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ARTICLE FROM **VIETNAM**

OPERATION KINGPIN *raid*

Almost flawless in execution, the daring rescue raid at the Son Tay prison camp deep within North Vietnam lacked only one essential ingredient--POWs.

As told by Terry Buckler

On November 21, 1970, at the U.S. Air Force base at Udorn, Thailand, helicopters carrying U.S. Army Special Forces personnel took off into the inky blackness of the night sky. Those aboard had been training secretly for months and were ready to execute Operation Kingpin, the final phase of a daring plan--the rescue of American prisoners of war from the North Vietnamese prison camp at Son Tay.

The Son Tay prison camp was located approximately 23 miles west of Hanoi. The camp was small, the courtyard a mere 140 by 125 feet, and it was surrounded by rice paddies and 40-foot trees. In addition, a 7-foot wall encircled the prison, and three observation towers were strategically placed to observe the POWs, who were housed in four large buildings in the main compound.

Son Tay and Ap Lo, another POW camp 30 miles from Hanoi, were first identified by the Interagency Prisoner of War Intelligence Committee in May 1970. The committee, established in 1967, was responsible for identifying POWs and the camps where they were interned and for diverting U.S. bombing missions away from those areas.

The committee determined that the Son Tay camp was being enlarged to handle additional prisoners and confirmed that 55 American POWs were imprisoned there. Reconnaissance photographs also revealed the letters SAR (search and rescue), spelled out by what appeared to be the prisoners' laundry, and an arrow with the number 8 next to it, indicating the distance the POWs had to travel to the fields where they worked.

Army General Earle Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), approved a plan to rescue the POWs at Son Tay. On June 10, 1970 a 15-man group led by 53-year-old Army Brig. Gen. Donald D. Blackburn, the special assistant to General Wheeler for counterinsurgency and special activities, began the planning stage of the operation. This initial phase of the rescue attempt was dubbed "Polar Circle."

Further reconnaissance of the area around Son Tay revealed some troublesome aspects of the proposed raid. First, the headquarters of the Twelfth North Vietnamese Army (NVA), totaling 12,000 troops, was located close by. Second, an artillery training school, a supply depot and an air defense installation were also in close proximity to the prison. Third, about 500 yards south of Son Tay was a compound known as the "secondary school," which was used as an administrative center for the guards. Lastly, the Phuc Yen Air Base was only 20 miles northeast of the compound. It was clear that a raid would have to be accomplished very quickly because the enemy could muster reinforcements to Son Tay in a matter of minutes.

"Ivory Coast," the second phase of the rescue operation, swung into action as soon as Polar Circle was complete. Air Force Brig. Gen. Leroy J. "Roy" Manor, a stickler for organization, headed up the group. This part of the operation kept constant surveillance on Son Tay, using Lockheed SR-71 Blackbirds and unmanned Buffalo Hunter drones.

By the summer of 1970, photos showed Son Tay to be less active than usual, and by autumn the camp had very few signs of life. However, Dong Hoi, another POW camp 15 miles to the east of Son Tay, had increased in activity.

Why had the POWs been relocated? Had the North Vietnamese learned about the rescue attempt? Unknown to the planners, the

POWs had been moved for a simple reason: Son Tay was located on the Song Con River, which had overflowed its banks. Because of the flooding, the POWs had been transported to Dong Hoi.

Operation Kingpin, the final phase of the rescue of the POWs at Son Tay, was approved on November 18. The following day Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, the new chairman of the JCS, received information that the POWs had definitely been moved to Dong Hoi. Unfortunately, the planners nixed the idea of moving on Dong Hoi. They felt that the raiders had rehearsed for months for a raid on Son Tay and that shifting camps at the last minute might prove to be disastrous.

The result of the raid is now well known--the raiding group found no live American POWs at Son Tay. However, that does not detract from the dedication and bravery demonstrated by the men who were willing to risk their lives to save their fellow countrymen.

Sergeant Terry Buckler, then 20 years old, was the youngest member of the raiding force to enter Son Tay and was the only team member who had not had a tour of duty in Vietnam. He also holds another unique distinction: His entire time "in-country" was only 27 minutes--all of it in North Vietnam. He could very well be the only Vietnam veteran to make that claim.

