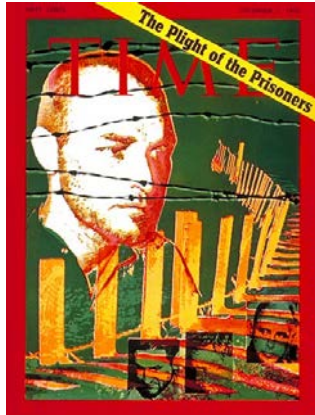


Nov70 Son Tay



FOR two years no bombs had fallen in the Red River Valley in North Viet Nam, and only occasionally had the sirens disrupted Hanoi's nights when unarmed U.S. reconnaissance flights triggered radar shields. Suddenly, in the early morning hours, radar screens all over North Viet Nam blossomed in menacing blips. Across communications nets lashed word that waves of U.S. planes were bombing heavily south of the 19th parallel: north of the DMZ, east of the Laotian border. That had happened before in the interim since the bombing halt —five times, in fact. But this was something far more.

Scores of fighter-bombers were weaving back and forth across North Viet Nam north of the 19th parallel in what appeared to be bewildering bombing patterns. Flares were drifting down to illuminate the vulnerable ships and docks of Haiphong harbor. As North Viet Nam's air-defense commanders opened up with cannon and missilery, MIGs scrambled into action all across the country, and South China also went into a state of advanced military readiness. To many North Vietnamese, it looked as if the U.S. were invading their country. It was 2 a.m. when allied monitors in South Viet Nam heard the top-priority emergency transmission crackling from Hanoi: "There's a landing! There's a landing!"

Landing, yes; invasion, no—although the confusion and panic engendered by the illusion of invasion was precisely the aim of the U.S. planners. In one of the most daring and meticulously rehearsed operations of the long war, a fleet of U.S. helicopters was skimming into North Viet Nam at treetop level, slipping through the narrow "windows" or gaps in Hanoi's radar system frantically preoccupied with the fighter-bombers high in the Vietnamese sky. Aboard the choppers were about 40 Green Beret and Ranger troops led by Army Colonel Arthur ("The Bull") Simons, 52, a near-legendary veteran of World War II, Laos and Viet Nam. He is considered by many to be quite simply the finest derring-do combat commander in the U.S. Army. Like the 20 or so Air Force specialists manning the helicopters, all the raiders had been volunteers for a mission unknown, one with only a fifty-fifty chance of success; for many on board the choppers, it had been enough to know that The Bull was in charge.

On the Minute

Their target was a scant 20 nautical miles from the center of Hanoi: Son Tay, an American prisoner-of-war compound. As the tiny fleet scuttled into North Viet Nam, National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger followed its progress at the Pentagon. The radio monitors in Washington were only two minutes behind the actual events. When the choppers passed their first checkpoint, they were seven minutes ahead of schedule. Kissinger made a quiet joke to a high-ranking officer about the plan's being off. Just wait, Kissinger was told. By the time the squadron passed the last checkpoint, it was only a minute ahead; the raiders came down on Son Tay, guns blazing, right on the dot. Incredibly, they had not been detected by the North Vietnamese until one minute before touchdown.

All but one of the helicopters were HH-53s, giant ships able to fly at almost 200 m.p.h. carrying 38 fully armed infantrymen and refueling in midair. The exception was a single HH-3 chopper, in which rode The Bull and his initial assault squad. The smaller craft came down inside the cramped camp yard; as its rotor tips whacked into trees, the pilot deliberately crash-landed it in the middle of the compound. Simons probably wanted to waste no time under fire while positioning for a landing. The other choppers landed outside the compound. There was a smattering of ground fire as the troops came in. The soldiers expected to meet as many as 100 guards, but there were only an estimated half a dozen. Colonel Simons found himself five yards from one North Vietnamese, who, he reported wryly, seemed very surprised to see him.

