

RAID AT SON TAY MASTERS OF COMIC STRIP ART

AMERICAN HISTORY

Illustrated

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BATTLES WON & LOST

Raid at Son Tay

by Richard Harris

One of the Vietnam War's most daring missions, this top-secret rescue effort was both a failure and a success.



Spring 1970. Fifty-five American servicemen languished in the dank cells of a small prison compound located among rice paddies in the countryside west of Hanoi. They were among the more than three hundred and fifty downed U.S. airmen then being held captive at about a dozen camps in and near the North Vietnamese capital.

One of these men was Air Force Major Elmo "Mo" Baker. He had been a prisoner of war (POW) since August 23, 1967, when he was shot

down while leading F-105 fighter bombers on a strike against the Bac Giang bridge north of Hanoi. As Baker rolled in against the target, shrapnel from a Soviet-made SA-2 surface-to-air missile slammed into his aircraft and disabled it.

About 40 percent of pilots shot down in Vietnam were injured when they ejected from their planes. Baker was no exception. "According to regulations we were supposed to fly with our shoulder straps locked," recalls the now-retired lieutenant colonel. "But if you were

On November 21, 1970, Air Force helicopters carrying a fifty-six-man team of Army Green Berets slipped deep into North Vietnam in an effort to rescue American prisoners of war believed held at the Son Tay prison camp, west of Hanoi. The mission was perfectly executed, but to their dismay the raiders discovered that the POWs had been moved from the camp months earlier. The raid would nevertheless have a positive effect on the morale and treatment of U.S. prisoners.

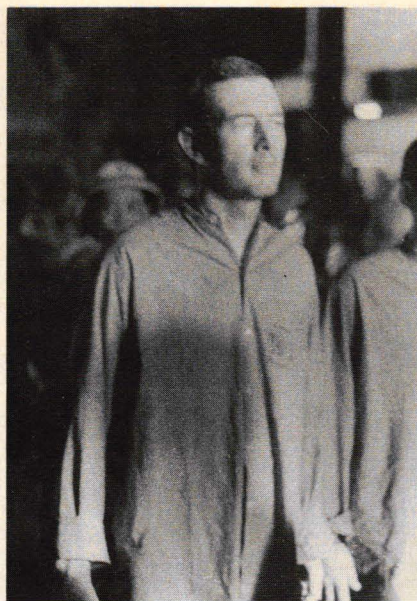
on a long mission you unlocked them so you could relax and move around a little. Also, if you flew with the straps locked it was nearly impossible for the weapons officer to bend over his radar scopes and bombsights when we rolled in against the target. If your plane was hit during the roll-in, you didn't have time to hit the locking mechanism and get into a good body position, and pull the ejection ring. If you took time to do all of this you would never make it out of the aircraft."

Baker broke his left thigh during the ejection, making it impossible for him to evade the enemy. He was immediately captured and taken to the Hoa Lo Prison in Hanoi. American POWs had sarcastically dubbed it the "Hanoi Hilton."

Baker's captors waited thirty days before treating his broken thigh. During this time he endured several grueling torture sessions. "The North Vietnamese can never be accused of raising torture to a sophisticated level," Baker says. "It just hurt. My God, it hurt so beyond comprehension, beyond the limit of human endurance. During my initial interrogation they would twist my left leg three-quarters of a circle every time I gave them an answer they didn't like. Then they took me to the ropes. They would run a rope through a hook in the ceiling and tie it around your wrists. They would pull it until your elbows touched. Then they would pull you off the floor and let you hang there until they got tired. I was lucky—I was only in the ropes for three days. I know some guys who were left in them for ten days."

Baker was finally taken to a hospital where his broken bones were set. Then he was transported to a "show prison" in Hanoi where visiting American "peace groups" were shown how "humanely" the "Yankee Air Pirates" were being treated.

There, for the first time since his capture, Baker had a cellmate, Air Force Captain Larry Carrigan. Carrigan had been selected to go before a visiting delegation called the "Women's Strike for Peace." He



A captured American aviator is paraded through Hanoi in 1966.

was supposed to confess his so-called "criminal acts" against the North Vietnamese people. But instead Carrigan told the visitors and his stunned captors that he was proud to be an American pilot. Because of this gallant act he was put in a punishment cell where he was bound with ropes and hung for five days.

On the night of December 9, 1969, more than two years after Baker and Carrigan had been shot down, a guard came to their cell and told them to collect their belongings. Then the cellmates were chained together and blindfolded, thrown into a van with several other prisoners, and driven away.

Late the following night the van stopped in front of a tall steel gate and the POWs were ordered out of the vehicle. They were led into a courtyard where three small buildings stood: one in the southwest corner and two others along the northern wall. The POWs were forced into cells in one of these buildings.

The first thing Baker did after being locked up was to put his ear to the wall of his cell and listen for coded communications. Ever since the first Americans had been captured in North Vietnam in 1964, they had been forbidden to converse with each other. But they had over-

come this obstacle by clandestine use of a tap code based on the Morse Code taught to every military flyer. Through this code, Baker learned that he was in a camp called Son Tay, which some prisoners called "Camp Hope."

