

1970 (cont)

- 1 Sep 70 (cont) and Traffic (MAST) Program. This program provided emergency transportation from remote areas for victims of accidents whose lives were endangered.
- 28 Oct 70 HH-3 aircrew from the 31st ARR Squadron saved 39 persons from the disabled Chinese tanker *Tong Lam*, aground on the Scarborough Reef, 150 miles west of Clark AB, Republic of the Philippines.
- 20 Nov-21 Nov 70 Raid on Son Tay Prison. Forty-two men assigned to ARRS, manning one HH-3, five HH-53s, and two HC-130Ps, participated in the daring raid on the POW compound at Son Tay, about 23 miles west of Hanoi, Vietnam. These men trained intensively with other Army and Air Force personnel at Eglin AFB, Florida, between August and November 1970. On 20 and 21 November 1970 the raid was carried out as planned, but no POWs were found. One HH-3 was lost due to impact with a tree at the prison, and Technical Sergeant Leroy Wright broke his foot. All personnel returned safely to Udorn AB, Thailand. However, the HH-53s stopped briefly in Laos to pick up two F-105 crewmen whose plane had been shot down by the enemy. Later, five of the ARRS participants received the Air Force Cross: Lieutenant Colonels Warner A. Britton and John V. Allison, Majors Herbert D. Kalen and



President Richard M. Nixon congratulates Technical Sergeant Leroy M. Wright after a presentation ceremony at the White House on 25 November 1970. At rear are Sergeant First Class Tyrone Adderly, United States Army, and Colonel Arthur D. ("Bull") Simons, United States Army.

1970 (cont)

20 Nov- Frederic M. Donohue, and Technical Sergeant Leroy M. Wright.
 21 Nov 70 The other 23 helicopter crewmen received the Silver Star.
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1971

10 Mar- Operational Transpacific Ferrying of Helicopters. In a mass
 24 May 71 transpacific ferrying deployment and redeployment of HH-53 helicopters between the United States and Southeast Asia, ARRS personnel flew five HH-53Cs from Eglin AFB, Florida, to Udorn Airfield, Thailand, and redeployed two HH-53Bs from Da Nang AB, Vietnam, to Hamilton AFB, California. This movement was planned in four separate flights, two westbound and two eastbound. However, the fourth (eastbound) flight did not take place due to the war-weary condition of the older HH-53s. Intermediate stops along the transpacific route were: McChord AFB, Washington; Elmendorf AFB, Alaska; Shemya AFB, Alaska; Misawa AB, Japan; Kadena AB, Okinawa; and Clark AB, Republic of the Philippines. All flights received en route refueling from ARRS HC-130P/Ns.

1 Apr 71 The 1550th Aircrew Training and Test (ATT) Wing was activated at Hill AFB, Utah, and assigned to ARRS. The primary mission of the new wing was to operate a consolidated transition and combat crew training school for all Air Force helicopter crewmen in concert with a specialized training school for HC-130 crewmen, pararescuemen, and firefighters.

25 Jun 71 The 39th ARR Wing moved from Richards-Gebaur AFB, Missouri, to Eglin AFB, Florida.

30 Jun 71 The Air Rescue and Recovery Training Center (ARRTC) at Eglin AFB, Florida, was inactivated. These training functions were acquired by the new 1550th ATT Wing at Hill AFB, Utah.

15 Sep- ARRS HH-43s airlifted 91 persons to high ground when Hurricane
 16 Sep 71 Fern caused flash floods in the Rio Salado Valley, approximately 45 miles south of Nuevo Laredo, Texas.

7 Oct 71 Responding to an SOS during Typhoon Elaine, two helicopters from the 31st ARR Squadron at Clark AB, Republic of the Philippines, rescued 25 Hong Kong Chinese from their sinking ship, the *Kee Lung*.

2 Nov- Another Transatlantic Helicopter Flight. ARRS ferried two
 5 Nov 71 HH-53s from Goose AB, Canada, to Woodbridge RAF Base, United Kingdom, with an intermediate stop at Keflavik, Iceland. The flight left Goose AB on 2 November and landed at RAF Woodbridge

Raid on Son Tay

by Kevin Generous

By the spring of 1970, American military disengagement from Southeast Asia was in full swing. But for those 1,463 Americans listed as either prisoners of war or missing in action, there was no scheduled rotation home. As the war wound down, the Pentagon's concern over American POWs held in North Vietnam increased, while Hanoi made obvious its intention to use the POWs as "bargaining chips" at the Paris peace talks—in effect, hostages for continued American withdrawal from Southeast Asia.