Unhappily, the Americans were surprised as well. There were no American prisoners to be found. For some 50 minutes, the soldiers dashed from building to building, breaking locks and searching the abandoned cells. Though U.S. fighter-bombers rocketed and strafed nearby antiaircraft batteries and troop areas to prevent a North Vietnamese reaction force from reaching Son Tay, some North Vietnamese reinforcements did arrive. One American was slightly wounded by an AK-47 automatic-rifle burst. Another broke his foot in the crash landing of the HH-3 helicopter, which was blown up before the Americans left. There were no other casualties; there was only an awful sense of dismay. All the courage, the long training, the perfectly executed mission, had come to naught. Said First Lieut. George Petrie, one of the raiders: "When we realized that there was no one in the compound, I had the most horrible feeling of my life."

Invitation to the Dance

The raid had its genesis a year ago, when President Nixon received a group of 26 wives of prisoners at the White House. His staff found Nixon clearly affected by the meeting; it imparted a human dimension to the problem that Nixon had not felt before. Some of the women, he said, had been separated from their husbands for nearly five years, but they showed no bitterness and did not demand an end to the war at any price. Nixon asked Secretary of State William Rogers, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird and Kissinger to get to work on a two-track approach to the problem of the P.O.W.s. He wanted increased diplomatic pressure on Hanoi; one White House aide says that since then hardly a week has gone by that there has not been some new move to get the P.O.W.s freed. None has worked.

At the same time, Nixon asked the military for some unconventional rescue ideas. Contingency plans for commando search-and-rescue missions into North Viet Nam already existed, and a

number of similar raids had been carried out in enemy-held areas of South Viet Nam over the years. (Significantly, none of them had ever found a single live prisoner either, but the omen was discounted.) Eventually, Laird told the President that his intelligence people had recommended a P.O.W. camp at Son Tay as a likely target for search and rescue. Nixon was enthusiastic. On Aug. 11 he gave a go-ahead for planning the operation without actually authorizing the mission. The Pentagon assigned Brigadier General LeRoy Manor, head of air commandos at Eglin Air Force Base, Fla., and Colonel Simons, an ex-Green Beret then stationed at Fort Bragg, N.C., to lead what became known as Joint Contingency Task Group Ivory Coast.

With some 100 carefully chosen Army and Air Force volunteers, most of them Viet Nam veterans, Manor and Simons set up a secret training center at Eglin. "It was sort of by invitation only," says an Army officer. "The invitation didn't indicate when the dance would be over, but it did mention that it would be dangerous." A full-size mock-up of the Son Tay camp was built in the vastness of Eglin's preserve, based on intelligence from travelers and diplomats who had heard about the camp in Hanoi, and aerial reconnaissance. It was put up each night and taken down each morning to preserve security. There were other security precautions as well. The training, which began Aug. 20 and continued for 21 months, included 150 nighttime practice assaults on the camp. It was, said Lieut. Petrie, "very meticulous, very long and very arduous."

On Oct. 7, President Nixon proposed "the immediate and unconditional release of all prisoners of war held by both sides." (Laird said last week that Saigon holds 35,000 P.O.W.s to the enemy's 3,000.) When that got no response, the U.S. turned again to the Ivory Coast alternative. Weather and moonlight conditions looked good for an assault either at the end of October or at the end of November. The weather worsened, so the October date was scratched. After a National Security Council meeting on Nov. 5, Laird stayed behind and told Nixon that it was time for a decision if the raid was to be held that month. On Nov. 11—Veterans Day, renamed "Prisoners of War Day" this year by presidential proclamation—Nixon assembled Rogers, Laird, Kissinger and Admiral Thomas Moorer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Moorer reviewed the plans. The hazards were clear. The slow, low-flying, vulnerable helicopters could be detected and shot down. There might be more enemy units defending Son Tay than the 100 men that the raiders expected. Finally, the P.O.W.s might have been moved; this was considered the least likely possibility. Nixon wanted to go ahead. "If you get 50 men out, it is worth it," said one of his advisers. "No," the President replied, "if you get five, it is worth it."

Scathed Secretary

The raid coincided with the bombing strikes south of the 19th parallel in retaliation for the loss of a U.S. RF4 reconnaissance plane over North Viet Nam on Nov. 13. Those bombings were justified on the grounds that Hanoi had violated the "understanding" Washington claims it reached when Lyndon Johnson called a halt to bombing North Viet Nam on Nov. 1, 1968. (The U.S. insists that under the terms of the understanding it has the right to overfly North Viet Nam with unarmed reconnaissance aircraft. Hanoi denies that it agreed to such an arrangement.)

