

Michael E. Haas, *Apollo's Warriors*, (Maxwell AFB AL: Air University Press, 1997) 317-332

Son Tay

The personal anguish over the POWs was brought home directly and forcefully into the White House in late 1969, when President Richard M. Nixon held his first private audience with 26 wives of POWs. Visibly shaken from their quiet despair during the meeting, Nixon turned to Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird to query the Pentagon for "some unconventional rescue ideas."⁴

The Pentagon's response evolved into one of the most spectacular, complex, and controversial military operations ever conducted in the 300-year history of American arms. And after military prowess and heroism failed to produce the desired results, Washington's time-honored hunt for scapegoats resumed with a vengeance. Beyond Washington, political shock waves from the mission reverberated through the international power centers of Moscow, Peking, and, of course, Hanoi as well.

The top secret mission, code-named "Kingpin," had its genesis in a startling discovery that occurred in May 1970, six months before the raid. President Nixon would later take a personal briefing on the mission in the White House, but that May the real action was taking place at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, just 15 miles south of the president's Oval Office. Located in an isolated section of Belvoir, the shabby wooden building hardly seemed worth the rolls of barbed-wire providing its security from unwanted visitors. Only the small sign outside indicating its occupants as the 1127th USAF Special Activities Squadron gave a clue as to its special importance.

Inside, a small group of intelligence analysts, all specialists in POW activities, stared in disbelief at the photos before them. After nearly two years of searching, it appeared they had discovered at last the location of a long-rumored POW camp in North Vietnam. It was located in the small village of Son Tay, some 23 miles northwest of Hanoi. Staring through their magnification scopes at the aerial photography, the analysts were stunned to see discreet physical signals from the POW compound — signals asking for an urgent rescue mission!*

It was the first time in the war the analysts had seen anything like it. After additional aerial photography seemed to confirm the analysts' initial assessment, the team immediately sent a high-priority intelligence summary through secret channels to the Pentagon. Two weeks later, the summary landed on the desk of US Army brigadier general Donald D. Blackburn, who was special assistant for counterinsurgency and special activities (SACSA) to the chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS).

Keenly aware of both the president's request for "some unconventional rescue ideas" and the likely political reaction to a combat operation so close to Hanoi, the JCS consumed two full months reviewing rescue feasibility studies. Finally, on 8 August

the CJCS authorized activation of Joint Contingency Task Group (JCTG) Ivory Coast, the ad hoc team that would, only if authorized personally by the president, launch Operation Kingpin right into the outskirts of Hanoi's suburbs.

Designating General Blackburn's SACSA as the office of primary responsibility, the JCS proceeded to make two critical decisions affecting Kingpin. First, it picked superb combat-proven Air Force and Army talent to lead the mission. Second, it gave this talent the freedom it needed to plan, organize, and train for the mission as it saw fit.

Selected to command the JCTG was Brig Gen Leroy J. Manor of the Air Force. Then commanding USAF's special operations forces at Eglin AFB, Florida, the general was not only the highest ranking unconventional warfare officer in the Air Force but a highly experienced fighter pilot whose combat record went back to World War II. Quiet, precise in manner, and effective, Manor enjoyed the complete confidence of his superiors. Underneath his suave exterior, however, General Manor had other qualities that surfaced when necessary. He was, as a senior JCTG officer put it, "the steel hand in a velvet glove."⁵

US Army colonel Arthur D. "Bull" Simons, then on the staff of XVIII Airborne Corps at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, became the JCTG's deputy commander. The colonel had earned the nickname "Bull" with his own combat record going back to World War II, not to mention the massive face, barrel chest, and huge hands that intimidated so many in his presence. No one ever accused Simons of the smooth efficiency for which Manor was known, but the man was a natural combat leader whose fierce appearance belied an excellent mind. General Blackburn described Simons succinctly: "When Bull Simons undertook an operation . . . the research and planning behind it were meticulous."⁶