Located twenty-three miles west of Hanoi, Son Tay was a working camp that the North Vietnamese were enlarging through the use of POW labor. From his surreptitious conversations with other prisoners on work details and through the tap code, Baker learned that several seriously ill prisoners were held at Son Tay. If these men didn't get medical help soon they would probably die.

Air Force Captain Wesley Schierman, a POW since 1965, was one of those men. Five years of brutal captivity had taken their toll: Schierman had developed a severe asthmatic condition. Several times during the cold winter of 1969 he almost died. Schierman's desperate gasps for breath filled his fellow prisoners with feelings of dread and helplessness because there was nothing they could do to help him.

The POWs knew that escape was virtually impossible. But during work details outside the camp they saw that Son Tay was located in an isolated part of the country, and that realization gave them another idea: rescue.

"I don't remember who first came up with the idea of signaling for a rescue," says Baker. "You could hear those poor guys suffering all day and all night. Especially Schierman. You could hear him trying to breathe all over the compound."

The prisoners knew that high-flying American reconnaissance aircraft flew over North Vietnam every day. All they had to do was signal where they were. A plan took shape.

During the weeks that followed, the North Vietnamese guards at Son Tay failed to notice the odd manner in which the POWs working in the courtyard stacked rocks and piled dirt. And when the Americans laid out their laundry to dry, their captors did not see that the clothing formed certain patterns. But some-

one else did.

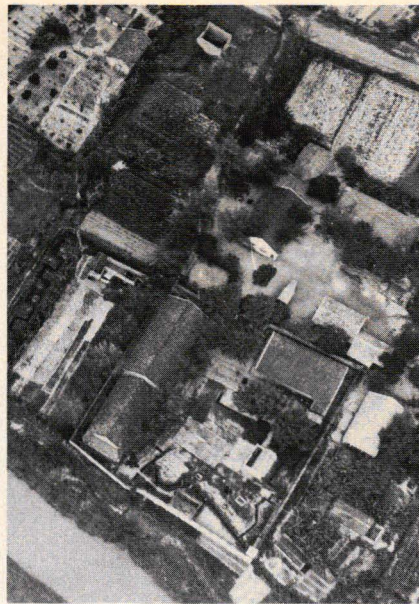
That someone was Air Force Technical Sergeant Norval Clinebell of the 1127th Field Activities Group at Fort Belvoir, Virginia. A photointelligence specialist who had been assigned to search for POW camps in North Vietnam, Clinebell had spent weeks studying photographs taken by SR-71 reconnaissance aircraft flying at eighty-thousand-foot altitudes.

In May 1970 Clinebell was positive that he had spotted an active POW camp twenty-three miles west of Hanoi. He could tell that the camp was being enlarged, and it seemed as if someone was trying to send a message.

Clinebell took the photographs to his boss, Colonel George Iles. "The photographs that are taken from an SR-71 are spectacular, and you could see men working in the courtyard," Clinebell recalls. "We could see their laundry spread out and it formed the letters 'S A R'; that could only mean 'Search and Rescue mission.' In one corner of the compound, dirt and rocks had been piled to form the letter 'K.' We were pretty sure this meant come and get us. What really grabbed our attention was another pile of rocks that had been laid out in Morse Code that said there were at least six men in that prison who were going to die if they didn't get help fast."

Iles agreed with Clinebell's analysis. Examining the camp's location, the two men speculated that a rescue mission in this part of North Vietnam might be possible. Iles telephoned a supersecret unit known as the Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities (SACSA), located in the Pentagon. "We'd done our job," Clinebell says. "We found them. But that's as far as we could go. Someone else was going to have to go and get them."

In May 1970, SACSA was commanded by Army Brigadier General Donald Blackburn. Blackburn was so intrigued by what he heard that he invited Iles and Clinebell to his office to brief him personally. They did so on May 25, during which meeting Blackburn called in his dep-



A reconnaissance photograph shows the Son Tay prison camp (bottom).

uty, Army Colonel E.E. Mayer, a tough Green Beret who commanded the special operation division within SACSA. All agreed that a rescue mission was possible, but no one there had the power to authorize one; such an order had to come from the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—or higher. Blackburn promised to endorse the operation, and he organized a group to study its feasibility.

The study was finished by July 10, when Blackburn presented the results to a meeting of the Joint Chiefs, headed by Admiral Thomas H. Moorer. Moorer asked two questions: How many North Vietnamese troops are in the area? And how long would it take them to react?

"Son Tay was in an extremely isolated area," recalls Blackburn. "We didn't know for sure, but we believed there could be as many as twelve thousand troops in the area and part of them could be at the camp in a half an hour. I told the chairman that the only thing we weren't 100 percent sure of was a mysterious compound about five hundred meters south of the prison. The CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] and DIA [Defense Intelligence Agency] couldn't tell us who or what was in it. On our briefing charts we simply labeled it the 'sec-

ondary school.'"