Planes would also be needed to create a diversion over central North Viet Nam, where Son Tay was located. Most of those sorties would drop flares or noise devices that go off like strings of giant firecrackers, creating much noise but capable of no damage. Some, however, would have to

neutralize soldiers and planes close to Son Tay with hard stuff—actions sure to bring violent protests from Hanoi and probably from the U.S. peace movement. There seemed no other resort to protect the raiders during the hour they would need to extricate the prisoners. The risk was grave, and Kissinger had one last session with the President. When Kissinger started to speculate as to how many of the helicopters might get out, Nixon cut him off: "That's bad luck. Don't speculate."

The raiders set off from Nakhon Phanom, a search-and-rescue base in Thailand. They approached their objective overland across Laos and mountainous inland North Viet Nam, a route that avoided the enemy's heaviest radar and antiaircraft defenses. When they returned emptyhanded, Nixon telephoned both Laird and Moorer. He had no regrets, he said; it had been a good plan, the right thing to do. If nothing else, the raid had clearly embarrassed Hanoi by pointing up the holes in the North Vietnamese air defenses.

If the raiders came through virtually unscathed, Laird was not so lucky when he appeared before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee early last week. The hearing room resounded with laughter when he told Chairman William Fulbright: "The intelligence in this mission was excellent." It was—but only up to the crucial point of whether or not prisoners were still at Son Tay. "Obviously the raid wasn't successful because of faulty intelligence," said Vice President Spiro Agnew from Palm Springs where he was golfing. Laird's only explanation was feeble: "We have not been able to develop a camera that sees through the roofs of buildings." The Pentagon insists that since prisoners are exercised only rarely in the open, there is simply no way to tell when they have been moved. One former senior Washington official found the intelligence failure unbelievable. Reconnaissance by satellite as well as by manned and drone aircraft can pick up vehicles, road activity, defense positions and many other telltale clues as to whether or not a camp is occupied. If, as Laird suggested, intelligence cannot function any better than it did at Son Tay, disturbing questions arise about the thousands of targets bombed by the U.S., North and South, throughout the war. The raiders found waist-deep grass around the compound; from the evidence, General Manor concluded that Son Tay had been abandoned for several weeks.

The operation raised other questions: WAS THE RAID DIRECTED AT MORE THAN P.O.W. RESCUE? There was some speculation that, beyond the stated aim, the mission was meant to signal U.S. toughness toward Hanoi. There were also some fears that the President or his advisers meant to step up the air war against the North, in hopes of still somehow achieving military victory. There was no evidence of this. But the raid unquestionably did serve notice that the U.S., while winding down the war, was still prepared to go to extraordinary lengths to keep Hanoi off balance.

WHY WAS THE RAID LAUNCHED NOW? New York Post Columnist Pete Hamill sarcastically suggested that it might have been staged in order to get the Son Tay prisoners home for display at the White House on Thanksgiving. There may be a modicum of truth in that, but a major factor in President Nixon's mind was his recent conclusion—supported by Pentagon doctors and specialists consulted by the Administration—that lengthy confinement under difficult conditions has cost the lives of a number of American prisoners in both North and South Viet Nam. A recent list had marked as dead six Americans whose fates had not been known for certain. That report was sent from Hanoi on Nov. 6 to Mrs. Cora Weiss, co-chairman of the

antiwar Committee of Liaison with Families of Servicemen Detained in North Viet Nam. Mrs. Weiss has given Washington the names of 22 such Americans in all. None of the information she has received from Hanoi indicates whether the men died in captivity or earlier, when their aircraft were knocked down, and she bitterly complained last week that the Government had twisted her report to justify the raid. The Administration, however, says that it has proof that some of the men did die in P.O.W. camps: in two of the six cases on the Nov. 6 list, for example, the Pentagon has photographs and recordings of the men made after they were captured. If they are now dead, they must have died in captivity.

