

Son Tay raid remembered nearly four decades later

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11/20/2007 - **HURLBURT FIELD, Fla.** -- Some 37 years ago a joint raider team of Army Special Forces Soldiers and Air Force pilots and crewmembers approached the hamlet of Son Tay in North Vietnam at 2:30 a.m. Nov. 21, 1970. Flying over the hills at treetop level, the helicopters and their escorts could see the yellow lights of Hanoi winking in the cool night air. Suddenly, they were over the camp at Son Tay and the sky, which had been bathed in the pale light of a waning moon, exploded in brilliant light as flares and muzzle flashes filled the night sky.

The escort aircraft fired on pre-selected targets and dropped fire-fight simulators in several locations near the camp. Simultaneously, the lead helicopter passed over the camp and destroyed two guard towers with a stream of bullets. Seconds later, another helicopter executed a planned crash-landing into the middle of the camp as its blades chewed into a tree. The helicopter hit the ground with a thud, and the heavily armed raiders burst from the crippled machine with chainsaws, axes and bolt cutters in tow. The liberators began fighting their way to the prisoners' cells. Amid the confusion of combat, a blaring bullhorn announced that Americans had landed and were here to rescue the prisoners of war.

The prison came alive, cracking with fire of automatic weapons. A large explosion blew a hole in the prison wall as raiders from a third helicopter, which landed outside the camp, made their entrance. Meanwhile, another helicopter landed at a location that looked very similar to the Son Tay POW camp. Within seconds of touchdown, the disembarked raiders found a fire-fight unfolding all around them. Four violent ground battles were now raging within the Son Tay area: one at the prison, another at an undisclosed location and two faked by air delivered fire-fight simulators. Before the helicopter could get back to pick up the force deposited by mistake, the raiders killed more than 100 enemy soldiers without any raider casualties while the location burned like a roman candle.

Back at the prison camp, nearly 60 enemy guards lay dead or wounded as the raiders swarmed over and through the camp like robots. As the raiders broke into one cell after another, they reported "negative items" -- no prisoners. After the last cell was opened and the other cells checked again, the mission commander was informed that the search was complete. The raiders were stunned to find that the prison was totally empty of POWs. Their departure was as quick and ghost-like, leaving behind a wake of death and destruction as their calling card. However, they left empty-handed. The Son Tay Raid was over.

Although nearly flawless in planning and execution, the raid failed in its primary mission because the prisoners had been moved some months earlier. Despite this, it was immediately apparent the raiders had performed excellently. When compared to most similar operations, before and since, the Son Tay Raid was a masterpiece of the deep penetration raid.



Code-named "Barbara," U.S. intelligence built this scale model of the Son Tay prisoner-of-war compound as a training aid for the raiders. (Courtesy photo)

The raiders practiced for the Son Tay assault at Duke Field. A full scale mock-up of the camp was built just beyond the concrete buildings at Test Site C-2.

Preparation for the mission took place at the Duke site for several reasons: it was remote and had no traffic; the temperatures and humidity in the Florida panhandle were similar to North Vietnam; and many of the resources needed for the troops were located nearby. Five HH-53 helicopters from Eglin Air Force Base were utilized as well as five A-1E Skyraiders from Hurlburt Field.

After months of preparation, the raiders began their mission by departing Udorn, Thailand, late in the evening of Nov. 20, 1970. The long three-hour flight had been uneventful considering the six helicopters were penetrating one of the most dangerous and sophisticated air defense environments in the world.

The ground force consisted of three teams: an assault group, a support group, and a command and security group. The 14-man assault group, commanded by Capt. Richard "Dick" Meadows, would crash their helicopter in the center of the prison and take out the guards before freeing the prisoners. The 22-man support group, commanded by Col. Arthur "Bull" Simons, would blow a hole in the compound's south wall and assist in getting the prisoners out. The 20-man command and security group, commanded by Lt. Col. Elliot Snyder, would land near the compound and establish security near possible enemy avenues of approach. Contingency plans - green, blue and red - were developed if any one of the teams were shot down or put out of action in some way.

The plan was not executed flawlessly: Colonel Simons' helicopter landed at a similar looking compound, a secondary school, approximately 400 meters south of the Son Tay camp. The school had North Vietnamese and other soldiers. The colonel and his men attacked, and in a hail of gunfire, set the school ablaze before remounting their helicopter and landing at the correct landing zone near Son Tay.

Meanwhile, Captain Meadows' assault team crash-landed in the compound and immediately began cutting into cells. Colonel Snyder's command and security group implemented contingency plan green and took over the support group's role of cutting through the compound wall while still providing security for the LZ.

After only 10 minutes on the ground it became apparent that all the planning that led to the violent and successful surprise assault was for naught; there were no prisoners at Son Tay. The raiders searched throughout the compound and spent 28 minutes on the ground before departing without any prisoners. Later intelligence reports indicated the POWs had been moved months earlier, perhaps as early as June 1970.

Despite some widespread criticisms of the intelligence systems and of the possible political consequences of the raid in North Vietnam, all parties, then and now, reserved their highest praise for the raiders.

Perhaps the highest praise came from the POWs themselves after their return to the U.S. Many of them cited the fact that the raid had a highly positive effect on their morale.

The senior U.S. officer in the Hanoi Hilton, Col. John Flynn, called the Son Tay raid "the most magnificent operation of the war ... there was a wave of exuberance. Our morale soared." The POWs no longer felt abandoned or forgotten.

Also, as an unintended consequence of the raid, most of the POWs were consolidated at the Hoa Lo prison in Hanoi where the prisoners, some for the first time, were able to share their experiences and have some measure of comradeship and organization.

One POW wrote years later, "the raid so frightened the Vietnamese that they decided to bring all the prisoners to Hanoi."

We can still learn from Operation Kingpin, as the raid was finally codenamed. More importantly, we should remember it as part of our special operations heritage.

It's important that each of us take a moment to reflect on the raider's actions and remember our past.