Moorer gave preliminary approval for a rescue mission and authorized Blackburn to assemble and train a task force to carry it out.

The raid that Blackburn and his assistants planned during the summer of 1970 promised to be one of the most daring and complex operations of the Vietnam War. Flying by night, a half-dozen "Super Jolly Green Giants"—large, heavily armed helicopters usually employed on search and rescue missions for downed pilots—would take off from Thailand and fly more than three hundred miles across Laos and into the heart of North Vietnam. In a surprise assault that was expected to last less than half an hour, the raiders would blast their way into the Son Tay compound, extract an estimated seventy American prisoners, and take off again for Thailand.

But ten thousand miles away, events were taking place that would have a pivotal effect on the outcome of the Americans' meticulously laid plans. The monsoons during the summer of 1970 were especially heavy. As a result, the Song Con River that flowed just outside Son Tay prison flooded to within a few feet of the compound's west wall.

The CIA had been conducting a series of weather modification experiments over the mountains of northern Laos, attempting to induce rainfall by seeding clouds with silver iodide. Those involved in the project hoped that the heavy rains and resultant flooding in North Vietnam would slow enemy infiltration into the south.

It is uncertain whether the flooding near Son Tay was caused directly by the CIA operation. Whether or not it was, on July 14, 1970, after a particularly heavy rain, the North Vietnamese moved their prisoners out of Son Tay into a new camp, Dong Hoi, fifteen miles to the east.

During that same week in the United States, Blackburn and Mayer were selecting the men who would lead the proposed rescue operation. "I would have given my left arm to command it myself," Black-

burn says. "But that was entirely out of the question. I had too many secrets tucked away in my head to go on a risky operation like this. But I had an old friend down at Fort Bragg who I believed would be the perfect choice."

Blackburn's friend, Colonel Arthur D. "Bull" Simons, was a living legend among the men of the United States Army Special Forces. Simons was a seasoned veteran of covert operations in Vietnam and Laos and had been an Army Ranger during World War II.

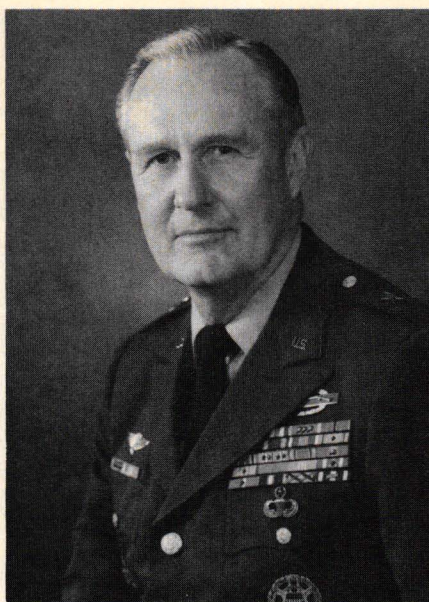
Blackburn and Mayer met with Simons at the Fort Bragg Officers Club in North Carolina. "I asked the 'Bull' if he would like to lead a little mission that just might get a bit hairy," Blackburn recalls. "Without so much as batting an eye, Simons said, 'Hell, yes. When do we go?' We spent the rest of lunch discussing who we wanted to go along."

Simons would recruit and train the assault force. The first two men he selected were Army Captain Richard Meadows and Army Lt. Colonel Elliott Sydnor. Meadows would command the compound assault team while Sydnor would be Simons's executive officer and command the security detachment.

Air Force Brigadier General Leroy J. Manor would be the overall mission commander. Among his many responsibilities was the selection and training of the helicopter pilots who would fly Simons and his raiders to Son Tay. The men he chose were some of the best helicopter pilots in the Air Force; they included Lt. Colonel John Allison, Lt. Colonel Warner Britton, Major Frederic Donohue, Major Herb Kalen, and Lt. Colonel Herbert Zehnder.

Both Manor and Simons knew they faced a tight schedule. The Joint Chiefs wanted the mission conducted in October or November; that left only about sixty days for Manor and Simons to assemble their forces and train them for the complex mission.

At Fort Bragg, home of the "Green Berets," the Army's elite Special Forces, Simons spread the word that he was looking for a few



Brigadier General Donald Blackburn organized the Son Tay rescue effort.

volunteers and that those who were interested could report to the post theater for a briefing. Such was Simons's reputation that nearly five hundred men showed up.

Simons couldn't tell them much except that he needed men for a hazardous mission. Prospective volunteers could return after lunch with their personnel files. When the briefing resumed, about 250 Green Berets were present to hear it. From that group, Simons selected fifteen officers and eighty-two enlisted men. About fifty men would form the assault force; the rest would serve as alternates and members of the support detachment.