A measure of the remarkable freedom and confidence granted these two officers by the CJCS was later acknowledged by General Manor, "We had practically a blank check when we left there [Office of the CJCS]. It is the only time in my 36 years of active duty that somebody gave me a job, simply stated, and the resources with which to do it, and let me go do it!"⁷

If the JCS believed it had picked good leaders in Manor and Simons, so evidently did the airmen and Green Berets who responded to the call for volunteers in numbers far beyond mission requirements. As obviously no details of the mission could be revealed, the men were asked to volunteer blindly, even after being told the mission would entail "considerable risk." As one JCTG officer observed: "It was sort of by invitation only. . . . The invitation didn't indicate when the dance would be over, but it did mention it would be dangerous."⁸

FROM DUKE TO TAKHLI

Moving swiftly, the JCTG began training on 20 August, less than two weeks after its activation. The vast training ranges and the presence of both special operations and Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service forces at Eglin AFB made the Florida panhandle the chosen area to prepare for the mission. At Eglin's Auxiliary Field 3 (Duke Field), the Ivory Coast group threw itself into an exhausting two-and-a-half month training regime.

Working through the Defense Intelligence Agency, the JCTG received additional photography of the Son Tay compound through both high-altitude SR-71 Blackbirds and low-altitude Buffalo Hunter photoreconnaissance drones.⁹

Early plans to build a full-scale 140 x 185-foot replica of Son Tay for training purposes had to be scuttled after the group learned Soviet Cosmos 355 photoreconnaissance satellites passed over Eglin twice a day.¹⁰ An easily disassembled lumber and target cloth substitute was used to simulate Son Tay's walls and buildings, and daylight training was limited to the few "satellite free" hours available.¹¹

In addition, US intelligence built an elaborate small-scale model of the camp for "wargaming" the actual assault. The top secret model was code-named "Barbara."^{*} In fairly short order, the Ivory Coast team determined the weather, terrain, and North Vietnamese enemy order-of-battle factors that would drive the training program at Eglin.

Son Tay would be a night assault, emphasizing surprise and shock action at close quarters. Good weather for aerial refueling was essential, as well as enough (but not too much) moonlight to identify the target without highlighting the aerial force for enemy gunners. Precision in the air and on the ground was mandatory, as the tolerance for error in such a small force was virtually nil.

By this time, Lt Col Warner A. Britton, an Air Force member of both the original feasibility study group and the mission planning staff,^{**} had culled some two dozen highly experienced helicopter crewmen from the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Training Center,^{***} located at Eglin.¹²

Headquarters, Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service would also provide the crewmen for the two HC-130P aerial tankers that would refuel the helicopters over Laos prior to their low-level dash into North Vietnam. From the special operations force at Eglin would come the A-1 strike pilots and the crews for the two C-130E Combat Talon aircraft, the latter serving as pathfinders for the force right up to its target.

Many years after the war, with the aid of much improved technology, the Air Force's special operations aircrews would perfect the dangerous tactics used by the Son Tay airmen. But in 1970, a prudent flyer observing the training would have been justified in wondering whether even this mission warranted such risks. One of the mission planners

described Ivory Coast's nightly activity over Eglin's dark swamps: Aircrew training began with night formation [flying] involving dissimilar aircraft [two types of C-130s; three types of helicopters and fighters] . . . low level was introduced as well as objective area tactics which included helicopter landings and extractions; airdrops by the C-130s of flares, fire-fight simulators and napalm; and close air support by the A-1s.