Vietnam's contributing editor Al Hemingway talked to Terry Buckler about his experience in the Son Tay raid.

Vietnam: When you joined the Army did you want to be a member of Special Forces?

Buckler: I was drafted on March 18, 1969. Three or four days later I did extend my enlistment to enter Special Forces. After jump school at Fort Benning, Ga., and training at Fort Bragg, N.C., I was assigned to the 7th Special Forces Group at Fort Bragg.

Vietnam: How were you selected to be a part of the Son Tay rescue team?

Buckler: That is an interesting story. First, at 20 years of age, I was the youngest man on the mission, and "Bull" Simons (Colonel Arthur Simons, leader of the Son Tay group) was the oldest. I was in the

field, at a place called Smoke Bomb Hill, when the call for volunteers was announced. All they said was that it was a secret mission that Bull Simons was heading up. We were to report to the Little White House, the headquarters of Special Forces at Fort Bragg. There were about 500 of us at the first meeting. After that, they started holding interviews.

Vietnam: What kind of man was Colonel Bull Simons?

Buckler: Simons looked as if his face had been chiseled out of stone. He was the type of soldier you would follow to hell and back. He took care of his men. He always scared the hell out of me. When he talked, you snapped to. He always had an old half-chewed stogie hanging from his mouth. In fact, I don't think he bought new cigars, he bought used ones. He also had a great sense of humor, and he most certainly had everyone's respect.

Vietnam: Did Simons conduct the interviews himself?

Buckler: No, there were two sergeant majors that did them. My paperwork got lost somehow, and it was about 7:30 in the evening and I was the only one left standing outside. I grew impatient and began to holler at the two sergeant majors. Looking back, that was a stupid move on my part because they could have killed me. But they instructed me to report back to them the following morning. The next day I was the first one to be interviewed, and then I went back to my unit to await their decision. We were at a state forest, practicing mountain climbing, when I received the word to pack my bags because I had been selected for the mission.

Vietnam: What other officers were part of the team?

Buckler: Our commanding officer was Lt. Col. Elliot P. Sydnor, who was second-in-command. Sydnor was a Ranger and there was some animosity between the Rangers and Special Forces. He was more military than us. I think the Special Forces attitude was more unorthodox. Lieutenant Colonel Bill Robinson was in charge of the administrative end. Some of the others who stand out in my mind are Sgt. Maj. Vladimir Jakovenko, who was definitely a hell-raiser and a real inspiration. Also, "Pappy" Kittleson, a real good soldier. Pappy was a three-war veteran and had a calming effect on everyone. He was in his 50s but was in real good physical condition. I wouldn't

want to mess with him. Then there was Master Sgt. Herman Spencer, who was in a class all by himself. And Sgt. 1st Class Tryone Adderly, who would win a Distinguished Service Cross for his part in the raid.

Vietnam: It seems you had experienced senior NCOs. Where did your group go from there?

Buckler: They sent us to Eglin Air Force Base in Florida. We had a building that had been used by the Central Intelligence Agency near Airfield No. 3. Concertina wire was strung around it, and we posted a 24-hour guard. Between guarding that building and training, we had time for little else. After about a month of this, I stopped Bull Simons one morning and told him that I could have remained at Fort Bragg if I wanted to pull guard duty. I asked what my chances of making the mission were.

Vietnam: Another brash move! What did Simons say?

Buckler: He told me to be patient. A couple of days later they came out with cuts. From then on, I didn't have to pull guard duty.

Vietnam: What was your training like?

Buckler: We had a mockup of Son Tay. However, we didn't know it was Son Tay at the time. Some people have said that it was dismantled every night and reassembled in the morning, which isn't true. We started training in the daytime, going through dry runs. We practiced our positioning and what to do when our choppers hit the ground. There were three ships (one Sikorsky HH-3 Jolly Green Giant and two HH-53 Super Jollies) going in; "Greenleaf," "Blueboy" and "Redwine" were their radio call signs. Then we began doing night training. There was a flare ship above us that lit up the compound. We used live ammunition the entire time as well.

Vietnam: You knew it was serious business then.