Meadows, the man whom Simons selected to lead the compound assault force, was a legend in his own right. When still a sergeant, he had captured an entire battery of Soviet-made artillery pieces from a North Vietnamese storage area in Laos. His exploit impressed General William Westmoreland so much that he awarded Meadows a battlefield commission.

"This wasn't going to be my first operation into North Vietnam," says Meadows. "But it would be the most rewarding. For years I had wanted to go in and get some of those poor guys out of those prison camps. God knows they had suf-

fered enough."

To train for their mission, the helicopter crews and assault force moved into an isolated area of Eglin Air Force Base in Florida. On August 20, the Air Force detachment began a series of practice flights in their huge eighteen-ton Sikorsky HH-53 helicopters. Most of the flights were over the Gulf of Mexico; the rest were conducted at very low altitudes in the mountains of Georgia and Alabama. The pilots flew at night, winding through the valleys and practicing inflight refueling from four-engine C-130 transports.

Meanwhile, the assault force made hundreds of practice night raids on a full-size canvas and wood mockup of the Son Tay prison compound. To avoid detection by Russian spy satellites, the mockup had to be taken apart every morning. Working at an almost frantic pace, the raiders assembled the tons of supplies—high-explosives, guns, radios, and bolt-cutters and related equipment—that they would need to break into the prison.

The maneuvering in the plan was the result of research by Air Force Lt. Colonel John Kennedy. He had spent weeks plotting the coverage and characteristics of North Vietnamese air defense radars. Every turn in the flight had been timed to take advantage of the mountain terrain en route and the scanning intervals of the enemy's radar antennae.

Manor's pilots would be threading the eye of the toughest air defense system in the world. To do so would require sophisticated electronics equipment to monitor the enemy radar. Because this would be too bulky to carry in the helicopters, a four-engined C-130 "Combat Talon" carrying the gear would guide the choppers to Son Tay. Another C-130 would refuel the helicopters en route; once over the objective the transports would drop flares to provide illumination for the raiders.

A third C-130 would guide five A-1 attack aircraft into North Vietnam. These planes would orbit near

Son Tay to provide support if the raiders met unexpected resistance. In addition, ten F-4 Phantoms would serve as a combat air patrol to protect the helicopters and C-130s from North Vietnamese jet fighters, while five F-105 "Wild Weasels" would act as decoys, drawing the fire of missile batteries in the area.

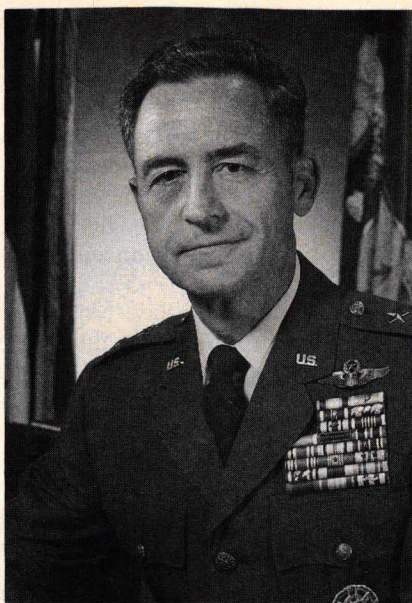
The Navy would also be involved in the mission. To divert attention from the raiders approaching North Vietnam from the west, a hundred planes from three aircraft carriers in the Gulf of Tonkin would conduct a diversionary raid on the harbor at Haiphong, east of Hanoi. This would be the largest night raid of the war, but the planes would carry no bombs—only flares! President Richard Nixon was still honoring a moratorium on bombing North Vietnam that President Lyndon Johnson had ordered in 1968.

The Air Force pilots selected to fly the C-130s were, like the helicopter pilots, some of the service's most skilled aviators. The HH-53's top cruising speed is about 105 knots. But a C-130 at 105 knots is near the bottom of its operational envelope—flying with flaps partially extended, just five miles above its stalling speed. Maneuvering in formation at low altitudes and minimum speeds in near-total darkness would leave absolutely no margin for error.

As the Army and Air Force teams trained together, two problems loomed. The planners agreed that success depended on Meadows's assault force getting inside the prison before the North Vietnamese could kill the prisoners. They also deemed it necessary to quickly destroy two guard towers in the compound without harming the prisoners beneath them.

Manor provided Simons with a simple solution to the second problem: use the mini-guns [six-barrelled, high-speed Gatling guns] carried by one of the HH-53s. Simulations tried in training exercises worked perfectly.

The other problem wasn't solved as easily. There was no way a big helicopter like an HH-53 could land



Brigadier General Leroy J. Manor
was mission commander.

between the trees and buildings in the prison camp's tiny courtyard. "At first we thought about using a small UH-1," Meadows says, "but you can't have inflight refueling with a Huey and you can only squeeze ten men in one—and I had to have at least fourteen."

