had foreknowledge of our plan, the reception would not be a pleasant one. even though the task force was small, it was extremely potent for its size. While it could have been overwhelmed by a much larger force laying in waiting, the enemy would have paid a heavy price. Escape and evasion procedures were thoroughly covered. Satisfied that the mission force was fully in a "go" position, I proceeded to Monkey Mountain where a staff had arranged for a command post from which the entire operation could be controlled. communications were available to all elements including US Navy Carrier Task Force, as well as to Admirals McCain and Moore. With me at the command post were Morris, Peshkin, Newman, Knops and Willett. Kraljev and Ropka were at Takhli and Udorn, respectively, and immediately available on direct communication lines. Frisbie, with a small staff, was airborne in a radio relay aircraft that could function as an alternate command post if I were to lose my communications capability. An intelligence staff member, Art Andraitus, was in Japan monitoring the SR-71 photo results of a mission during late 20 November. He

reported to me that the photo Intel was positive (signs of habitation - vehicle tracks, etc.).

For the troops 20 November was a day for "crew rest."

Dr. Joe Cataldo issued sleeping pills. At 2200 hours the men boarded a C-130 and left Takhli for Udorn where helicopters were waiting. Upon landing at Udorn the men transferred to three of the helicopters - two HH-53s and one HH-3 - carefully rechecking all the equipment that had been deemed necessary for the mission that lay ahead. At 2318 hours the first helo launched; at 2325 hours the last helo launched. They were led by two HC-130 refuelers enroute to an air refueling area over Northern Laos.

Jay Stayer recalls - "We had a last minute 'huddle' type briefing to check weather and to go over the radio-out procedures for the 'umpteenth' time, and one of the mission planners pulled the cover off a large sign that said, 'F--COMMUNISM.' We all cheered and the tension seemed to subside for most of us. We boarded C-130s for the short trip to Udorn Air Base. I remember I was in a sort of a slow-motion dream-state as I disembarked with my personal gear and walked by my squadron friends, all standing out on the porches and wherever there was a place to watch. They all spoke a quiet word of greeting and wished us good luck, but none asked what we were up to. They had been ordered to stand down a couple of days or so before, to ensure their aircraft were in top mechanical condition for us to use. Even the tower operator was ordered to ignore our taxi-out without radio transmissions.

I climbed aboard into the left seat of Apple Two and worked through the starting checklist with the aircraft commander, Lt Colonel Jack Allison, our flight mechanic and the two pararescuemen.

Just as we had practiced, the formation lead HC-130P refueler aircraft, Lime One, got off on time, as did the rest of us, the HH-3 Banana, and five Apple HH-53s. We routinely fell into the seven ship formation, three helicopters stacking high on each side of the leading HC-130 at about 1500 feet AGL. There was a partial moon and some clouds that we climbed through, when suddenly the call came to "break, 'break, 'break!', indicating that someone had lost sight of the formation lead and we were to execute the formation break-up procedure.

Each helicopter turned to a predetermined heading and climbed to a predetermined altitude for one minute and then returned to the original landing. The effect was a very widely separated formation, each helicopter 500 ft above the other and at varying distances away from the lead HC-130. I could see other members of the formation flying in and out of the clouds, and I thought we had blown the mission we had hardly started. Apparently a strange airplane had almost flown through the formation and someone had called the lost contact procedure to avoid a mid-air collision. As it turned out, our planning for such possible events, and the training for such, resulted in a rather routine formation break and with a subsequent rejoin being completed successfully.

In the meantime, we had all topped off our fuel tanks from the lead HC-130 and had quite deftly exchanged formation leads from him to the just-arrived, blacked-out C-130 with all the fancy electronic gear."

Bill Kornitzer, A/C of the lead HC-130, "Lime One," recalls "Our mission was to launch from Udorn, join up with the six helicopters and lead them to the North Vietnam border. After joining up we refueled the five HH-53s and the HH-3. This was done in total silence without any incidents. The HH-3 stayed close behind our left wing in order to maintain the speed required by the rest of formation. After leaving the helicopters for their final

assault, we immediately returned to Udorn for refueling. We were to refuel as soon as possible and return to Northern Laos area to provide air refueling and search and rescue support as needed."

