illustration by Lou Nolan

# raid at Son Tay

A stream of startled silence welled up in the humid theater and slowly settled among the nearly 100 men dressed somewhat casually in military fatigues. Then the slow, low whistling began, stifled well under the breath. Finally, like a clap of summer thunder, emotion burst into an ovation.

The men were still standing and cheering as the Army colonel walked briskly from the room.

Gradually, the cheering subsided and the handpicked raiders — Air Force special operations and rescue specialists and Army green berets — made their way from a briefing room at Takhli Royal Thai Air Force Base to closed vans and a waiting, anxious C-130 transport. It would be a night, a lifetime, to remember. November 20, 1970.

Until the colonel's announcement a few minutes ago, as many as 80 raiders

by ROBERT K. RUHL

hadn't known the exact objective of the 2½ months of strenuous, exacting, intense training they had just completed. They choked back their initial response to the news and then let it all out in a torrent. Tomorrow the world would do the same.

An American military force was on its way to free U.S. prisoners of war believed held in a compact, half-acre-sized compound on a tributary of the Red River in North Vietnam, just 23 precarious miles west of Hanoi.

Throughout air bases in Thailand, as far away as Kadena AB in Okinawa, and aboard Navy carriers in the Gulf of Tonkin, an air armada was taking shape in the ominous darkness. Prop-driven and jet aircraft, and helicopters would provide an umbrella of protection and diversion.

That the raid at Son Tay would fail was inconceivable.

But it was conceivable, albeit only slightly, to President Nixon and his advisors. Nevertheless, it was a risk the President would take.

First, however, he wanted to increase diplomatic pressure on Hanoi for release of the POWs and, second, to plan a rescue; one that would show his and the Nation's concern for the nearly 1,000 U.S. servicemen missing in action.

The stakes would be high, indeed. Former President Johnson had halted the bombing over the north on October 31, 1968. And although the U.S. continued to fly regular reconnaissance missions over North Vietnam, no bombs had fallen in the Red River Valley since then. Of as much concern was the fact that there had been no enemy offensive since the *Tet* period of 1968.

In mid-May 1970, intelligence indicated that U.S. prisoners were being held at a camp near the city of Son Tay. And after careful study and planning, a joint contingency task group named Ivory Coast, a properly innocuous code name selected at random by a computer, was formed to put the rescue plan into effect.

Selected to head the group was Brig. Gen. LeRoy J. Manor, 49, commander of the Air Force's Special Operations Force at Eglin AFB, Fla. General Manor was an obvious choice. A skilled organizer, the general was also a veteran of 275 combat missions over Southeast Asia while commanding the 37th Tactical Fighter Wing at Phu Cat AB.

His deputy was also an odds-on choice. Army Col. Arthur D. Simons, 52, was a craggy, rock-jawed ex-green beret appropriately nicknamed "The Bull." Legendary was an apt description of his feats in World War II, Laos, and Vietnam.

Even though the mission's purpose was undisclosed, Simon's reputation was enough to attract 300 volunteers from the Special Forces Center at Ft. Bragg, N.C. Only one of every three volunteers was selected after rigid physical and mental testing. Then the Army element was moved to an auxiliary field at Eglin to begin training in late August 1970.

Air Force members also stepped forward to volunteer. From units in the U.S. and overseas came crewmen to man five HH-53 *Super Jolly Green Giant* helicopters, a smaller HH-3E *Jolly Green Giant* helicopter, and five prop-driven A-1E *Sandy* close-support aircraft. The helicopters would be used to ferry the Army troops, provide mini-gun assault fire, and most importantly, to bring the POWs out.

"Colonel Britton, our operations officer at Eglin, called me in one day and closed the door — which was highly unusual," said then Maj. Frederic M. (Marty) Donohue, an HH-53 instructor pilot at the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Training Center at Eglin.

"He told me we had a mission coming up that would involve a lot of training and night flying. He said he couldn't give me any details now, but he asked me to volunteer. I did."