Once again Simons turned to Manor for help. By now the helicopter pilots knew what they were training for, and Major Kalen recommended a solution. "I wanted to give Meadows and his men every second they needed," Kalen recalls. "I volunteered to crash-land an HH-3 [similar to an HH-53 but smaller] with Meadows and his men on board into the courtyard. When I first brought the subject up everyone looked at me like I was a man from Mars. But no one else could think of a better idea so my plan was grudgingly accepted."

On October 6, Simons and Manor put the entire assault force through a final, live-fire exercise that included everything the raiders would experience on the flight from Thailand to Son Tay. The helicopters flew every twist and turn just as they would on the actual mission. The exercise went like clockwork, and when it ended Manor knew his troops would be able to conduct the mission. Manor told Pentagon offi-

cials that he and Simons had recruited and trained a first-class fighting force and now all they needed was the signal to go.

In World War II a mission such as the Son Tay raid could have been ordered by a division commander; but in Vietnam, operations weren't that simple. Vietnam was a war of politics in which political expediency took priority over military necessity. The order for this mission had to come from President Nixon.

On Wednesday, November 18, 1970, eight days before Thanksgiving, Nixon sat in the Oval Office listening to an incredible briefing by Admiral Moorer and General Manor. Manor told the president that the mission was called "Operation Kingpin," and that a hand-picked team of Green Berets was already in Thailand waiting for the order to proceed. He explained how the raiders would be flown to the objective, evading North Vietnamese air defenses, and how the Navy would support the mission by flying a diversionary air strike against Haiphong.

Moorer further informed Nixon that intelligence had identified by name and service sixty-one POWs held in the camp. "Mr. President," Moorer said, "we intend to rescue every one of them." He closed the briefing by saying that the mission commanders believed the operation had a 97 percent chance of success.

All eyes turned to the president. Nixon remained silent for a long time as he weighed the pros and cons, both political and military. Finally he stood up and said, "Hell, how could anyone not approve this?"

Moorer picked up a direct line to the Pentagon where Blackburn waited. Moorer spoke just two words: "Execute Kingpin."

When Simons and his men arrived at Takhli Royal Thai Air Force Base in Thailand on Wednesday, November 18, most of the raiders still didn't know where they were going from there. All they knew was that they were in Southeast Asia. But Meadows knew their destination. "It was kind of funny,"

he says, "to listen to some of the guys wondering where we were going. When we landed in Thailand one guy swore to high heaven that we were still in Florida."

After they landed, Simons gave the men six hours to recover from the grueling twenty-eight-hour flight from Florida. Then he assembled his teams and briefed them quickly without naming their objective. "He gave the men a rough idea what the next couple of days were going to be like," Meadows says. "He told them we didn't have any time to waste."

At 3:30 A.M. the next day, Manor, now at his advance headquarters in Da Nang, received the order to proceed. He now faced the toughest decision yet: when to launch the raid? Typhoon Patsy was making carrier operations in the Gulf of Tonkin nearly impossible. To make matters worse, a cold front was moving out of China. But there was one bright spot on the horizon: meteorologists

