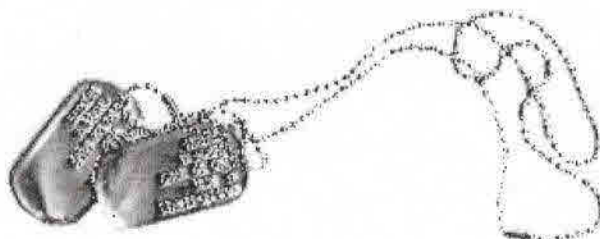


The Son Tay Raid

"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 west of Hanoi." - Colonel Arthur "Bull" Simons



By the spring of 1970, there were more than 450 known American POWs in North Vietnam and another 970 American servicemen who were missing in action. Some of the POWs had been imprisoned over 2,000 days, longer than any serviceman had ever spent in captivity in any war in America's history. Furthermore, the reports of horrid conditions, brutality, torture and even death were being told in intelligence reports.

In May of 1970, reconnaissance photographs revealed the existence of two prison camps west of Hanoi. At Son Tay, 23 miles from Hanoi, one photograph identified a large "K" - a code for "come get us" - drawn in the dirt. At the other camp Ap Lo, about 30 miles west of North Vietnam's capital, another photo showed the letters SAR (Search and Rescue), apparently spelled out by the prisoner's laundry, and an arrow with the number 8, indicating the distance the men had to travel to the fields they worked in.

Reconnaissance photos (at right) taken by SR-71 "Blackbirds" revealed that Son Tay "was active". The camp itself was in the open and surrounded by rice paddies. In close proximity was the 12th North Vietnamese Army (NVA) Regiment totaling approximately 12,000 troops. Also nearby was an artillery school, a supply depot, and an air defense installation.



Five hundred yards south was another compound called the "secondary school", which was an administration center housing 45 guards. To make matters more difficult, Phuc Yen Air Base was only 20 miles northeast of Son Tay.

It was determined that Son Tay was being enlarged because of the increased activity at the camp. It was evident that the raid would have to be executed swiftly. If not, the Communists could have planes in the air and a reactionary force at the camp within minutes.

Son Tay itself was small and was situated amid 40-foot trees to obstruct the view. Only one power and telephone line entered it. The POWs were kept in four large buildings in the main compound. Three observation towers and a 7-foot wall encompassed the camp. Because of its diminutive size, only one chopper could land within the walls. The remainder would have to touch down outside the compound. Another problem the planning group had to consider was the weather. The heavy monsoon downpours prohibited the raid until late fall. Finally, November was selected because the moon would be high enough over the horizon for good visibility, but low enough to obscure the enemy's vision.

The National Security Agency (NSA) tracked the NVA air defense systems and artillery units nearby. Also, in addition to the "Blackbirds", unmanned Buffalo Hunter "Drones" flew over the camp as well, although they had to cease flying because many feared that the NVA would spot them. In July, an SR-71 photo recon mission depicted "less active than usual" activity in the camp. On Oct. 3, Son Tay showed very little signs of life. However, flights over Dong Hoi, 15 miles to the east of Son Tay, were picking up increased activity. The planners were scratching their heads. Had the POWs been moved? Had the NVA picked up signs that a raid was imminent?

Brigadier General Donald D. Blackburn, who had trained Filipino guerrillas in World War II, suggested a small group of Special Forces volunteers rescue the prisoners of war. He chose Colonel Arthur D. "Bull" Simons to lead the group.

Col Simons went to Fort Bragg, home of the Army Special Forces and asked for volunteers. He wanted 100 men possessing certain identified skills and preferably having had recent combat experience in Southeast Asia. Approximately 500 men responded. Each was interviewed by Simons, and Sergeant Major Pylant. From that group 100 dedicated volunteers were selected. All the required skills were covered. All were in top physical condition. Although a force of 100 men was selected, Simon's believed that the number might be excessive. However as some degree of redundancy and a reservoir of spares were deemed necessary, it was decided that they would train the 100.

The ground component commander selected was Lt Colonel "Bud" Sydnor from Fort Benning, Georgia. Sydnor had an impeccable reputation as a combat leader. Additionally selected to be a member of the task force from Fort Benning was another superb combat leader, Capt Dick Meadow. Meadows would later lead the team that made the risky landing inside the prison compound.

Since the compound was more than 20 miles west of Hanoi, planners of the operation believed Son Tay was isolated enough to enable a small group to land, release prisoners and withdraw. In addition to a table model of the Son Tay

prisoner of war camp, code named "Barbara". A full-scale replica of the compound was constructed at Eglin Air Force Base, Florida, where a select group of Special Forces soldiers trained at night. The mock compound was dismantled during the day to elude detection by Soviet satellites. Despite security measures, time was running out. Evidence, although inconclusive, showed that perhaps Son Tay was being emptied.