Happily, the weather in the refueling area was clear. All refuelings ere accomplished without difficulty. All six helos then joined formation with an MC-130 Combat Talon for the low altitude flight toward North Vietnam. The area over Laos is a mountainous area requiring precise navigation by the MC-130 crew.

In the meantime the five A-1s had departed Nakhon Phanom and joined formation with the second MC-130 Combat Talon. This formation was in close proximity of the MC-130/helo flight. All were enroute at low altitude for Son Tay.

Close air support was the job of the A-1s because they were ideally suited. They had long endurance capability, carried a big load of ordnance and their relatively low speed permitted small orbits which would keep them close by overhead should assistance be needed on short notice.

Ten F-4s had taken off from Ubon to provide a MIG air patrol and five F-105 Wild Weasels had launched from Korat to provide protection from the SAM sites. The F-4s and F-105s would be flying at a high altitude providing cover over the general area and would not interfere in any way with the primary force.

The Navy force launched on time with a total of 59 sorties. As the primary force reached the Laos/North Vietnam border, the enemy radar's became aware of the Navy force coming from over the Tonkin Gulf. The diversionary raid was having the desired effects. The presence of the Navy on enemy radar caused near panic conditions within the North Vietnamese defense centers. It became obvious that the North Vietnamese total concern was directed eastward. Our raiding force, coming from the west, in effect had a free ride.

Meanwhile, in Apple Two, as **Jay Strayer** vividly remembers - "Tension was building up by this time, as we neared the IP for the final approach to the camp. I had done most of the flying up to this point, and Jack Allison took over the controls for the final phase. I in turn picked up the navigation duties during this critical phase of the mission.

As we had rehearsed so many times, the lead C-130 led us over the last mountain range and down to 500 ft above the ground. At the IP, they, along with Apple Four and Five, popped up to 1,500 ft to fly directly for the camp. A single radio transmission with the last vector heading to the camp was made by the C-130's navigator and we continued on, maintaining a disciplined radio silence.

Now we were only four - Apple Three in the lead with the

HH-3, Apple's One and Two following in trail, with 45-second separations between. I was particularly interested in this phase, for I had done the procedural planning for getting us separated in a manner that would allow room for each to "do his thing," while at the same time not delaying the following bird's initial assault details."

Upon reaching the IP (Initial Point), the MC-130 climbed to 1,500 feet. The 130's mission at this point was to drop flares over the Son Tay Prison. Helos 4 and 5 were to provide a backup and were to drop flares should the C-130 flares not be effective. The flares worked as intended. The helos made a left turn and proceeded to a pre-selected landing area which was on an island in a large lake. There they would wait, hopefully to be

called to move to Son Tay to pick up some POWs. The C-130 made a right turn and dropped fire fight simulators (deception) and napalm to create a fire as an anchor point for the A-1s. The C-130 then left the area for an orbit point over Northern Laos. Immediately after the flares illuminated the prison compound HH-53 Apple Three, under the command of Marty Donohue, flew low over the prison firing at the guard towers with his Gatling machine guns. The plan called for neutralizing the guard towers to eliminate that potential source of enemy opposition.

Immediately following Donohue's pass the HH-3, whose crew was Herb Kalen, Herb Zender and Leroy Wright and carrying Meadows with his 13-man assault force, landed in a relatively small space inside the prison walls. So far all is going strictly according to plan and precisely on time.

The landing was a hard one, but successful. Rotors contacted some of the tall trees which bordered one side of the landing area. It was anticipated that damage would occur and the plan provided for the HH-3 to be considered a loss. By means of an explosive charge with a timing device, it was to be destroyed upon departure of our troops from the compound. The hard landing caused a fire extinguisher to dislodge and crashed against Sgt LeRoy Wright (HH-3 Engineer), fracturing an ankle. While undoubtedly this caused severe pain, the flow of adrenaline apparently was such that Sgt Wright ignored the pain and continued with his duties to perform as a member of Meadows' assault force. (Sgt Wright was later awarded the Air Force Cross by President Nixon).