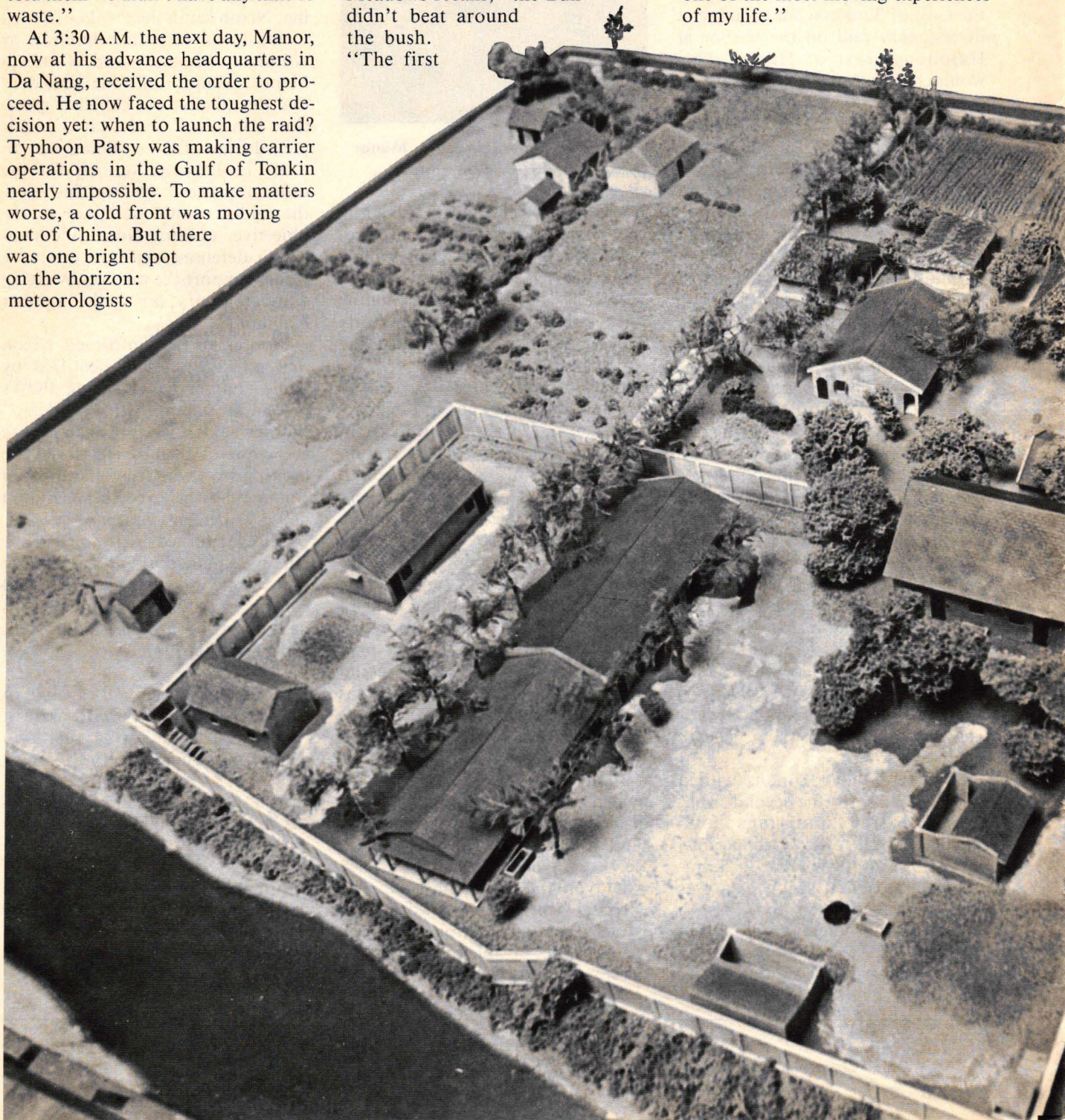
believed a high pressure ridge might form over Hanoi on Saturday, November 21. If this happened, the skies would clear for a few hours, giving Manor's pilots the vital hours of clear weather they needed. Although conditions for the raid were far from perfect, Manor decided to proceed with the mission on Saturday.

At 6 P.M. on Friday, November 20, Simons assembled his men for a final briefing that lasted forty-five minutes. Simons spoke first. As Meadows recalls, "the Bull" didn't beat around the bush.

"The first

thing he told the men was that they were going to rescue seventy American POWs from a camp called Son Tay. It was incredible. There was absolute silence for about twenty or thirty seconds. Then someone stood up and started clapping, and before long there wasn't a man in that room who wasn't on his feet clapping and whistling.

"I'd known Bull Simons for a long time, but that night was the only time I ever saw tears in his eyes. The whole thing was just incredible, one of the most moving experiences of my life."



A model used to train the Son Tay raiders shows the prison compound (foreground). To insure that they could reach American POWs in the prison before the North Vietnamese guards could react, the raiders planned to crash-land an HH-3 helicopter into the small courtyard immediately after a Gatling-gun-carrying HH-53 helo destroyed two guard towers. Two additional HH-53s carrying Green Berets would land outside the walls, and another pair of helos would stand by to pick up rescued prisoners.

AP/WIDE WORLD

After Meadows and Sydnor completed the briefing, the raiders were ferried by C-130 to Udorn Air Base and the helicopters that would fly them to Son Tay.

Just before 11 P.M. Friday night, Manor decided that the weather was good enough to proceed with the mission. He sent a one-word message to Simons: "Execute."

At Udorn the raiders made one last equipment check and climbed aboard their helicopters. Then the stillness of the night was shattered by the piercing whine of jet engines. The giant rotor blades turned, and the six choppers lifted slowly into the black sky. They passed over the air base and then fell in line behind the C-130 tanker, disappearing beyond the eastern horizon.

Just before 2 A.M.
on November

21, the Task Force 77 carriers turned into the wind and the first A-6 attack aircraft were catapulted into the night.

At about the same time, after three hours of intense night maneuvering, the Son Tay raiders crossed from Laos into North Vietnam and began to descend into the Red River Valley. Donohue pulled his HH-53 helicopter, "Apple Three," out of the formation and into the lead. "We were right on time," Donohue recalls. "At exactly 02:22 I spotted the prison. I eased off the throttle and we ghosted right over the camp just when the first [C-]130 started dropping flares. I opened my intercom and told my gunners to let 'em have it!"

A ribbon of fire arced away from each side door of Donohue's helicopter. In less than five seconds the two guard towers were destroyed. "I was too busy flying the ship to see it, but as soon as the towers went down my gunners started whooping it up like two six-year-old kids," remembers Donohue. He eased his helicopter away from the prison and set it down in a small rice paddy a few thousand yards to the west. For the next half-hour Donohue and his crew remained there, monitoring the radios while Simons's raiders hit the prison.