Lt. Col. Warner A. Britton had a more difficult time with another helicopter veteran. "When he told me he couldn't give me any details, I said no," explained then Lt. Col. Herb Zehnder. "You know what they say about volunteering — and I had been an enlisted man for 10 years."

Zehnder laughed. The tall, free-wheeling pilot is given to rank understatement. But he had spent a year flying counterinsurgency missions in Vietnam and was "glad to get out alive." He had also saved the lives of 84 people with sometimes daring helicopter pickups in the jungle. As he put it, he was finally talked into joining Ivory Coast.

The training at Eglin was "even more hazardous than the mission," explained then Lt. Col. John Allison, an HH-53 flight commander at Eglin.

Air Force rescue specialists had never before worked with Army troops on an

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assault mission, and new equipment and tactics had to be developed, tested, and refined. Timing would be critical. Every facet of the operation was gone through completely, step by step, more than 170 times. In all, a thousand hours of incident-free flying were logged, mostly at night under almost complete blackout conditions.

At Eglin, planning and intelligence experts worked with film taken by high-altitude SR-71 aircraft and low-altitude drones flying over Son Tay. Using the reconnaissance photos, a precise mockup of Son Tay was built. For some unknown reason, the scale model was called "Barbara" by the aircrews. The pilots would place Barbara in a dimly lit room, and with night-viewing, binocular-like devices, "practice" approaches to the camp from various heights and distances. A full-scale mockup made of white target cloth and two-by-fours was also built at Eglin.

The "real" Son Tay camp, which previously held a French garrison, measured 185 feet by 140 feet by 110 feet. It included two POW buildings, three guard towers, thatched-roof support facilities, wells, a laundry, a kitchen, and troop housing units. Built mostly of masonry, its walls were topped with concertina wire.

At Eglin the Army trained with acetylene torches, chain saws, bolt cutters, and fire axes for quick entry into the locked cell blocks. They also practiced with a new night sight on their AR-15 rifles and wore goggles covered with a special sensitive tape that would provide protection against sudden flare light.

Eglin was also the training grounds for both the A-1E strike force, and the Air Force helicopter force, which worked long and hard at perfecting night formation flying at low altitudes. COMBAT TALON C-130E aircraft, specially equipped for the mission with Forward Looking Infrared (FLIR) equipment for precise navigation, would lead the force of six assault helicopters, including Donohue's HH-53 gunship, and the A-1Es.

Just getting to Son Tay, even without enemy action, would be tricky. The choppers were able to refuel in the air, but the smaller HH-3, programmed to land and discharge troops in the compound, had to fly at maximum speed in a "drafting" position behind the

TOP: Col. John Allison, director safety, Hq. Aerospace Rescue a Recovery Service, handles a model of the HH-53 *Super Jolly Green Giant* helicopter he pilot on the Son Tay raid.

ABOVE: Col. Warner Britton, n retired and living in Mobile, Ala helped select helicopter crews f the raid and also flew one of th HH-53s.

LEFT: Col. Frederic M. (Marty) Donohue, chief, resources and projects, the Secretary of the A Force's Office of Information, fl the *Super Jolly Green* gunship that heralded the attack.

C-130's wing to stay in formation. At the same time, the C-130 was forced to fly with 70 percent flaps at just 10 knots above its power-on stall speed.

Training was completed in early November. C-141s and C-130s then moved the force to the staging base at Takhli over a period of days. All were in place by November 18.

"When we left Eglin, we thought we were going to continue our training at Norton AFB (in California)," Donohue said. "But we never got off the aircraft, except once. We flew from California to Alaska, to Japan, and then to Thailand. I had never before been on an aircraft while it refueled on the ground."

In October President Nixon proposed the "immediate and unconditional release of all POWs held by both sides," but there was no response from Hanoi. Then on November 11, Veterans Day, renamed POW Day in 1970 by Presidential proclamation, the President met with his top advisors to review the Son Tay plan.

At noon on Friday, November 20, the launch order came, but it was not relayed to the troops immediately. After a rest period and supper, the raiders were assembled in the briefing room at Takhli. Colonel Simons detailed the exact geographical location of the raid, spoke personally to the men, and then left as the cheering continued toward its peak.