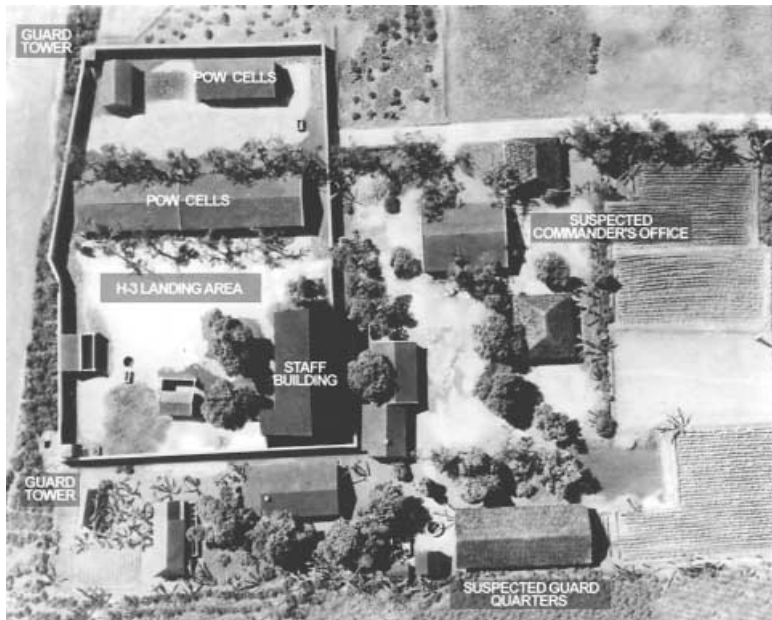
In 77 days of training, the aircrews flew 1,054 hours, mostly under the conditions described above, without a single scratch to any of the aircraft. (A few bad frights maybe, but no damage to the outside of man or plane!) It was a good omen, and the performance fully warranted the enthusiastic approval of JCS observers who declared Ivory Coast ready after watching two five-and-one-half-hour-long full-profile mission rehearsals.

On 10 November, just 10 days before the mission, two C-130Es departed Eglin to begin Ivory Coast's long deployment across the Pacific Ocean to Takhli Royal Thai Air Force Base. Four days later, the bulk of the men and material were lifted out via four C-141 jet transports for the two-day deployment to Takhli.¹⁶ As this movement was going on, Manor was busy adding some vital "insurance" to the upcoming mission.

By 1970, the Hanoi-Haiphong urban area possessed the densest (and most proficient) concentration of anti-aircraft defenses in the world. To fly down the throat of such defenses even in a night surprise raid required some obvious precautions. These precautions came in the shape of F-105G Wild Weasel fighters—specialists in attacking surface-to-air (SAM) missile sites with antiradiation missiles that homed in on the SAM site's own search radars.

In the long chance North Vietnamese MiG fighters would make a rare night appearance, F-4 fighters were also added as a protective umbrella, or combat air patrol (MIGCAP) over the raiders. Finally, the United States Navy would put on a massive deception operation with fighters from Carrier Task Force-77, dropping illumination flares* over North Vietnam's most sensitive coastal areas.

Taking off from seven airfields and three aircraft carriers, the aerial armada for this mission would ultimately total over 116 aircraft before the raid was finished.¹⁷ Just to keep this massive force in the air required 12 Strategic Air Command KC-135 tankers, eight for the MIGCAP and another four for the Navy jets over the Gulf of Tonkin.



With the entire compound measuring only 140 x 185 feet, the “landing zone” targeted for the HH-3’s crash-landing point was little more than the size of a volley-ball court. The intentional destruction of the helicopter was the price paid to ensure the Assault Element could reach the POW cells before the guards had the chance to kill their prisoners.

Back at Takhli, bitter news awaited nearly half the Army raiders present, as the final assault force was pared down from the 100 men present to the 56 considered the minimum essential force to accomplish the mission. The US Army UH-1 helicopter crew that had trained since the beginning with Ivory Coast at Eglin also got its “layoff” message.

The decision had been made to use the Air Force’s larger twin-engined HH-3 helicopter to carry the 14-man assault team that would stun the prison guards by crash-landing directly into the prison compound, a volley-ballcourt-sized area surrounded by trees.