"Banana One," Kalen's HH-3 carrying Meadows's fourteen-man assault group, was next over the objective. Behind it followed "Apple One" and "Apple Two," the HH-53s carrying Simons's twenty-two-man command team and Sydnor's twenty-man security detachment.

Several of the trees in the prison compound were taller than anyone had anticipated. Kalen realized this when he started to crash-land into the courtyard. "Man, one of those suckers must have been at least 150 feet tall," he recalls. "I almost lost control when my main rotor made contact. I almost lost it again just before we hit. It seems someone had strung a clothesline or something across the courtyard at about six feet."

In the back of the helicopter, Meadows and his team braced for the impact. It was a rough landing.



After Son Tay

Army Brigadier General Donald Blackburn was reassigned from the Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities (SACSA) less than one month after the raid. He retired from the United States Army seven months later, after thirty-three years of military service. He was replaced at SACSA by Brigadier General Leroy J. Manor.

Air Force Major Richard Meadows retired in 1976 and began working for the Defense Department as a contract agent. In 1980, Meadows infiltrated Teheran, Iran, where he assembled the trucks and safe houses that would have been used by the U.S. armed forces Delta Team just before raiding the U.S. Embassy in an attempt to rescue Americans held hostage there. But that mission ended in disaster at Desert One when a helicopter and a C-130 transport collided. Meadows managed to escape from Teheran one week after the aborted raid.

Air Force Major Elmo Baker was released from captivity in North Vietnam in March 1973. He eventually returned to flight status.

Air Force Captain Wesley Schierman also survived his ordeal. The North Vietnamese released him in February 1973. Since then his health has improved and he is now a Northwest Airlines captain.

Colonel Arthur D. "Bull" Simons retired from the U.S. Army in July 1971. A first impression of Simons might be that he was a tough, craggy-faced old soldier who didn't mind spilling the blood of his men and his enemies. But nothing could be farther from the truth. Simons loved every man that he led. He was tough, but never brutal.

I remember when I was a young soldier at the U.S. Army Ranger School and felt that I couldn't climb a rope up a steep wall in the Fort Benning obstacle course. We had been awake for about

twenty hours and were exhausted. I sank to my knees, just about ready to quit. Then I felt a hand on my shoulder and raised my head to look Simons straight in the eye. I expected a blistering "tail-chewing." But the "Bull" patted my shoulder and gently said, "You can make it, son." Then he walked away. I climbed that rope and when I got to the top he was there waiting for me. He smiled and said, "I knew you could do it." This was the kind of man "Bull" Simons was.

When Simons retired, he moved to Florida. After his wife died in 1977 Simons became deeply depressed, for she had been the stabilizing factor in his life. Then an event twelve thousand miles away turned him around.

In January 1979, the Shah of Iran was forced from his throne, and mobs took over Teheran's streets. Using trumped-up charges, the Iranian revolutionary government arrested some of Ross Perot's Electronic Data Systems (EDS) employees. The U.S. government couldn't help them. Perot tried everything he could, including ransom, but the Iranians wouldn't negotiate. Then he remembered a colonel he had met at a party he had given for the Son Tay raiders in 1971. Perot called Simons.

Simons accomplished the seemingly impossible: he freed Perot's men from the Iranian jail and smuggled them five hundred miles across Iran to the Turkish border.

Before the operation started, Perot had offered to pay Simons for the mission, but the "Bull" wouldn't hear of it. When he later saw the men reunited with their families he turned to Perot and said, "I just got paid."

Simons died of a heart attack three months after leading Perot's men out of Iran. ★

—Richard Harris

A flying fire extinguisher fractured the ankle of Kalen's crew chief.

"When we hit the ground it nearly knocked the breath right out of me," remembers Meadows. But he was on his feet and running off the rear ramp almost before the dust had settled. "I had my weapon in one hand and a bullhorn in the other," he remembers. "I crouched down by the helo and started talking into the bullhorn. 'We're Americans. Keep your heads down. We'll be in your cells in a minute.' But I didn't hear a damn thing in response. It was right then that I got

that sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. I knew we had hit a dry hole."*

Before the North Vietnamese occupying the compound knew what

**The failure of U.S. intelligence to confirm the absence of POWs at Son Tay before the raid subsequently became the most controversial aspect of the operation. Photoreconnaissance during the fall of 1970 had suggested that activity at Son Tay had been reduced; and just days before the raid a list of active POW camps smuggled out of Hanoi in a pack of cigarettes made no mention of the prison.*

was happening, Meadows's assault team dashed from the helicopter toward the cell blocks and the front gate. Son Tay came alive with the angry sound of small-arms fire.

The assault group had been on the ground about three minutes when a deafening explosion rocked the compound, and a portion of the seven-foot-high south wall fell down. Meadows thought that Simons and his command team had arrived. But the team was Sydnor's, not Simons's. The "Bull" and his men were about four hundred meters away—outside the wrong camp.