The exhilaration subsided into calm intent as the raiders moved by van to board a C-130 for the hour-long flight to the launch site at Udorn RTAFB.

That night, at four minutes before eleven o'clock, the helicopters began lifting off, heading north — into the unknown.

The weather "window" was crucial. October and November were the worst weather months in years in Southeast Asia. An estimated five years' worth of typhoons had already moved through the area. Moreover, the blanket of rain that had covered North Vietnam and Laos for several days was an ominous harbinger of Typhoon Patsy, rolling from the south toward the panhandle of North Vietnam and the Gulf of Tonkin. By tomorrow it would be too late. From his command post at Monkey Mountain, just outside the huge U.S. air base at Da Nang in northeastern South Vietnam, General Manor gave the go-ahead order. The elaborate communications setup would allow him to coordinate and control the many elements of the task force.

From Takhli came the strike force C-130; from Nakhon Phanom RTAFB came the A-1E *Sandys*; from Udorn came the HC-130 tankers, the six F-4 *Phantoms* for MIG CAP, and the six helicopters; from Korat RTAFB the five F-105 *Wild Weasels* for surface-to-air missile (SAM) and antiaircraft suppression, and two EC-121 airborne command posts; from Kadena AB came the RC-135 with the airborne mission commander; and from U-Tapao RTAFB came a KC-135 radio relay aircraft. In the Gulf of Tonkin some 60 planes of Carrier Task Force 77 were moving into position.

The flight to Son Tay, planned as a 5½-hour round trip, was uneventful, but there were some earlier problems.

The C-130 assault aircraft, which would lead the helicopters in and drop flares over the compound, had ignition trouble with the No. 3 engine. When maintenance personnel couldn't fix it quickly, General Manor cleared it to fly on three engines. A final try, though, started the engine, but the aircraft was 23 minutes behind schedule, time it made up by flying at speeds greater than planned and eliminating some enroute checks.

Difficulties were also experienced by the helicopters. "When we took off from Udorn, an aircraft flew right through our formation," recalled Donohue. "It was ticklish." The choppers scattered, then reformed and flew north to Laos, refueling while they crossed the mountains into North Vietnam.

"As we went up, I was just thinking about getting some of those guys (the POWs)," said Donohue, a thin, boyish-looking pipe smoker who doesn't look like he's put on a pound since high school. "They were buddies and they had suffered a lot."

His thoughts were echoed by the pilots of the other choppers — Maj. Herb Kalen and Herb Zehnder, pilot and copilot, respectively, in the HH-3E; Warner Britton and John Allison, piloting two of the HH-53s and who along with Kalen were carrying the 56 Army troops. Lt. Col. Royal Brown and Maj. Ken Murphy were piloting the remaining two HH-53s that would serve as spare flare ships and later help evacuate the prisoners.

"I was confident we could do the mission," recalled Colonel Allison, "providing there was no break in security. Of course, we'd never know that



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Warner Britton had a different thought. "I felt that we had better than a 50-50 chance if some quirk of fate, something we couldn't possibly plan for, didn't happen."

As the assault force, which had been dodging and darting through the North Vietnamese radar net, broke through the cloud cover in the Red River Valley, the pilots and crews saw something they would never forget.

"Ahead the lights of Hanoi were beautiful," said Donohue. "And just beyond them the Navy planes had the sky over Haiphong Harbor lit up like the Fourth of July with flares. There was an awful lot of commotion, and there must have been a lot of noise."

Three miles from the camp, and still undetected, the choppers pulled into trail formation. The C-130 moved ahead to drop the flares, and Donohue took the lead with Kalen's HH-3 and the other *Jolly Greens* behind at staggered intervals.

Just as he was about to start his pass toward the west wall, Donohue saw his chip light blink on, indicating possible main transmission failure. It could be serious trouble or, simply, metallic fuzz in the detector system. "But there was no place to go and check it," Donohue remarked wryly.