Buckler: Oh, yes. Even the old-timers were impressed. They had never used live ammo during training either, so it was all new to them as well. They wanted the training to be as realistic as possible. We also used several old buildings on the base and had some of our people who were not going on the raid act as prisoners. We would

find them and take them out. Again, they included certain situations to add realism to the scenario. For example, when we brought the prisoners out to safety, one would accuse another of collaboration and want to kill him on the spot.

Vietnam: So how did you diffuse the situation?

Buckler: First, we would take a head count of the prisoners and determine who was in charge (usually the ranking officer) and then separate people who were arguing. Our primary concern was getting out of there and then sorting everything else out later.

Vietnam: By this time, did you know you were going after American POWs at Son Tay?

Buckler: No. We thought we were going to rescue people who were being held hostage aboard a hijacked plane. At that time, quite a few hijackings were taking place. They kept us pretty much in the dark.

Vietnam: What else was involved in your training?

Buckler: Quite a bit of physical training. One of our officers, Captain Dick (Richard) Meadows, had what he referred to as the "Meadows Mile." It was a 4-mile run in the beach sand that he liked to lead.

Vietnam: Meadows was an extraordinary soldier. He was one of only two, to the best of my knowledge, who received a battlefield commission from General William Westmoreland during the Vietnam War.

Buckler: That's right. Quite a guy. Getting back to the training, it was very physical. We fought a lot. As a matter of fact, it was listed on the training schedule as the Friday Night Fights. Once training commenced, we were all restricted to base. As a result of being cooped up, one tends to get restless. I recall one night Master Sgt. Herman Spencer had a few too many. He returned to the barracks to get his weapon and kill Bull Simons. I guess he had a disagreement with him on how the mission should be run. Well, we took the weapon away from him. The next morning Simons had him locked at attention and went up one side of him and down the other.

Vietnam: Simons was certainly no one to fool with.

Buckler: Well, he had remarked that he didn't want a bunch of Boy Scouts, and he didn't get them.

Vietnam: How long did this training last?

Buckler: Three months. One night they told us to pack our bags and loaded us on a Lockheed C-141 transport plane. From that point on we were not allowed to wear any military uniforms or insignia of any kind. We were what they called "sterile." We were flown to Takhli Air Force Base in Thailand and huddled into the special operations area. I felt like I was in prison. There was a big fence around the compound, and there were also guard dogs. After three or four days, we were ushered into a large auditorium. Simons addressed the group and said that Lt. Col. "Bud" (Elliott P.) Sydnor, in charge of the security command group, had something to tell us. Sydnor stood up and pulled down a huge map of Hanoi, and there was a big red circle around Son Tay. He turned and said, "Gentleman, this is where we're going in." Just then everybody busted out laughing. I guess it was from all the fear and anxiety that we felt inside.

Vietnam: It must have been a great feeling when you first realized you were going to rescue American POWs.

Buckler: Absolutely. It was a real high knowing that. The CIA had made a miniature model of the Son Tay prison. We went in and studied it so we would know what to expect when we hit the ground. It was very accurate. So accurate, in fact, they had a little bicycle parked in the prison compound.

Vietnam: That's real attention to detail!

Buckler: The night before the mission they gave us sleeping pills so we could get a good night's rest. After we awoke and got ready, they flew us to Udorn, Thailand. From there, we boarded our choppers for the mission.

Vietnam: There were three assault groups?

Buckler: Yes. The groups were code-named "Blueboy," "Redwine" and "Greenleaf."

Vietnam: That was so your group code names would not be confused with the call signs of the choppers, which were Apple 1, Apple 2, Apple 3, Apple 4 and Apple 5. In fact, Apple 4 and Apple 5 hovered 1,500 feet above the Son Tay camp to act as flare ships in the event the other flare ships, the Lockheed C-130E Combat Talons, malfunctioned.

Buckler: That's probably true. However, I didn't see any of that.

Vietnam: There was a mix-up with Bull Simons when the groups first entered Son Tay, right?

