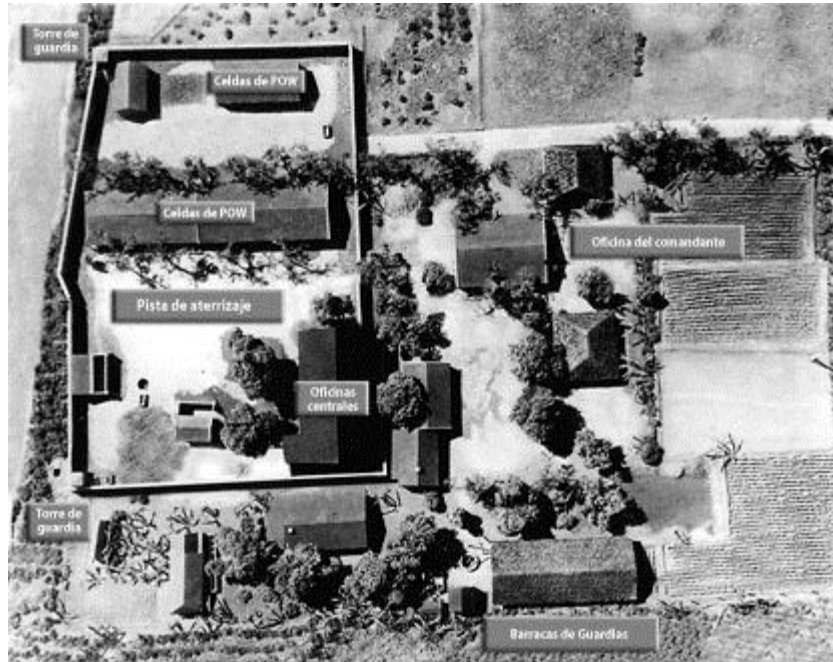


The Son Tay Raid



Son Tay was located about 23 miles from Hanoi. By the spring of 1970, there were more than 450 known American POWs in North Vietnam and another 970 American servicemen who were missing in action. With the entire compound measuring only 140 x 185 feet, the “landing Zone” targeted for the HH-3’s crash-landing point was little more than the size of a volley-bal court.

By 1970, the US course in Vietnam had been set toward disengagement and turning the war over to the South Vietnamese. President Richard M. Nixon, nevertheless, was determined to extract the country from Southeast Asia with dignity. In this regard, one of the few issues which resonated with the American public was the plight of US prisoners of war (POW) held in North Vietnam. At this time over 350 American servicemen were in captivity in the north, most of them aircrew.

On the night of the 20th/21st of November 1970, the North Vietnamese were treated to an aggressive demonstration of Pres. Nixon's concern for the welfare of US prisoners - the raid on the Son Tay POW camp. Although we rescued no POWs (the enemy had moved them to other facilities), the raid serves as a model of a well-planned and -executed joint special operation. Indeed, Son Tay stands in stark contrast to the dismal effort mounted to free hostages in Iran 10 years later. Marked by outstanding organization, planning, training, and unity of effort, "Operation Kingpin" badly embarrassed the North Vietnamese.



Reconnaissance photos taken by SR-71 "Blackbirds" aircraft revealed that Son Tay "was active".

Overhead imagery from USAF SR-71 "Blackbird" reconnaissance aircraft indicated the probable presence of US POWs at the compound at Son Tay, North Vietnam, some 20 miles from Hanoi. When this was brought to the attention of Brig Gen Donald Blackburn, special assistant for counterinsurgency and special activities in Washington and an old army hand at special warfare, he championed the idea for a raid.



**Brigadier General
Donald D. Blackburn**

Nixon had been looking for an opportunity to rescue POWs, both for its intrinsic value and to "make a statement" to the North Vietnamese. When Blackburn briefed his idea to Gen Earle Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, it was well received and he was given the go-ahead for a feasibility study. Although there had been many previous attempts to free captives

within South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, this would be the first attempt in North Vietnam itself. After a favorable outcome by the feasibility study, meticulous planning began with the blessing of the president.

Most importantly, the operation remained directly subordinate to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, bypassing the bureaucracy in Southeast Asia. Brig Gen Leroy Manor, commander of USAF Special Operations at Eglin Air Force Base (AFB), Florida, and the joint task force commander, wielded a very free hand. His deputy, Col Arthur "Bull" Simons, a long-time Army veteran of "spec ops" would go in on the ground with the raiding party, commanded by Lt Col Elliott Sydnor.

Planning

By the beginning of August, 1970, Joint Contingency Task Group "Ivory Coast" was hard at work planning the raid. The era of the 1960s had left the US military well-prepared to conduct special operations. Army Special Forces (the "Green Berets") were at the top of their form in Southeast Asia, and USAF special operations and combat search & rescue units were highly experienced in ingress and egress from "hot" areas with the HH-53 "Jolly Green Giant" helicopter, backed up by the A-1 "Skyraider" attack aircraft. Redundancy was built into the plan, on the supposition that anything could go wrong and the mission would still succeed.