At thirty minutes past two in the morning of the 21st, the C-130's flares went off over Son Tay like a beacon in a dark room. Wind changes and lack of references caused the formation to drift slightly (less than 200 yards) to the right of their planned assault course, and Donohue momentarily turned toward a military installation, similar in structure to Son Tay, that lay more than 400 yards to the south of the target.

Concentrating intently, he saw his mistake in time — there was no river winding along the western side of the installation — and turned toward Son Tay. There was no turning back now. He was on course and rapidly approaching the prison.

Flying at 40 feet and 20 knots, the big helicopter cleared the western wall of the camp like an attacking giant frog, its rotor blades whipping up a whirlwind of debris and ear-splitting confusion. In the eerie, dim light the mini-guns shook the huge machine as they splintered the northwest guard tower, destroying it with the efficiency of a buzzsaw gone beserk, and severely damaged the southwest tower and the guard barracks. Here and there, fires were taking hold. In a moment Donohue's chopper, like a shadow, had passed over the camp, now in a frenzy.

Herb Kalen was next. Trailing Donohue in his HH-3E, Kalen also had turned into the installation to the south, saw his mistake, and headed into Son Tay. He was looking for the clearing — located in the center of the compound and about the size of two tennis courts. To get there, he had to let down through a huge tree to land in the clearing.

"We tore into it like a big lawnmower," said Zehnder. "There were limbs, brush, branches, and leaves everywhere. That tree must have been 150 feet tall, much higher than we thought. There was a tremendous vibration, the rotor system was damaged, and we were down."

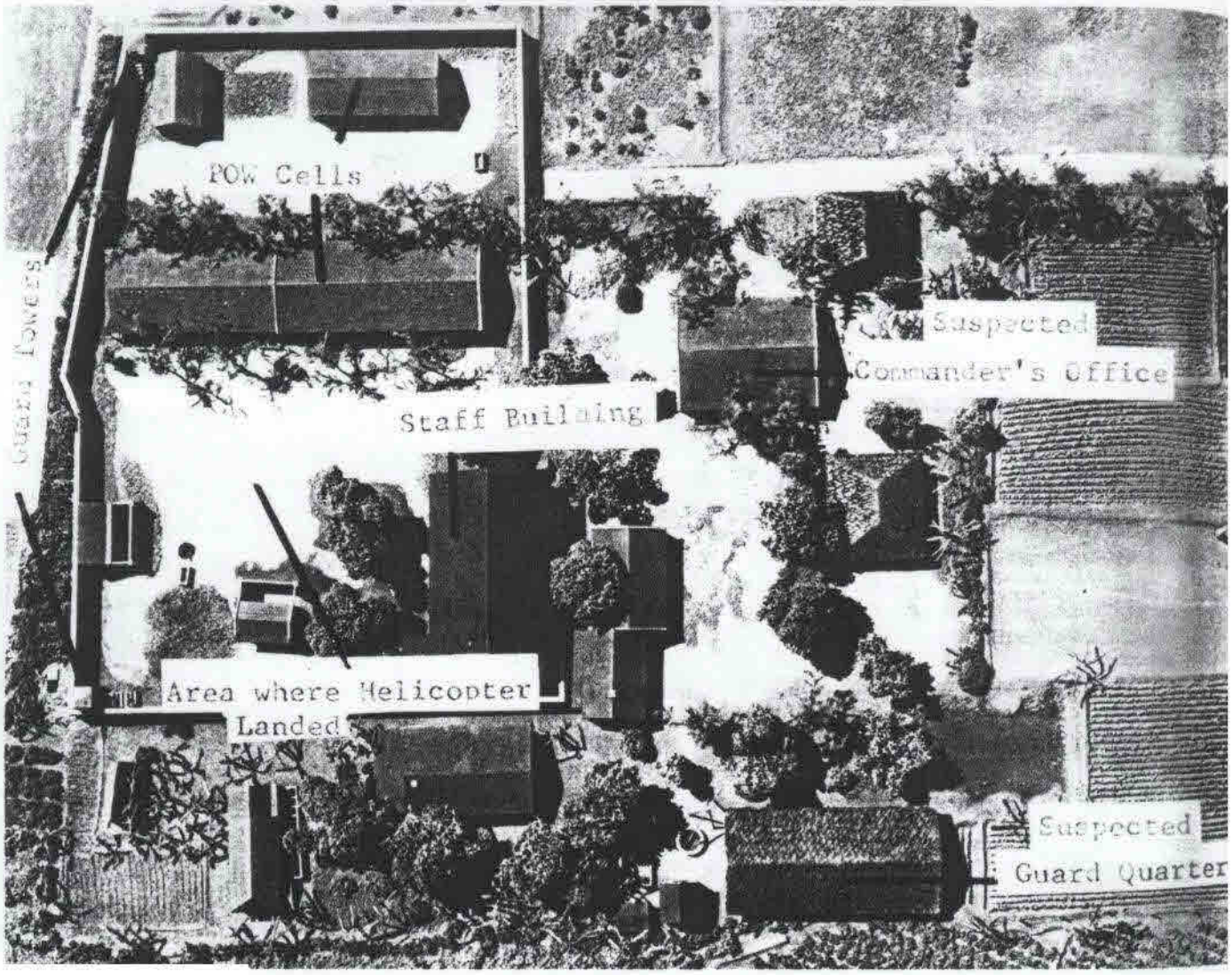
Kalen, Zehnder, and TSgt. Leroy Wright, a flight engineer, scrambled out and took defensive positions around the chopper as the Army troops headed through the chaos for the cell blocks.