Dick Meadows and his highly trained and rehearsed assault force, including the helicopter Air Force crew members, went into action immediately. With bullhorns they announced that it was a rescue raiding party and were there to bring out the POWs. North Vietnamese military personnel exited the buildings in various states of undress and fired their weapons against the intruders. The raiders, however, having the benefit of initiative, a rehearsed plan of action and not suffering from the element of shock that was imposed on the defenders quickly disposed of the camp contingent. Meadow's primary concern now was to enter the buildings to search for Americans held prisoner by the North Vietnamese. The timed explosive charge was placed in the HH-3 to ensure its destruction upon departure of the raiders. With the use of another explosive device a hole was blown in the southwest corner of the prison wall. The raiders and the POWs would exit through this hole. Col Bud Sydnor's command post would be established just outside the wall at the site of the hole.

Simultaneous with the landing of the assault force, HH-53s Apple One and Two were to land opposite the south side and immediately fan out and conduct a search of all the buildings in search of Americans and to prevent reinforcements from interfering in any way with the rescue effort. Apple One, with Simons and 21 raiders aboard, mistakenly landed at a site enclosed by a fence that presented an appearance not unlike the Son Tay compound. It was approximately 200 meters south of the objective area.

A fire fight immediately ensued where the estimate of enemy killed ran as high as 200 -- a number which may be somewhat exaggerated. This raiding element was on the ground for not more than five minutes when the mistake was realized. Simons and his men re-boarded the helicopter and moved to the correct position at the Son Tay Prison.

Jay Strayer from Apple Two observed - "As we neared our objective I sensed we were not going the right way to the Son Tay camp, and mentioned it more than once to Jack. Quite suddenly I was sure of it; we were about to land at the military camp to the south of Son Tay! The amazing thing to me at the time, and remains so, is that no one had the forethought to break radio silence and say so! Indeed, Apple Three had almost taken the

camp under fire, discovered his error in time, and turned north to the correct place."

Warner Britton in Apple One remembers - "I saw the flares dropped by the C-130 ignite and was impressed by the surrealistic appearance of the illuminated landscape. This light enabled me to see Donohue (Apple Three) hover across the building complex toward which we were heading. I noticed that he didn't fire as scheduled and commented on this to Montrem. Then Kalen followed the first aircraft and he did fire. That was the last Montrem and I saw, as just after Kalen crossed the buildings, we were landing on a heading slightly away from the buildings, so that our troops could proceed out the rear ramp and have their objective in sight. We had no idea we had landed in the wrong place until we had taken off and turned toward the holding area. My memory of what happened next differs slightly from that of some others. I believe that we took off, flew to our holding area about a minute away and landed. We returned immediately when Donohue, in Apple Three, told us we had landed in the wrong place. We were also in contact with Col Simon's group. Others, including Montrem, believe that we returned to pick them up without landing at the holding area. In any case, very little time passes before we were back on the ground at the so-called "school."

In the meantime, Jack Allison in Apple Two carrying Bud Sydnor and his force, had landed at the correct predetermined spot and realizing that Apple One was not with him immediately put an alternate plan in effect. Within a few minutes, however, he returned to the primary plan when the erring force was in place.

Jack Allison, in the holding area, recalls - "Sitting in the holding area waiting to be recalled to pick up the POWs and ground forces, Apple flight was treated to a spectacular fireworks display. 14 to 16 SAMs were fired at the F-105 "Wild Weasel" aircraft, although one was at such a low angle, one of the departing helicopters took evasive action. One SAM was observed to explode and spray fuel over Firebird Three. The aircraft descended in a ball of fire and appeared to be a loss. However the fire blew out and the crew continued with the mission. Another SAM exploded near Firebird Five, inflicting damage to his flight controls and fuel system. The crew later bailed out over the Plaine des Jarres and were picked up at first light by Apple Four and Five."

While all the helicopters were engaged with the compound and A-1s, which had arrived with the second C-130, were doing their thing.

Bob Senko in Peach Two recollects - "Ed Gochenaur and I were in Peach Two. We were on Major Rhein's wing. We had an automatic radio frequency change when we entered the target area. Only one aircraft forgot, and that was me. But we were able to keep up with what was going on visually. Both Goch and I knew right away that none of the helos had gone to the wrong area, but were pretty helpless to do much other than support the troops as best we could. Everything got better organized for us when I got the frequency right. It got better for the troops when they got to the right area.