With the final lineup established, Ivory Coast needed two more decisions to launch Operation Kingpin. The first would come from the White House, as President Nixon reserved for himself the final approval for mission launch.* The second would come from Manor, who upon receiving the president’s approval would pick the exact launch date based on weather over the target.

As simple as the latter decision might seem at this late stage, Mother Nature stepped in to put the general through another (but not his last) agony. Bad weather developing over North Vietnam threatened to scrub the mission that was from the start totally dependent on a very narrow set of weather criteria. Receiving the president’s approval on the 18th, Manor took a calculated gamble on a particular 24-hour weather window and set the launch date for 20 November, 24 hours ahead of the original schedule.

So tight was mission security that not until 1600 hours on the 20th were all raiders finally informed of the target and the mission. Pent-up energy from months of training exploded in applause as the national-level significance of their task spread over the assembled group.

EXECUTE

At 2200 hours on the 20th, the raiders were flown eastward from their staging base at Takhli to Udorn RTAFB, their launching point from Thailand. At Udorn, the force split up to board three helicopters: the Assault Element on the HH-3 and the larger Support and Command Elements on two separate HH-53s. These three were joined by three other HH-53s—one dedicated as a “gunship” to knock out Son Tay’s two guard towers, the final two serving as backup flareships and transport home for the 50-plus POWs expected at Son Tay.

Within an hour of the raiders’ arrival at Udorn, the heliborne force was airborne, following two Ivory Coast HC-130P tankers leading them over Laos for the aerial refueling leg. Refueling silently, the helos watched their tankers peel away, to be replaced by a Combat Talon that would lead them into North Vietnam and to the very doorsteps of Son Tay, 337 miles from their departure point at Udorn. Both lead and backup Talons were specially equipped with forward looking infrared navigation equipment and no less than three navigators in each plane to ensure absolute pinpoint accuracy.

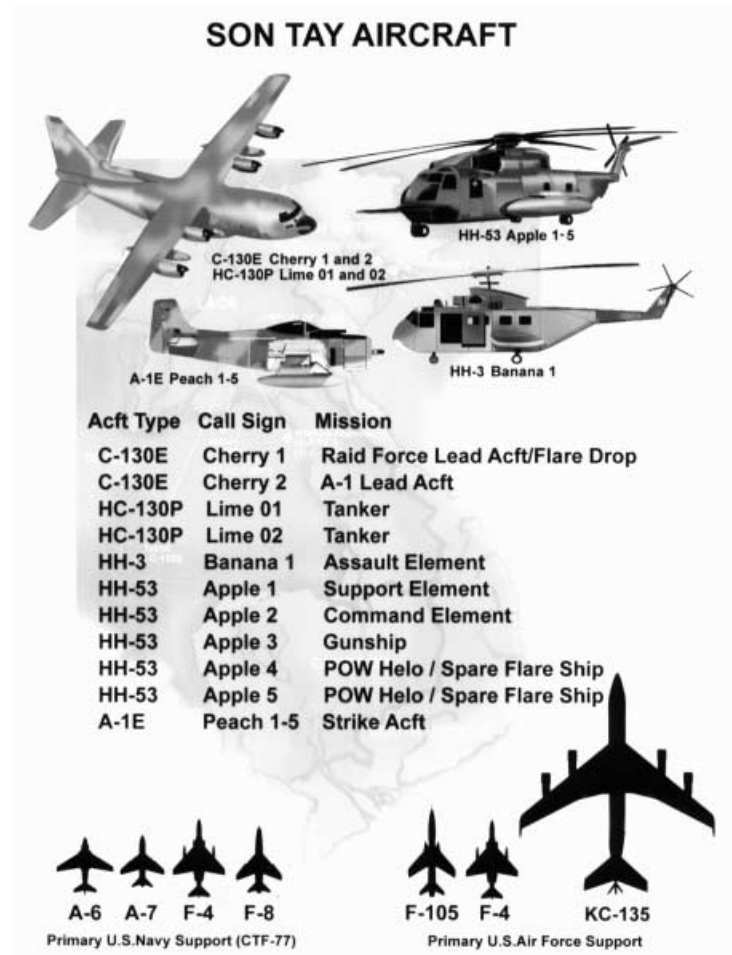
As the Talon-helo flight departed Laos heading eastward, a second Talon was then leading a flight of five A-1s to a rendezvous with the helos. With the linkup completed, the Talon-led force continued eastward, flying low to slip underneath enemy radars. Above them, the MIGCAP F-4s and Wild Weasel F-105s were already slipping into their predetermined positions.