Warner Britton, flying at a distance behind Kalen, was too far away to see him pull off the military installation. And, when he saw Kalen heading that way, concentrated on landing his troops. They charged off the helicopter but were quickly told to reload and proceed to Son Tay. John Allison, flying above the first three choppers, saw Kalen turn off and followed him into Son Tay, discharging his troops outside the west wall.

According to plan, the last two HH-53s, flying without troops, earlier had pulled away from the formation, and landed on islands in the Finger Lake, some eight miles away from the prison. They would wait to fly forward, if needed, to pick up troops and POWs.

On the ground the Army element was sweeping through the compound, now a riot of surprise. Half-dressed, stunned from their sleep, the North Vietnamese guards were scurrying for cover and firing indiscriminately. Calmly, the Army element sought them out, singly and in groups, and shot them. In spare minutes, the word crackled through the raiders' radios: "Zero 'items' (POWs)!"

There was shocked disbelief among the raiders. From every section of the camp, now alive with ripping rifle fire and thrumping grenades, and shouting, crazed, ghostlike North Vietnamese troops running in all directions, the word was the same.




Air Force helicopter pilots worked with "Barbara," the scale model of the Son Tay camp, to help orient themselves to the facilities.

But, the raiders kept their poise and systematically searched the cell blocks, ripping open doors and charging into empty rooms. General Manor had directed the troops to confirm the report and they were complying.

Close overhead the A-1Es were causing a ruckus, dropping ordnance on the foot bridge to the northwest, and firing rockets on the road to the southwest.

There wasn't much time now for reflection among the raiders. The North Vietnamese on the ground were getting over the shock and beginning to organize, MIGs could be expected at any time, and SAMs were beginning to zero in on the pesky F-105s.

From their holding position about a mile away on dry spots in a rice paddy, Britton and Allison flew to Son Tay to pick up the Army troops. The other two HH-53s were already on their way from the Finger Lake, while Donohue waited until the all-clear was given to leave the rice paddy. In 27 minutes one of the boldest, most meticulously planned and executed surprise attacks in the history of modern warfare was over.

But not before some last-minute scares.

"I got aboard Warner Britton's aircraft," recalled Zehnder. "Shortly after takeoff, we took a round just about six inches from where I was sitting. Sounded like gravel hitting a tin roof. The aircraft vibrated violently and I thought, 'Damn, we've been hit in the flight controls.' Although I didn't know it at the time, Warner had pumped the controls. And if this wasn't enough, one of the pararescuemen started blasting away with his mini-gun at the same time. But we got off okay."