Buckler: Yes, Simons' group, Greenleaf, went into the wrong area. They landed at the secondary school. Unfortunately, it was no school at all--it was a barracks filled with NVA soldiers. They had a firefight, killing a lot of NVA before the chopper pilot realized his mistake. Fortunately, there were no American casualties, and they were choppered back to Son Tay.

Vietnam: Who entered the prison camp first?

Buckler: Dick Meadows' group, Blueboy. The chopper crashed inside the compound after it hit a tree. Luckily, no one was seriously injured. My group, Redwine, landed outside the compound, blew a hole in the south wall and ran in and took up positions. Of course, Meadows thought it was Simons' group, which was still back at the secondary school. What was really embarrassing was the firefight we got into with Simons' men when they arrived at Son Tay.

Vietnam: So your group, Redwine, was actually supposed to be following Simons' group, Greenleaf.

Buckler: Yes. If you look at the initial plan, Greenleaf's touchdown was to take place 30 seconds before ours. We were only 60 to 80 feet apart. It was dark, and we thought they were the enemy. Simons figured out what was going on and put a stop to it immediately. It was tense there for a while.

Vietnam: Were you scared?

Buckler: Not until we boarded the chopper after the raid. Captain Dan Turner and I were sitting in the tail of the helicopter with a

minigun between us, and we could see Hanoi all lit up. About that time what looked like orange telephone poles started coming up at us.

Vietnam: Surface-to-air missiles!

Buckler: That's right. Our pilot was doing everything he could to dodge them. That's when it really got tense.

Vietnam: You never entered the compound?

Buckler: No. The only people that went in were the Blueboy group and Bull Simons. He searched every room looking for those POWs.

Vietnam: Of course, they had been relocated.

Buckler: Yes, but we didn't know that at the time. Boy, Simons was mad.

Vietnam: When you heard the report of "negative items," meaning no POWs had been found, what was your reaction?

Buckler: I thought my headset was screwed up. I told Captain Turner, and he didn't believe me.

Vietnam: The raid lasted only 27 minutes.

Buckler: That's correct. It wasn't long at all.

Vietnam: Luckily, with the exception of Bull Simons landing in the wrong place, things went pretty much according to plan.

Buckler: They did. However, Sergeant Noe Quezada was shot in the back of the leg. Also, the crew chief aboard Blueboy suffered a broken ankle. Those are some of the risks you take when you're part of special operations. When we were first told where we were going, we all had an opportunity to withdraw from the mission. Nobody did. Our plan of escape, if things did not go right, was to pull back with our backs to the river and take out as many of them as we could. Simons told us: "There's a 50-50 chance of us not coming back, guys. If the mission is compromised, we'll make them pay for every inch of ground we occupy."

Vietnam: You had no prior tour in Vietnam?

Buckler: There were only two of us who had not been in combat before: Sergeant Keith Medenski and I.

Vietnam: What happened when you returned to the United States?

Buckler: They turned it into a media event, trying to get as much publicity out of the raid as they could. In retrospect, it was a good thing to do. It proved that we could get into the enemy's backyard undetected and get out without losing anyone.

Vietnam: How did you deal with the publicity?

Buckler: Well, I tried to keep a low profile. Besides, in Special Forces there were so many guys who had gone on similar missions, it didn't matter. Some years later, after I got out of the service, Ross Perot held a big party in San Francisco, for the Son Tay prisoners and the raiders.

Vietnam: Did you talk to any of the former POWs?

Buckler: Oh, yes. It was very emotional. We were quite upset that we did not succeed in bringing them home. One of the most interesting comments I heard was they started receiving better treatment after the raid. The raid proved to the NVA that we meant business.

Vietnam: At least it wasn't a total loss.

Buckler: Another thing that really impressed me was the dedication the guys on the raid had. I was the youngest person there, so I felt my life was unimportant. But the others had families. They could have gotten off the mission at any time, but they stayed. Those guys were willing to lay down their lives for their comrades. They were true professionals. *

Suggestions for further reading: The Raid, by Benjamin Schemmer (Harper & Row); The Secret Vietnam War: The United States Air Force in Thailand, 1961-1975, by Jeffrey D. Glasser (McFarland & Company); and "Bring our POWs Back Alive," by Dale Andradé, Vietnam Magazine, February 1990.