HOW MANY PRISONERS COULD HAVE COME OUT? The U.S. estimated that anywhere from 15 to 70 P.O.W.s would be found at Son Tay, and there was plenty of space in the HH-53 helicopters for them. (In a pinch, as many as 60 people can be squeezed inside an HH-53.) The U.S. knows definitely that 339 Americans are in North Vietnamese hands; about 400 others are listed as missing in action in North Viet Nam.

WHAT IF THE P.O.W.S HAD BEEN THERE? One former P.O.W., Specialist Four Coy Tinsley, said that he felt that if there had been prisoners at Son Tay, the guards "would probably have annihilated them and moved out." The Ivory Coast planners obviously felt that surprise would stun the enemy. "They never had time to get together," Lieut. Petrie said. "They never expected an American force to come blooming down on them." Had the prisoners been there, though, there would have been many more guards—and their rifles could have damaged the American helicopters seriously. Indeed, some critics of the operation think that had the prisoners been there, disaster would have ensued, that none of the raiders would have come back.

The startling raid on Son Tay is the culmination of mounting concern over the American P.O.W.s, much of it stimulated by the men's families. At first, following a service tradition reinforced by official advice, the wives kept quiet. The Johnson Administration put Ambassador Averell Harriman discreetly to work exploring diplomatic avenues toward winning release of the prisoners. Nothing came of it, and in the controversy over the bombing the prisoners seemed almost forgotten. In 1968, when demonstrations were the mode, no one took a second look at a tiny group of P.O.W. wives with their little hand-lettered placards forlornly picketing the State Department's main entrance.

Then the wives began to organize in earnest, increasing political pressure on Washington, rousing the press and public to the plight of the prisoners. Early in his Administration, Richard Nixon pronounced earlier efforts to win the prisoners' release "not good enough." Nixon directed his top officials to speak out on the subject at every opportunity. Civic groups, city councils and state legislatures started deluging Washington with resolutions and petitions. H. Ross Perot, a Texas computer multimillionaire, began a well-publicized campaign last year to get Christmas packages through to the P.O.W.s and even arranged for a planeload of wives to go to Paris for meetings with the North Vietnamese that produced few tangible results. The President sent Former Astronaut Frank Borman on a 25-day round-the-world tour in the prisoners' behalf last summer.

Wooden Knife Never before have Americans been fighting for so long. Two of the P.O.W.s have been gone for more than six years: Air Force Captain Floyd Thompson, lost in South Viet Nam

on March 26, 1964, and Navy Lieut. Everett Alvarez Jr., captured on Aug. 5 of the same year. Some 300 have been missing or in captivity for over four years. The men have subsisted on a meager diet of rice, squash and pork fat; medical care has sometimes been adequate, sometimes not.

Dispassionate accounts of the treatment of American P.O.W.s by Hanoi are understandably hard to come by. While Lieut. Frishman spoke of torture and malnutrition, a correspondent for Rome's Communist daily *L'Unità* last month published interviews with four P.O.W.s and pronounced their condition fair to good. One of them was Everett Alvarez, who, *L'Unità* said, found the medical care sufficient and the food much better "lately." Alvarez's mother in Santa Clara, Calif., has poignant words for the feelings of the P.O.W. families: "There is an old Spanish saying that there is nothing worse than a wooden knife. It does not cut but keeps wearing away at the same old spot."

The relatives of the missing and imprisoned have a particularly difficult life because of the nature of the Viet Nam War. Where, in another kind of conflict, their men would be heroes, now antiwar groups in their own land denounce the cause for which the men were fighting in language like that used by the enemy. Crank telephone calls interrupt whatever tranquillity they can find. President Nixon has pronounced himself pleased with their patience, but their patience is wearing thin. Increasingly, some of the wives complain that the U.S. Government is not doing enough. Some of them have been driven to espouse the offer put forward by the Viet Cong's Mme. Nguyen Thi Binh in Paris last September: that talks on releasing the prisoners would begin when the U.S. agreed to withdrawal within a set period. Says Mrs. Frankie Ford of Orange Park, Fla.: "If it is true that they will not be released until the U.S. gets out, then why don't they set a date and get out now? This war cannot be successful. Why should one more man die on the battlefield or in the prisons?"

