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Son Tay: The Real Story

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Reporters News Service

WASHINGTON—The White House relied on basic military intelligence that was at least six months old in approving the unsuccessful commando raid last November on the Son Tay prisoner of war camp inside North Vietnam.

Interviews over the past two months revealed that the Pentagon's first information about the Son Tay camp—23 miles west of Hanoi—was supplied by a former North Vietnamese prison guard who was either captured or defected during the U. S.-South Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in May, 1970.

The guard, whose capture was considered highly classified information, provided military intelligence teams with invaluable information about the location, operation and construction of the Son Tay prison. The detailed data even included what kind of locks were on the cell doors and where they were located.

By July, the interrogation of the guard had been completed and the Air Force was ordered to initiate a series of flights over the prison. Amazingly, at no time before the actual invasion of the prison—Nov. 20, six months after the guard's capture—was the military able to establish any further proof that Americans were, in fact, being detained inside. In essence, the high-risk operation was staged—with approval from President Nixon—although the only facts were those supplied by the former prison camp guard.

Yet there was no available evidence indicating that the military planners "knew" that the Son Tay camp did not contain prisoners, as Sen. Fulbright (D-Ark.), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations committee, has publicly charged.

What does emerge from an intensive investigation into the Son Tay raid is a serious indictment of the practices and operation of the Defense Intelligence Agency, which was in charge of intelligence for the mission. The DI photo analysts somehow interpreted what turned out to be a vegetable garden growing inside the Son Tay compound

as evidence that many American prisoners were inside.

Here is the story behind the planning behind the Son Tay operation:

The capture—or defection—of the North Vietnamese guard in May, 1970, was a major achievement; such were never sent by Hanoi into South Vietnam because of the high risk of capture. At least three POW camps previously were known to exist inside the city limits of Hanoi, but the location of other facilities was not known. Despite this, the military had long been seeking permission to raid one of the known camps.

One clue to the inadequacy of the over-all American intelligence operation inside North Vietnam emerged from the simple fact that the Pentagon learned about the Son Tay camp from the captured guard. The Son Tay area had long been known to the intelligence community and was frequently photographed. According to defense sources, a major military construction program, manned by a force estimated at 15,000 Chinese communists, got under way there in 1965 or 1966. The area also became the site of a MIG base early in the air war and was a key target area

during the heavy bombings from 1965 through November, 1968.

The Central Intelligence Agency also had been unable to develop any solid information about prisoner of war camps. Beginning in the mid-1960's, it had attempted unsuccessfully to infiltrate highly trained teams of South Vietnamese into North Vietnam. Most of the groups—known in the intelligence community as "bell teams"—were dropped by parachute in the Red River delta, northwest of Hanoi, but quickly became, as a former agent said, "ground up like hamburger. They'd get wrapped up in two or three days," he added, largely due to the high state of internal security in the north.

In July, 1970, the military asked the CIA for any information it had on the physical makeup of Son Tay, but that apparently was the extent of the CIA's involvement. The raid on Son Tay

was to be an all-military affair, with overall direction and planning coming from the Pentagon's counterinsurgency office and intelligence coming from photo interpretation supplied by DIA.

The early reconnaissance photographs of the prison camp indicate that it was still in heavy use and were highly encouraging to the Pentagon. A highly skilled team was carefully assembled; men were handpicked from offices throughout the Pentagon and assigned to the secret operation. The planning was rigidly bureaucratized for security reasons: one group of men worked on means for getting a rescue team safely in and out of North Vietnam; another group did the day-by-day analysis to determine a crucial fact—were the captured pilots there?

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The evidence that the photo interpreters viewed as encouraging, however, was far from definite proof that the pilots were at Son Tay. One man who worked on the project, attempting to explain its failure, argued that photo reconnaissance is not an exact science at all, despite the widespread beliefs of the general public so conditioned to descriptions of miraculous close-ups from "eye in the sky" cameras 100 miles up. Source added:

"The photograph of the crowd on the Ellipse during the march on Washington [the anti-war demonstration in November, 1969]—it was an Air Force picture published in a lot of newspapers. Now, don't ask anybody to break down how many of the people were Negroes and how many were Caucasians. We just can't do it. But after they left, you sure could tell that they were there—the grass would be all trampled."