The only injuries were to Sergeant Wright, who broke his foot in the crash of the HH-3E, and to an Army sergeant who sustained a flesh wound in the thigh. Wright later received the Air Force Cross from the President for his heroism in providing effective covering fire on enemy positions.

On the way out of the area, the helicopter force stayed low to the ground. MIG calls were on the radio and SAMs, like flaming telephone poles, were darting through the night sky. Sixteen had been fired at the *Wild Weasels*, two of which sustained considerable battle damage. One flamed out over the Plaine des Jarres in Laos, and its two-man crew was picked up individually by Royal Brown and Ken Murphy.

Was the mission worthwhile?

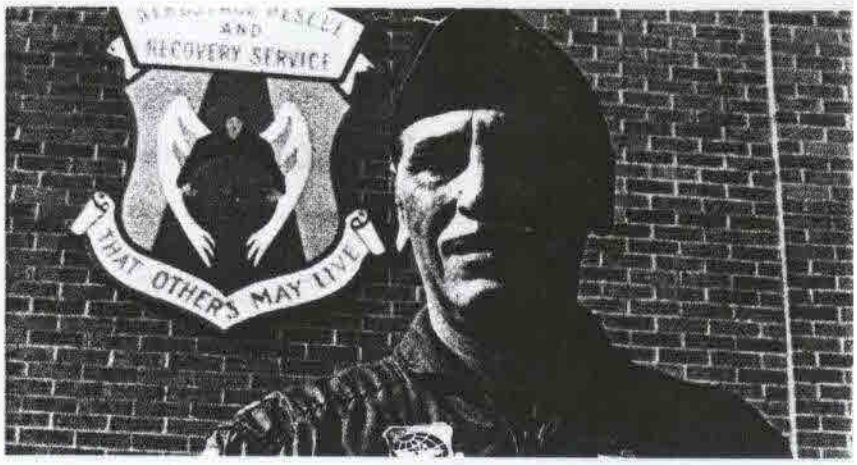
The helicopter pilots were unanimous; yes! "I was glad I was in on the effort," Donohue said. "I think we learned a lot about unconventional uses of rotary-winged aircraft. We now had a method for utilizing existing resources that had not been properly exploited before."

There was a clamor, both pro and con, among members of Congress and the media in the days that followed. Secretary of Defense Laird had to answer questions concerning an alleged intelligence breakdown before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

But all available data had pointed to the fact that the camp was occupied. Vehicles, movements on the nearby roads, defensive positions around the camp, and movement within the camp itself were parts of the data used to determine that the POWs were, indeed, there.

Laird told Committee Chairman J. William Fulbright that "we haven't been able to develop a camera that sees through the roofs of buildings." And the Pentagon noted that since prisoners were rarely exercised in the open, there was no way to tell whether they had been moved.

General Manor noted that "all indications, including aerial reconnaissance photography, showed that the camp was in continuous use, as evidenced by the hard-packed earth in the compound. The implication that little or no activity was occurring at Son Tay is refuted by the fact that evidence of gardening was repeatedly noted in the area of the camp. In retrospect, it is most probable that this observation was the result of indigenous activity, but, at the same time, could logically have been attributed to POW programs." Returning POWs who actually had been held at Son Tay also gave no reason for being moved. It may have been as prosaic as Hanoi merely wanting to save money by consolidating some camps.




Col. Herb Zehnder, vice commander of the 39th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Wing, Eglin AFB, Fla.,was the copilot on the HH-3E helicopter that landed in the compound.

One thing, though, seems for certain. The POWs benefitted indirectly from the raid. Many were moved from outlying, isolated camps into the bigger cantonement areas of Hanoi and were allowed more privileges and freedom. The raid also served to unite the Nation on behalf of the POWs.

Like the others on the raid, though, Donohue takes a deep personal pride in his part. And just as characteristically notes, "If there had been POWs there, we would have got them."

General Manor said the same thing, indirectly: "For those involved in the planning and execution of the mission, I have only the highest regard; for those who authorized this attempt to rescue our prisoners of war, I have the deepest respect."

No doubt, they would have "got them."