There is an extra cruelty, an extra reason to despair for those whose men are identified by the Pentagon as missing in action. North Viet Nam has yet to release a complete list of the Americans it holds captive, so in some cases the family has not known for three or four years whether son, husband or father is still alive. Timothy Bodden has been missing since June 1967. Says his mother, Mrs. Dorothy Bodden of Downers Grove, Ill.: "Even after 3½ years, I still find myself losing control and breaking down. There is an answer to what's happened to him, but you just don't know what it is."

For Hanoi not to make known the names of its P.O.W.s is a violation of the Geneva Convention, which North Viet Nam signed in 1957—with the reservation that it would not abide by the convention in the case of anyone it deemed a war criminal. Hanoi, in effect, has tried to apply the principles of the Nuremberg trials to U.S. captives; to the Communists, the Americans are not prisoners of war in the Geneva sense, but war criminals.

Tears in the Post Office

The U.S. and South Viet Nam have not always adhered scrupulously to the Geneva Convention, notably those provisions that bar torturing prisoners of war. But the U.S. charges North Viet Nam with massive violations. Not only does Hanoi refuse to list its prisoners, but also the North

Vietnamese bar the International Committee of the Red Cross from free access to P.O.W.s. Under Article 13, "prisoners of war must at all times be humanely treated." Instead, Former Astronaut Borman told Congress, the average P.O.W. has lost 45 to 60 lbs., and in some cases the men have been "beaten, dragged through villages, and tortured." U.S. peace groups that have traveled to Hanoi, however, claim that conditions in the camps are at least adequate.

The convention also calls for a minimum of two letters and four cards to be allowed in to each man every month. Some letters are getting through to the P.O.W.s now, and sometimes there are replies, squeezed into six short lines on a standard North Vietnamese official form. Those letters can change lives, as one did for Mrs. Carol North of Wellfleet, Mass., whose husband, Ken, was shot down in an Air Force F-105 near Hanoi. She had not heard from him for 3½ years, though she and her four daughters wrote to him regularly. Then last April there was an excited telephone call from the Wellfleet postmaster. In her mailbox was a small white envelope postmarked Hanoi. The letter was brief and bland, but it was enough. She burst into tears. So did the postmaster and everyone else in the post office. "We all stood there with tears running down our faces," she recalls.

Mrs. North is New England coordinator of the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia. Her organization is the one approved by most of the wives and families who share her burden. They tend to be suspicious of Cora Weiss's Liaison Committee in New York. They are resentful of the fact that Hanoi has plainly chosen to deal with antiwar organizations and leaders like David Dellinger and Rennie Davis, who have succeeded in opening lines of communication between the P.O.W.s and their families. By the time the U.S. stopped bombing North Viet Nam regularly in November 1968, only about 100 letters had reached families in the U.S. In the past year, Cora Weiss's Liaison Committee has received and relayed more than 2,600 letters from P.O.W.s. "I don't understand how Americans can cooperate with the enemy," says Mrs. Charlotte Christian of Virginia Beach, Va., "but you can't bite the hand that feeds you."

The National League, by contrast, has yet to make much progress with Hanoi. The league women work out of a small fourth-floor office donated by the Reserve Officers Association on Washington's Capitol Hill. With growing success, they have pressed their cause on editors and television producers, Senators and Representatives. Mrs. Bobby Vinson, whose husband has been missing since April 1969, is national coordinator; she has made three futile trips to Paris to see the North Vietnamese negotiators. The league has offered to build and equip a hospital for the North Vietnamese in exchange for freedom for the P.O.W.s. "But no luck," Mrs. Vinson sighs. "No luck at all."

Last week's Army-Navy game was dedicated to the P.O.W.s; there Mrs. Vinson was presented with sacks of letters from Americans to representatives of North Viet Nam. It was all in aid of the league's campaign to deliver 100 tons of mail—some 32 million pieces—to Xuan Thuy, chief North Vietnamese negotiator in Paris, by Christmas. The Teamsters have offered to truck the mail from Washington to New York at their own expense; in New York, longshoremen have volunteered to load the mail free on ships bound for France. A similar campaign to dramatize the treatment of the prisoners is sponsored by the San Diego-based Concern for Prisoners of War, Inc. One of Concern's leaders is Joseph McCain, a former newspaper reporter whose brother is a

P.O.W., and whose father is Admiral John McCain, U.S. Pacific Forces commander. McCain's group is collecting signatures on petitions to Hanoi that he reckons will be five miles long (at 187,000 signatures to the mile). "We're gonna go to the Eiffel Tower," McCain promises, "and unroll the petitions right down the Champs-Élysées."