A similarly trampled appearance was evident in what seemed to be a grassy area inside the tiny Son Tay compound. The aerial photographs also established that the guard towers and basic layout of Son Tay were very similar in design to that of the POW camps inside Hanoi. It was agreed—without ever seeing an identifiable prisoner—that the Son Tay facility was an active POW camp for Americans.

Sometime in the July-August period, the military got a shock when during a period of heavy flooding of the Red River delta, the camp suddenly was vacated. The changing geography of the camp was apparent. The trampled look disappeared.

When the flood waters receded, the geography changed again—much to everyone's relief—and the courtyard suddenly took on "that well-worn look," as one analyst described it. By now it was August and the White House was ap-

proached. Briefings were presented to President Nixon and Henry Kissinger, the President's advisor on security affairs. The President was, according to later White House accounts, "enthusiastic" about the idea and authorized full-scale planning and training for a search and rescue mission.

The cloak-and-dagger operation was code-named the Joint Contingency task group Ivory Coast, and training began in August at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida. On September 1, 1970, it was the first time that the military had established an intelligence "book" on a POW camp that was not inside the Hanoi city limits.

But there were many basic intelligence problems that were never overcome. For one thing, no one had established beyond a reasonable doubt that the Son Tay prison was holding Americans. "We had a hypothesis based on various sources of information," said one analyst who worked on the project. "But as far as being able to say, 'Hey, there go two more guys into the camp'—well, we couldn't." The official added:

"Our situation was this: So a river comes out and floods—and they [the North Vietnamese] move the pilots out. The place overgrows. It looks bad. Bingo. The grass starts to wear down again. Hey, it looks good. It's a fifty-fifty chance they moved them back."

There were, apparently, only a few cautious doubts raised—largely because the high secrecy of the operation kept details away from many officials who might have pointed out more vigorously that the military was planning a high-risk raid.

There had been previous mistakes based on aerial photographs. One former intelligence official recalled the time photo interpreters spotted an enclosed camp area in North Vietnam with

a double-barbed wire fence. After observing it for a while, they concluded it was a base with some military significance and targeted it for a bombing raid. "A few days later," the official said, "North Vietnam began claiming we had bombed the death ward of a leper colony. Intelligence got fooled."

The 101-man joint Air Force-Army commando team took off in helicopters and landed in the Son Tay compound. No prisoners were found, but it was noticed that most of the open space inside the prison was being used by the North Vietnamese for a carefully cultivated vegetable garden.

No Way of Knowing

Intelligence analysts later concluded during postmortems on the raid that the "well-worn look," which had become so clearly discernible after the July-August flooding, might have been a result of the gardening efforts. Even more disturbing was the fact that the prisoners could have been transferred from Son Tay in August, just after the flooding began and just as the commando team began its arduous training for a mission already doomed.

During a little-noticed press conference at Eglin in early December, Brig. Gen. Leroy Manor, head of the commando team, told reporters: "We weren't able to tell exactly when they moved the prisoners of war . . . I'd say it could have been about three months. And this is a judgment, and I have nothing absolutely definite to base this on."

In fact, the Pentagon had no way of knowing if American prisoners had been inside the camp at all—even before the flooding—since the captured guard last worked there early in 1970.

Intelligence men in the Pentagon later were only able to lamely conclude that

the base had either been closed permanently or temporarily. "Was it being refurbished? Was it being disinfected? We didn't know," one of the men who took part in the planning said.

The Vietnamese guards in the camp had the latest style Chinese weapons, AK47 machine guns, a fact that led many analysts to decide that they were a small housekeeping team, perhaps for the prisoners to return.

The last overflight of the prison, concluded just hours before the operation began, still showed signs of occupation—the "well-worn look."

Despite the failure, most members of the planning and intelligence teams took solace in the demonstrated ability of American commandos to penetrate North Vietnam's air space and get in and out of Son Tay safely. And one Air Force officer closely involved with POW affairs later said with pride during an interview that his counterparts in England had described the mission as "the best show since Tobruk."