Like a pack of wolves moving silently through the forest with total concentration on its doomed quarry, this force of heavily armed and dangerous men moved steadily through the night sky towards Son Tay. The 56 raiders were armed with no less than 111 machine guns, grenade launchers, rifles, and pistols, not to mention the demolitions. Every Green Beret had also been issued a combat knife, as well as some stone-cold command guidance from the Bull:

You are to let nothing, nothing, interfere with the operation. . . . Our mission is to rescue prisoners, not to take prisoners. . . . If we walk into a trap, don’t dream of walking out of North Vietnam. . . . We will back up to the Song Con River . . . let them come across the open ground and we’ll make them pay for every foot across.

Three and a half miles west of the camp, the lead Talon radioed a final course correction to the helos, then pulled ahead up to 1,500 feet to drop illumination flares over the POW camp. Seeing the effective deployment of the flares, the two HH-53 backup flareships (Apple 4 and 5) diverted to their holding area on an island in a lake*

to await a call-in for POW pickup. Apple 3, the HH-53 “gunship,” began descending toward the camp, followed in turn by Banana 1 with the Assault Element, then Apple 1 and 2 in trail with the Support Element and Command Element, respectively. At this moment, the plan started to unravel. As the copilot on Apple 2 later recalled:



As we neared our objective, I sensed we were not going the right way to the Son Tay camp. . . . The amazing thing to me at the time, and remains so, is that no one had the forethought to break radio silence and say so! Indeed, Apple 3 had almost taken the [wrong] camp under fire, discovered his error in time, and turned north to the correct place.

Recovering from his mistake, Apple 3 flew another 400 meters northward to obliterate the two guard towers at Son Tay with its miniguns as planned. Following Apple 3, Banana 1 slammed into the camp’s tiny courtyard, chopping down some unexpectedly large trees “like a big lawn mower” before delivering the Assault Element less than 50 feet from the POW cells.

What neither Apple 3 nor the Assault Element knew was that something dreadfully wrong was happening behind them. Only one of the two helicopters following them had reached Son Tay. In taking their eyes off Apple 3 and Banana 1 to

pick out their own touch-down point outside the darkened compound, the pilots of Apple 1 (the third helicopter in line carrying Simons's Support Element) missed the first two helos veering off toward the Son Tay compound.

As Apple 1 touched down at the wrong place, the pilots of Apple 2 (the fourth helicopter in line carrying the Command Element) overflowed it and continued on to Son Tay in radio silence. In the last few seconds before arriving at Son Tay, the Command Element leader was notified Simons's helicopter was missing.

Even before the Assault and Command Elements landed 400 yards away at Son Tay, Simons and the 21 other raiders in the Support Element poured out of Apple 1 into a compound labeled simply on their target area photos as a "secondary school." As Apple 1 flew off to its nearby holding area, a nasty shock awaited the Support Element.

Apple 1's landing had an effect on the compound much like someone kicking over a hornet's nest. From seemingly everywhere, darkened forms spilled out of the buildings, firing on the run into the American intruders. It was an infantryman's worst nightmare and happening way too fast to call for the A-1s overhead. Something else was wrong, too.