That Woman in Puyallup

With a combination of frustration and wry humor, many of the wives and families try anything they can think of to get word from Hanoi about their missing relatives. In Puyallup, Wash., Mrs. Emma Hagerman douses her daily letters to Hanoi's chargé d'affaires in Moscow with cheap cologne. She has had no word about her husband, shot down in November 1967, and she thinks her scented missives just might get attention. "Even if he doesn't open the letters," she says, "he will know they're from that woman in Puyallup again."

Virginia Nasmyth, 21, a San Diego State College senior, made three trips to Paris to try to learn something about her brother John Jr. ("Spike"), an Air Force captain first listed as missing in September 1966. Once, in a sexy outfit, she bearded Xuan Oanh, an aide to Xuan Thuy. "Oanh was cordial but evasive," she reports. "I don't think he'd ever seen any American girls in miniskirts." Just over a year ago, the Nasmyths heard that Spike was alive. Their penchant for attention-getting persists. They have spent \$2,000 for 100 billboard posters calling for the release of P.O.W.s.

Since 1966, Frank Sieverts, a special assistant to the Under Secretary of State, has been laboring full time to free the Viet Nam P.O.W.s. Sieverts, 37, has become a kind of unofficial counselor to the wives and mothers. "The telephone rings all the time," he says. "In the holiday season, it is especially bad. Wives call up asking me what to say to their children, how to explain that they don't know where their husbands are, whether they are dead or alive, when all the other kids have their fathers."

The U.S. has approached a number of third countries, asking them to intercede with Hanoi on the P.O.W.s' behalf; among them are Sweden and the U.S.S.R. Sweden, which has diplomatic relations with Hanoi, has made cautious overtures, but has shied away from accepting a role as a neutral site for the internment of P.O.W.s, which the U.S. would like it to do under a Geneva Convention provision. The Communist countries generally express sympathy but contend that the U.S. must work the problem out directly with the North Vietnamese. Since December 1968, the Soviet Union has served as a conveyor belt for packages to North Viet Nam. Parcels are sent directly to Moscow. From there they are flown in sealed bags on Soviet planes through China to Hanoi.

All of this public and private activity was beginning to surface long before the Son Tay raid, but Son Tay brought the whole effort into the open. "After this, I believe that nothing is impossible," says Mrs. Kevin McManus, secretary-treasurer of the National League. "It's a tremendous boost. People do care now." Many wives take the Son Tay raid as an overdue sign of concern on the part of the U.S. Government; they also feel that it will buoy the morale of their imprisoned husbands. No one, however, is quite sure just how the prisoners will find out about the raid, for Hanoi has not specifically mentioned the rescue mission.

Diplomacy or Force?

Some in Washington believe that the Son Tay raid left the U.S. worse off than it was before. With Hanoi surely tightening the defenses of the P.O.W. camps, further rescue attempts will be vastly more difficult—but President Nixon has already hinted that he has just that in mind. At his Thanksgiving dinner for injured servicemen, speaking to Marine Sergeant George Lowry, the President likened the situation to a football game. "Sometimes you have to take them by surprise," he said. "You run a play and it fails. Then you turn around and call the same play again because they aren't expecting it."

Nixon's resort to force, and his threat to use it again, may well have set back the prospects for a peaceful exchange. The Administration has said that if the Paris negotiations continue to drag on without a settlement, it will simply keep on with Vietnamization. Many of the prisoners' wives are well aware that with the American troops out of South Viet Nam, there would be little bargaining leverage left to secure the release of American P.O.W.s still held by the Viet Cong or by the North Vietnamese. "It's a problem," admits one top Administration official. "We have 35,000 of theirs, but they may not care."