Public awareness in the United States over the plight of the POW/MIAs was at an all-time high. Thousands of citizens wore a one-quarter-inch aluminum bracelet inscribed with the name and date of an American POW/MIA and pledged not to remove the bracelet until his liberation. Other Americans launched intense letter-writing campaigns in an attempt to pressure Hanoi for more information and better treatment for the imprisoned Americans.

This sort of activity did not seem enough to American military leaders. The Pentagon had long considered attempting a POW rescue operation that, according to JCS Chairman Admiral Thomas Moorer, could provide a "focal point, something dramatic" that would give the nation a more positive per-

spective on the war. "If we could get 50 or 60 of those boys back in the U.S. and let them tell in their own words what happened to them," Moorer stated, "it would throw a lot of light on the character of North Vietnam."

But a POW raid into North Vietnam would be more than just a Pentagon public relations gimmick; after the release of three Americans by Hanoi in 1969, U.S. military leaders heard firsthand the horror stories of systematic North Vietnamese psychological and physical torture of POWs, confirming what had always been suspected. The tales sufficiently impressed the Joint Chiefs of Staff to order the special assistant for counterinsurgency and special activities (SACSA), Brigadier General Donald Blackburn, to study the possibility of a dramatic POW rescue operation. Such a raid, it was thought, would raise POW morale and force Hanoi to improve treatment for remaining POWs. It would also demonstrate that the U.S. would not stand idly by while its fighting men were abused by a signator of the Geneva Convention.

Blackburn, former commander of MACV-SOG, the special operations group that ran covert cross-border operations, realized the difficulty of a successful raid on a POW camp behind enemy lines. In fact, the U.S. had secretly conducted numerous but mostly unsuccessful POW rescue attempts in South Vietnam. The only American POW freed from a Vietcong camp later died of wounds inflicted by his captors during the rescue. Air force search-and-rescue teams and SOG agents had conducted many quick-in-and-out rescues of downed pilots in North Vietnam, but none to pluck POWs out of prison camps. Even with the full backing of the Pentagon brass and U.S. military resources in Southeast Asia, a rescue raid on a POW camp in the North would be risky, demanding daring speed, perfect execution, and most important, good intelligence. A Joint Contingency Task Group was formed in May 1970. From a number of possible POW camps the group picked Son Tay, some twenty-three miles west of Hanoi. There were said to be fifty-five American captives

there. Photographic intelligence from low-altitude unmanned Buffalo Hunter drones and high-altitude SR-71 strategic reconnaissance aircraft showed signs of life at Son Tay. Although three NVA military installations and 12,000 NVA troops fell within ten kilometers, Son Tay was relatively isolated, and planners felt that a surprise nighttime raid could be executed before the North Vietnamese could react.

The rescue operation, code named Ivory Coast (a name picked at random by a Pentagon computer), was put in the command of air force Brigadier General Leroy J. Manor, chief of the USAF Special Operations Force at Eglin AFB, Florida. Eglin was the home of the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service (ARRS), the elite pararescue organization responsible for rescuing more than 3,800 American pilots and air crews during the Vietnam War. Manor himself had flown 275 combat missions as commander of the 37th Tactical Fighter Wing, based in Phu Cat.

At General Blackburn's insistence, Special Forces Colonel Arthur "Bull" Simons was picked as Manor's deputy and ground commander of the raid. Simons was a legendary figure among the Green Berets, a noted expert on unconventional warfare who had served as a World War II Ranger, as commander of the 1960-61 "White Star" missions that organized the Meo guerrilla tribesmen in Laos, and in Vietnam, as chief of SOG's OPLAN 3 covert cross-border operations. When word went out at Fort Bragg's JFK Special Warfare Center that Simons wanted men for a special mission, more than 500 men volunteered. Simons handpicked a fifty-nine-man assault force, divided that into three groups, and chose two SOG veterans to command the first two groups. Simons himself would lead the third.

Both air crews and Simons's raiders trained at Eglin Auxiliary Airfield No. 1, an isolated, vacant cantonment at which Jimmy Doolittle's B-25 Tokyo Raiders had trained in 1942. During the rigorous six-week training, air crews and raiders were kept in the dark about their actual mission. One air force pilot was certain he was training for a helicopter assault on Cuba. The raiders practiced on a hill

scale mockup of the Son Tay camp, made of lumber and target cloth that could be hoisted up to mask the operation from twice-daily passages overhead of Soviet COSMOS satellites. Simons's men trained in surprise raiding tactics and with bolt cutters, chain saws, and axes for breaking into locked cellblocks.