Vietnam map

The Army provided the assault force of 100 men, which was later reduced to 56. The Navy committed 59 aircraft from three carriers of Task Force 77 in the Tonkin Gulf to a planned diversion in the direction of Haiphong, to draw the attention of the North Vietnamese air-defense network. The Air Force organized its mission aircraft into robust packages: 1) five HH-53 helicopters and one HH-3 (which was to crash-land the *rescue team* in the middle of the prison compound) carrying the assault troops and 2) five A-1E attack aircraft providing fire support and electronic jamming. Additional aircraft were tasked to provide top cover, aerial refueling, radar coverage, enemy radio monitoring, and command and control relay



"Barbara" code name of a scale model of the Son Tay compound built by the Central Intelligence Agency and used in the training of the Son Tay assault force at Egling Air Force Base, Florida.

Training

Training for the raid began on 20 August 1970 at Eglin AFB. The Central Intelligence Agency provided a scale model of the prison and surrounding buildings, and engineers constructed a life-size mockup of wood and canvas at the training site which they disassembled before Cosmos 355 (a Soviet spy satellite) made its twice-daily crossings over the area.

The rigorous air training involved dangerous dissimilar aircraft formation flying at night. Varying speeds and flight characteristics of the mission aircraft left no room for error, but the professionalism of the crews overcame all obstacles, mechanical or natural. Full-dress rehearsals proceeded under operational conditions until the team was 95 percent confident of mission success. Barely three months had transpired from the time Manor had been summoned to the Pentagon until the force deployed to Thailand (12-17 November).

With all elements of the raid primed and ready to strike, the force was given the "go" from Washington, unaware that conditions had changed on the objective. Further aerial reconnaissance had given strong indications that the POW population at Son Tay, expected to be over 50, had been drastically reduced or removed altogether. In fact, all the prisoners had been

relocated to the infamous "Hanoi Hilton" prison compound. Not even General Manor, who had set up to operate from a ground station near Da Nang, South Vietnam, knew that the "intelligence picture" had changed.

Execution (Operation Kingpin)

As darkness fell on the 20th of November, an armada of aircraft positioned themselves to support the strike. General Manor's command post was linked to the raiders via an EC-135 and two EC-130E electronic / command control aircraft. All radio transmissions were monitored by an RC-135M, and the aerial "threat picture" was kept by an EC-121T airborne warning and control aircraft. Ten F-4s flew combat air patrol in the objective area, supported by five F-105 Wild Weasels for suppressing any surface-to-air missiles (SAM). The "fast movers" were refueled by 10 KC-135 aerial tankers. The Navy launched its diversionary feint which, from all accounts, was entirely successful in diverting the attention of North Vietnam's integrated air defense system away from the raiding force.

The raiders' helicopters and A-1s took off from Udorn and Nakhon Phanom, Thailand, respectively and headed for the rendezvous with their special operations tankers over Laos. After refueling (at low altitude under radio silence) from separate HC-130Ps, each group then followed its own MC-130E "Combat Talon" special operations aircraft to Son Tay. The Combat Talons then broke off in the target area to drop flares and diversionary ordnance.

At 2:18 a.m. on the morning of the 21st of November, the raiders hit Son Tay like a sledgehammer. While HH-53s strafed guard towers and barracks, the HH-3 successfully made a hard landing in the prison compound. The rescue team rushed out and began checking cells for POWs. They came up empty.

Meanwhile, Simons's helicopter landed at the wrong compound, a barracks known as "the secondary school" to intelligence. As at the prison compound, Simons and his group achieved complete surprise and killed many startled defenders. It was fortunate that the mistake was made, because Simons eliminated the only viable North Vietnamese counterattack force that could have interfered with the raid. Within minutes his team redeployed to the prison site.

While the rescue team confirmed their initial disappointment at finding no POWs, other raiders secured a perimeter, and called in fire support from the circling A-1 Skyraiders to "hold the ring" against slowly responding North Vietnamese troops in the vicinity. Simons signaled the raiders to evacuate the objective. The HH-53s retrieved the raiding force and headed south back toward Thailand.



Racing from the glare of a North Vietnamese surface-to-air missile exploding overhead, the last Kingpin HH-53 escapes the deserted POW camp moments before a demolition charge inside HH-3 "Banana 1" explodes

During the operation, a SAM downed one of the Wild Weasels, but the crew was picked up without incident. The force had achieved total surprise, completely overpowered the garrison, and evacuated the area one minute ahead of schedule. Only one raider sustained wounds. The North Vietnamese had received a black eye, and US POWs in Hanoi knew it and took heart.



Colonel Arthur D. "Bull" Simons, answers questions about the Son Tay POW Rescue Raid from the Pentagon Press Corps

In Retrospect

The effort against the Son Tay POW complex was an excellent example of the masterful execution of a joint special operation. The raiding force was chosen from men who were

experienced members of elite units which had proven their value in combat. The command and control organization was streamlined for efficiency and security, unlike previous operations run through the cumbersome apparatus in theater. The cooperation between the military services was admirable. Planning was meticulous and provided flexibility to deal with unexpected circumstances. Training was thorough and realistic – accomplished under conditions that would be similar to those faced during the operation. Execution, while not flawless, overcame every obstacle and accomplished the mission without loss of life to the raiding force. Although the problem of compartmented intelligence prevented the raiders from knowing that they were most likely going into an empty prison, they believed that the effort was worth it anyway. Unfortunately, two decades would have to pass before US special operations forces were capable, on a permanent basis, to carry out raids like Son Tay.

[Source: <http://www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/apjinternational/apj-s/2006/1tri06/kampseng.html> Nov 2012 ++]