Because they were out of position, we got called to pay close attention to the road from the south, to make sure no-one took advantage of our situation. When we got the order to shut down the foot bridge between the Citadel and Son Tay, lead and Goch got lined up headed east to take the bridge out with a couple of 100# Willie-Pete bombs. I hollered at Goch that he was too shallow, but he let the WPs go anyway and they were pretty short. Fortunately, his run in line was across a chemical factory (if that was what it was) and he greased it. There was a beautiful display of different color flames, with the bright green ones going up way over the altitude we were working. Major Rhein's bombs were pretty good and the combination allowed us to get the job done. On - by the way - the reason Goch was so low on his run in was that the SAMs had already started.

They seemed to be pretty random at first but slowly we saw that they were at least aimed in the general direction of Son Tay and were being fired on a very low trajectory. So we stayed as low as we could. I don't think any were actually targeted specifically on us. But they got our attention and we stayed pretty well in the weeds. It wasn't too hard since we had about 15-20 percent moonlight to work with and the target area was pretty well marked by the small arms going off.

We were circling the camp about 100-200 AGL and when we were on the north side, we'd drop down to water level over the Red River. Again, because some of the ground troops were not in position to blow the bridge on the north side of the camp, we got called to take it out. Since we couldn't get enough altitude to drop any heavy stuff, we started strafing it. I don't know how productive that was, but I'm pretty sure we kept any traffic off the bridge even if we didn't drop it. When the ground guys wrapped it up, we dumped our left over stuff in the Red River and headed home. One other thing I remember vividly is that when the helos went in, they were to take out the guard towers with their mini-guns (7.62). We were only to help as a last resort. When they opened fire, either they hit something explosive, or the sheer number of tracer rounds caught the bamboo/wood towers on fire. Actually, it looked like they exploded. It was amazing, certainly stopping any reaction from those towers."

The entire camp was searched. All North Vietnamese forces were annihilated and the devastatingly disappointing discovery was made that there were no Americans at the camp. The coded message - NEGATIVE ITEMS- was received in my command post. In disbelief I hoped that the message had become garbled in transmission. Simons and I had previously discussed this unlikely probability but knew that the possibility existed. The raiding party was on the ground at Son Tay for 29 minutes, within one minute of the planned time of 30 minutes. We experienced no losses. Sgt Wright suffered a broken ankle and Sgt Murray suffered a bullet wound on the inside of a thigh, a minor injury. The estimate of enemy killed was determined to be about 50.

The helicopters were called in and the raiding party went aboard. After every man was accounted for, they launched for the long ride back to Udorn. The SA-2 missile sites became active and were engaged by the F-105 Wild Weasels. A missile hit and severely damaged an F-105. There was a loss of fuel and an effort was made to return to the KC-135 tankers on an orbit over Laos. A flame-out was experienced prior to contact with the tankers and the crew of two, Major Kilgus and Capt Lowry, ejected - landing in a mountainous area, uninjured. The progress of this emergency was monitored at my command post. Location of the downed airmen was relayed to the crew of HH-53s Apple Four and Five, Lt Col Brown and Major Kenneth Murphy, with instructions to search for and pick up the F-105 crew members. The pickup was successfully accomplished after more helo air refuelings and flare drops; all returned to Udorn safely. At Udorn I met a dejected force of raiders. They were disappointed because our hopes of returning with POWs were dashed. We had failed. This thoroughly dedicated group expressed the belief we should return the next night and search for the POWs. For many reasons, this could not be done.

POW CAMP PICTURES



ALCATRAZ

BUFFALO HUNTER Recon Photo
AQM-34L or M Remotely Piloted Vehicle
Courtesy 432 Tactical Drone Group



CAMP FAITH

AQM-34L or M Remotely Piloted Vehicle
Courtesy 432 Tactical Drone Group

HANOI HILTON



An aerial, black and white photograph of a mountain retreat. The central focus is a large, rectangular building complex with several smaller structures and a courtyard. The buildings are surrounded by dense vegetation and trees. The terrain is rugged, with steep slopes and a network of paths or roads. The overall scene is a high-angle view of a secluded mountainous area.

MOUNTAIN RETREAT



BUFFALO HUNTER Recon Photo
QM-34L or M Remotely Piloted Vehicle
courtesy 432 Tactical Drone Group

PLANTATION



SON TAY