Plots and assault teams also studied "Barbara," an exact, \$60,000 CIA-built scaled model of Son Tay compound, rigged with special viewing devices to duplicate precise light effects from varying angles of approach. Simons wanted his assault force intimate with every detail of Son Tay. Helicopter pilots trained extensively for night contour flying and navigation, while trailing a specially modified C-130 Combat Talon equipped with a new forward-looking infrared radar system. Another C-130 Combat Talon practiced guiding a flight of supporting A-1 Sandy attack planes, while a HC-130 rescue ship rehearsed as tanker for refueling and for navigation support.

Flying in radio silence from five bases in Thailand, the C-130s and a helicopter assault force of five HH-53 Super Jolly Green Giants and an HH-3 Jolly Green Giant would have to link, refuel in midair, and penetrate carefully picked "blind spots" in North Vietnamese and Chinese radar coverage. An essential ingredient for a successful rescue was, of course, timely and accurate intelligence. Although the Son Tay raiders had the full support of the CIA, DIA, NSA, and the National Reconnaissance Office, the cumulative record on POWs held in North Vietnam was thin and based largely on aerial photographs from low-level 147SC remotely piloted aircraft and SR-71s taken from 80,000 feet. As the raid planning continued in June 1970, the photos duly noted such details as guard towers, volleyball nets, and, in midsummer, the flooding of the river adjacent to the camp to within two feet of its walls.

As training got under way in August 1970, planners were told of "decreased activity" in the Son Tay camp. Highly abnormal weather conditions over North Vietnam, plus North Vietnamese persistence in shooting down the reconnais-

sance drones, interfered with efforts to get good photographs, but some clearly showed weeds growing inside the compound. Planning for the raid continued anyway. As the raid's planned deadline approached, some other disconcerting intelligence came in. A covert source smuggled a cigarette pack out of Hanoi that contained a list of active North Vietnamese prison camps. Son Tay was not on the list.

Son Tay was indeed empty of American POWs. In mid-July unusually heavy monsoon rains had flooded the camp and forced the evacuation of the POWs held there. Later, Blackburn would remember that someone had suggested to him that Son Tay might be empty, but the planners preferred to believe that the POWs were merely being kept inside the compound.

General Manor and Colonel Simons, now based in Thailand, were never told to expect an empty camp. On November 20, Bull Simons told his men: "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 from Hanoi."

The raiders were silent for an instant, then stood up and applauded loudly. At 6:00 P.M. on November 20 the rescue team departed from Udorn Air Force Base for a flight through Laos and then into North Vietnam. One hour before their arrival at Son Tay, 100 navy planes headed for Haiphong Harbor in the largest night air operation ever flown over North Vietnam. The planes, however, were dropping not bombs, but flares, designed to divert Hanoi's air defenses from Son Tay. The diversion worked, and Simons's small helicopter fleet was able to slip through Hanoi's radar undetected.

With one exception, the raid proceeded according to plan. One small helicopter landed inside the compound, knocking out the guard towers and guard barracks. The other two choppers were supposed to land outside the camp, blow a hole through the wall, and then reinforce the initial assault group. One of them did, but Simons's own helicopter

veered off course and dropped down at what U.S. planners had thought was a secondary school 500 yards away from the camp. There the raiders found a large group of foreign military advisers (Chinese or Asians from the U.S.S.R., they could not tell which) and shot several of them before moving on.

By the time Simons reached Son Tay itself the bad news was apparent. No POWs. Sporadic fire from North Vietnamese defenders injured one raider, and the raiders in turn killed or wounded several North Vietnamese guards. Another American broke an ankle during the initial landing. They were the only two casualties among the raiders, other than the men's spirits. "You build your heart up for something like this," one man said later. "Every nerve in your body wants it. Then there's no one there."

The results of the raid reached the White House less than one hour after the men had left Son Tay. President Nixon and Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird decided to make the mission public and portray it in the best light possible, before word of it could leak out.

Recriminations over the Son Tay failure came quickly. Within hours after the raid was announced publicly, Son Tay was called an "intelligence failure," a "first-magnitude blunder" that radically decreased the chances of better treatment of POWs through negotiation.

While it saved no American POWs, the raid on Son Tay may at least have ameliorated their plight. Not long after the raid, the North Vietnamese herded all the POWs into prisons in central Hanoi to make them less accessible to future raids. As one of them, Colonel Robinson Risner, later wrote: "The raid may have failed in its primary objectives, but it boosted our morale sky-high! It also put all the POWs captured in North Vietnam together for the first time. This would have a major impact on us."

Kevin Generous has published a book and several articles on special operations and unconventional warfare in Vietnam.