On November 18, 1970, the Son Tay raiders moved to Takhli, Thailand, a CIA operated secure compound. It was here that final preparations were made. The CIA compound at Takhli became a beehive of activity. Weapons and other equipment checks were carefully conducted. Ammunition was issued. Simons, Sydnor and Meadows made the final selection of the force numbers. Of the original 100 SF members of the force, 56 were selected for the mission. This was unwelcome news for the 44 trained and ready, but not selected. It was known from the beginning that the size of the force would be limited to only the number considered essential for the task.



Only Simons (pictured at right) and three others knew what the mission was to be. Five hours before takeoff November 20, Simons told his 56 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 west of Hanoi."*

A few men let out low whistles. Then, spontaneously, they stood up and began applauding. Simons had one other thing to say:

"You are to let nothing, nothing interfere with the operation. Our mission is to rescue prisoners, not take prisoners. And if we walk into a trap, if it turns out that they know we're coming, don't dream about walking out of North Vietnam-unless you've got wings on your feet. We'll be 100 miles from Laos; it's the wrong part of the world for a big retrograde movement. If there's been a leak, we'll know it as soon as the second or third chopper sets down; that's when they'll cream us. if it happens, I want to keep this force together. we will back up to the Song Con River and, by Christ, let them come across that God damn open ground. we'll make them pay for every foot across the sonofabitch."

Later in their barracks at Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base Simons' men stowed their personal effects - family photos, letters, money, anything that should be returned to their next of kin. The raiders were then transported in closed vans to the base's biggest hangar. Inside the hangar, a four engine C-130 waited to take them on board. The raiders made a final weapon and equipment check that lasted one hour and 45 minutes.

The plan was not unduly complicated. Using in-flight refueling, the six helicopters would fly from Thailand, across Laos and into North Vietnam. While various diversions were taking place locally and across North Vietnam, the task force would close on the camp under cover of darkness. The single HH-3H "Banana 1"

with a small assault force, would be crashed-landed inside the prison compound, while two HH-53s "Apple 1 and Apple 2" would disgorge the bulk of the assault force outside. The wall would be breached and the prison buildings stormed. Any North Vietnamese troops found inside would be killed and the POWs would be taken outside and flown home in the HH-53s.



On Nov. 21, 1970, at approximately 11:18 p.m., the Son Tay raiders, accompanied by C-130Es called Combat Talons, departed Udorn, Thailand, for the final phase of their mission. At the same time, diversionary attacks were being launched all over the country. The U.S. Navy began a huge carrier strike against North Vietnam's port city of Haiphong. Ten Air Force F-4 Phantoms were flying MIG combat air

patrol to screen the force from enemy fighters, while an F-105 Wild Weasel decoy force launched a raid on enemy surface-to-air missile sites. Five A-1 Skyraiders with the call sign "Peach One to Five", arrived on station to suppress ground fire around the enemy camp.

As the group neared the prison, the two "Jolly Greens", dubbed "Apple-4" and "Apple-5" hovered at 1,500 feet to act as reserve flareships in the event the C-130s' flares did not ignite.

Suddenly, Major Frederick M. "Marty" Donohue's HH-53 helicopter, call sign "Apple-3", developed trouble. Without warning, a yellow trouble light appeared signaling transmission problems. Donohue calmly informed his co-pilot, Capt. Tom Waldron, to "ignore the SOB". In a normal situation, Donohue would have landed. But this was no normal mission. "Apple-3" kept going. As Donohue's chopper "floated" across Son Tay's main compound, the door gunners let loose 4,000 rounds a minute from their mini-guns. The observation tower in the northwest section of the camp erupted into flames. With that, Donohue set down at his "holding point" in a rice paddy just outside the prison.

As Maj. Herb Kalen tried to negotiate a landing inside the compound, the almost lost control of his chopper, call sign "Banana-1", that was carrying the assault group code-named "Blueboy".

The 40-foot trees that surrounded Son Tay were, in actuality, much larger. "One tree", a pilot remembered, "must have been 150 feet tall ... we tore into it like a big lawn mower. There was a tremendous vibration ... and we were down."

Luckily, only one person was injured; a crew chief suffered a broken ankle. Regaining his composure, Special Forces Captain Richard Meadows scurried from the downed aircraft and said in a calm voice through his bullhorn: "We're Americans. Keep your heads down. We're Americans. Get on the floor. We'll be in

your cells in a minute." No one answered back, though. The raiders sprung into action immediately. Automatic weapons ripped into the guards. Other NVA, attempting to flee, were cut down as they tried to make their way through the east wall. Fourteen men entered the prison to rescue the POWs. However, to their disappointment, none were found.

As the raiders were neutralizing the compound, Lt. Col. John Allison's helicopter, call sign "Apple-2", with the "Redwine" group aboard, was heading toward Son Tay's south wall. As his door gunners fired their mini-guns on the guard towers, Allison wondered where "Apple-1" was. Code-named "Greenleaf", it was carrying "Bull" Simons. Allison put his HH-3 inside the compound and the Special Forces personnel streamed down the rear ramp. Wasting no time, they blew the utility pole and set up a roadblock about 100 yards from the landing zone (LZ). A heated firefight ensued. Guards were "scurrying like mice" in an attempt to fire on the raiders. In the end, almost 50 NVA guards were killed at Son Tay.