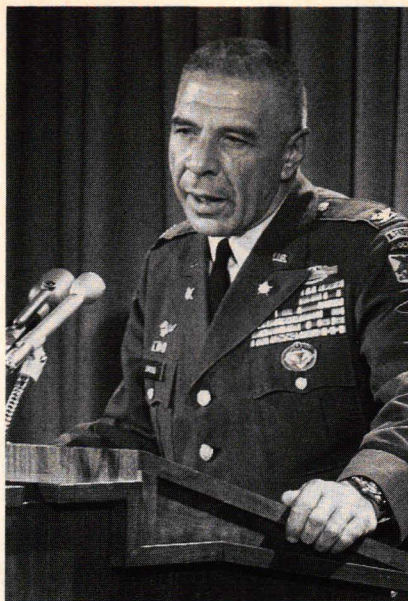
Soon after "Apple One" dropped him off, Simons had realized that something was wrong. Small-arms fire and grenades sounded all around him, but he couldn't hear Meadows bellowing on his bullhorn. And when his men blew a hole in the wall and entered the compound, it became clear that Simons's team was in the wrong place. Simons ordered his radio operator to get that chopper back—fast.

Simons's immediate concern became the deadly firefight that broke out with the inhabitants of what Americans planning the raid had called the "secondary school." Eighteen years after the Son Tay prison raid, no one has positively identified the men occupying this compound. All anyone has said for certain is that they were *not* North Vietnamese. They may have been Chinese or Russian advisors. But whoever they were, they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. In five minutes Simons's men killed at least one hundred of the mysterious occupants.

Meanwhile, at the prison Meadows and his men had killed at least twenty-two North Vietnamese soldiers. "We hit 'em so fast most of them never knew what hit them," Meadows says. "By the time the Bull [Simons] got there we had pretty much taken care of all the enemy troops inside the compound."

By then all six of the helicopters were on the ground in holding areas west of the prison, waiting for the order to pick up the POWs. The pilots tensely monitored the raid on their radios. "It was tough just sitting there," Donohue recalls. "But we weren't bored. The North Vietnamese were putting on a fantastic light show. There were surface-to-air missiles going up all around us and exploding all over the sky. It didn't look like they even tried to get a radar lock. They were just shooting them straight up."

"We had been on the ground for about ten minutes now," remembers Meadows, "and every report I got was 'negative items'—that was our code for no prisoners. I decided that I would check it out myself. I ran through every cell block, and



Colonel Arthur Simons describes the raid at a press conference.

then I got on the radio and reported that the search was complete and there were no prisoners in Son Tay."

When Simons received this message he ordered Meadows to start moving his men out of the compound to prepare for extraction by helicopter. About fourteen minutes after Meadows crash-landed into the prison, the first chopper landed back outside the prison walls. Kalen's crew and thirteen of Meadows's men boarded the chopper. The watch officer signaled that everyone was aboard, and the helicopter ascended.

Twenty-two minutes into the raid the second chopper landed and another team of raiders boarded. A quick count was taken and the helicopter headed for Thailand. Meadows re-entered the prison and set the delayed-action explosive charges in the disabled HH-3; then he rejoined Simons's command group.

Five minutes later the final chopper landed and the last of the raiders climbed aboard. The helicopter lifted off and headed for home. Six minutes later a massive explosion rocked Son Tay as Kalen's million-dollar HH-3 was blown into pieces.

The Green Berets and the Air Force pilots had performed flawlessly. They had successfully penetrated the toughest air defense sys-

tem in the world without being detected and had launched their attack so quickly that the enemy never knew what was happening. The prison search had been swift and the extraction perfect. Only one thing went wrong: Son Tay held no prisoners.

"It was a long ride back to Thailand," Meadows says. "I don't think anyone said a word. Everyone felt too let down to talk."

Fifteen miles away, at Dong Hoi prison camp, Major Elmo Baker was jolted awake when a battery of missiles opened fire. The POWs rushed to the windows of their cells from where they could see the flares hanging over Son Tay. They also heard the helicopters. "Right then I knew they had got our message," Baker recalls. "When I heard those choppers I damn near cried."

Although Simons and his gallant raiders were forced to go home empty-handed after a dangerous, unsuccessful mission, for POWs it was the greatest event of their captivity. After years of brutal treatment, American prisoners finally knew that their country hadn't forgotten them. But there was an even greater benefit: soon after the raid, all of the POWs were consolidated into prisons in Hanoi and given better treatment. Contrary to popular belief, the United States armed forces were beating their enemy; the North Vietnamese realized that in the event of defeat the POWs were their only "ace in the hole." Viewed in the context of its effect on the morale and treatment of the American prisoners in North Vietnam, the Son Tay raid can be judged a resounding success. ★

Richard Harris is a free-lance writer who specializes in military affairs and history. His work has appeared in armed forces journals and popular magazines.

Recommended additional reading: The Raid by Benjamin F. Schemmer (Harper & Row, 1976) provides a complete account of the attempt to rescue American POWs from Son Tay Prison. A paperback edition published by Avon Books is currently in print.