"Apple-1", piloted by Lt.Col. Warner A. Britton, was having troubles of its own. The chopper had veered off the mark and was 450 meters south of the prison and had erroneously landed at the "secondary school." Simons knew it wasn't Son Tay. The structures and terrain were different and, to everyone's horror, it was no "secondary school" - it was a barracks filled with enemy soldiers - 100 of whom were killed in five minutes.

As the chopper left, the raiders opened up with a barrage of automatic weapons. Capt. Udo Walther cut down four enemy soldiers and went from bay to bay riddling their rooms with his CAR-15. Realizing their error, the group radioed "Apple-1" to return and pick up the raiders from their dilemma.

Simons, meanwhile, jumped into a trench to await the return of Britton when an NVA leaped into the hole next to him. Terrified, and wearing only his underwear, the Vietnamese froze. Simons pumped six shells from his .357 Magnum handgun into the trooper's chest, killing him instantly.

Britton's chopper quickly returned when he received the radio transmission that Simon's group was in the wrong area. He flew back to Son Tay and deposited the remaining raiders there. Things were beginning to wind down. There was little resistance from the remaining guards.

Meadows radioed to Lt.Col. Elliot P. "Bud" Sydnor, the head of the "Redwine" group on the raid, "Negative items". There were no POWs. The raid was over. Total time elapsed was 27 minutes.

What went wrong? Where were the POWs? It would be later learned that the POWs had been relocated to Dong Hoi, on July 14. Their move was not due to North Vietnam learning of the planned rescue attempt but because of an act of nature. The POWs were moved because the well in the compound had dried up and the nearby Song Con River, where Son Tay was located, had begun to overflow its banks. This flooding problem, not a security leak, resulted in the prisoners being transported to Dong Hoi to a new prison nicknamed "Camp Faith". Murphy's Law

- "Whatever can go wrong will go wrong" - had struck again.

Was the raid then a failure? Despite the intelligence failure, the raid was a tactical success. The assault force got to the camp and took their objective. It's true no POWs were rescued, but no friendly lives were lost in the attempt. Furthermore, and more importantly, the raid sent a clear message to the North Vietnam that Americans were outraged at the treatment our POWs were receiving and that we would go to any length to bring our men home. At Dong Hoi, 15 miles to the east of Son Tay, American prisoners woke up to the sound of surface-to-air missiles being launched, the prisoners quickly realized that Son Tay was being raided. Although they knew they had missed their ride home, these prisoners now knew for sure that America cared and that attempts were being made to free them. Morale soared. The North Vietnamese got the message. The raid triggered subtle but important changes in their treatment of American POWs. Within days, all of the POWs in the outlying camps had been moved to Hanoi. Men who had spent years by themselves in a cell found themselves sharing a cell with dozens of others. From their point of view the raid was the best thing that could have happened to them short of their freedom. In the final assessment, the raid may not have been a failure after all.

Political cartoonist R.B. Crockett of the *Washington Star* said it best, and first, the day after the news of the Son Tay raid broke. At the top of the *Star's* editorial page was a drawing of a bearded, gaunt POW. His ankle chained to a post outside his hutch. He looks up watching the flight of American Helicopters fade into the distance. Below the cartoon is a three word quote: "*Thanks for trying*" .

Brigadier General Leroy J. Manor, Colonel Simons, SFC Adderly, and TSgt Leroy W. Wright were decorated by President Nixon at the White House on November 25, 1970 for their parts in the rescue attempt. The remainder of the raiders were decorated by Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird at Fort Bragg, North Carolina on December 9, 1970. Click [here](#) for a complete list of awardees.

The Son Tay Raid would not be Colonel Simons last attempt to free prisoners in a foreign country. In early 1979 , after his retirement, Colonel Simons was asked by Ross Perot, then Chairman of EDS, to plan and conduct a rescue operation to free two Electronic Data Systems, Inc (EDS) employees who were taken hostage by the Iranian government. In February 1979, Colonel Simons planning efforts proved successful as he organized a mob in Tehran which stormed Gazre prison where the EDS employees were being held hostage. The two Americans, along with 11,000 Iranian prisoners, were freed. Col. Simons and his party fled 450 miles to Turkey, and were later returned to the United States. Noted author, Ken Follet, wrote a best selling novel, "*On Wings of Eagles*" , (Morrow & Company, 1983) about the rescue. The book was later made into an NBC TV mini series.

Colonel Simons died of heart complications three months later.

If you would like to learn more about the Son Tay Raid, I recommend that you visit the Son Tay Association Webpage or read the following: "*The Raid*" by Benjamin F. Schemmer(Harper & Rowe, 1976); "*The Secret Vietnam War: The*

*United States Air Force in Thailand,
1961-*

1975" , by Jeffrey D.Glasser (McFarland & Company); *"Bring our POWs Back Alive,"* by Dale Andradé, Vietnam Magazine, February 1990; and *"SOG - The Secret Wars of American Commandos in Vietnam"* by John L. Plaster (Simon & Schuster, 1997).

Song playing is "Airwolf"



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