These soldiers were much more heavily armed than those predicted at Son Tay, and much taller than any North Vietnamese these American combat veterans had ever before encountered—"5-foot-10 to 6-feet tall, Oriental, not wearing the normal NVA dress, but instead . . . T-shirts and fitted dark undershorts."²³ While the nationality of the troops was never identified, or at least publicly released, it was at the moment obviously a moot point for those dodging all the hot lead coming their way.

Realizing the error, Simons immediately called for the return of Apple 1 and extraction even as his men counterattacked the compound. In a masterpiece of understatement, the laconic Simons would later remark that his Support Element attacked "with great violence."

Apparently so. Nine minutes after its insertion at the "secondary school," Simons's team was back aboard Apple 1 enroute to Son Tay. Behind them, the 22 raiders left the compound burning "like a Roman candle," the flames casting eerie shadows and a yellowish glow over the estimated 100 to 200 enemy dead and wounded littering its grounds.

"Let nothing, nothing, interfere with the operation. . . . Our mission is to rescue prisoners, not take prisoners." Most of the estimated 55 North Vietnamese guards at Son Tay had already been killed or wounded by the Assault and Command Elements before Simons's team arrived.

The raiders then received the worst shock of all. The POW cells were found empty, the POWs gone. Apparently Son Tay had been a dry hole for some time, as the raiders had landed in waist-high grass. Simons immediately called for the HH-53s to extract the

force.

But if there was a heartbreaking shortage of American POWs at Barbara, there was no shortage of heavily armed—and now thoroughly upset— North Vietnamese. As the A-1s began working over the area adjacent Son Tay, Soviet-made SA-2 missiles flashed skyward over Son Tay, seeking anything in the air. Approximately 16 of the telephone-pole-sized missiles were launched in a matter of minutes. The Wild Weasels fought back, firing eight Shrike antiradiation missiles into the launch sites.

Both sides drew blood before the American force left the area.* Twenty-seven minutes after the HH-3 had crash-landed into Son Tay, the last group of raiders were back in the air with only two slightly wounded personnel. It was a long, long ride back to Thailand, with everyone agonizing over the effort and risk expended only to come home empty-handed. They were met at Udorn by Manor, who, after a quick debrief of the key personnel, communicated the mission results back to the JCS.

THE SCAPEGOATS

Both Manor and Simons were directed to proceed back to Washington via the quickest means possible. Once there, they were to help the JCS and the Nixon administration answer a barrage of questions from the media and Congress, as well as counter North Vietnamese allegations the US had actually bombed Son Tay!

In the melee of public finger pointing over the ensuing few days, it became difficult at times to tell who was more hostile to the failed gamble. But if the North Vietnamese response was a given, the Nixon administration was shaken by the congressional hostility exhibited by some powerful Democrats to the attempted rescue.

Senator J. William Fulbright (D-Ark.), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, virtually parroted North Vietnamese cries of outrage when he called the mission “a major escalation of the war . . . a very provocative act to mount a physical invasion [of North Vietnam].”

Senator Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) “deplored the [Nixon] policy” that sent the raiders forth, while Senator Birch Bayh (D-Ind.) referred to the “John Wayne approach” in which the mission was undertaken.

The government’s military and civilian intelligence agencies were publicly vilified for their “intelligence failure” in not knowing the Son Tay camp was devoid of POWs. The public accusations were safe enough, as the finger pointers knew that by the very nature of its business the intelligence community is virtually forbidden to defend itself against such public attack. But if the allegations could be made without fear of public repudiation, the senior military and political officials responsible for the Son Tay raid knew even then that the allegations were fundamentally false.

The day before the raid, no less an authority than the director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, Lt Gen Donald V. Bennett, told both Blackburn and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff that late-breaking intelligence strongly suggested the Son Tay POWs had been moved to another camp earlier that year.

Bennett's information came from a "usually reliable" foreign source with credible access to POW-relevant information. The source reported many POWs, including those at Son Tay, had been moved to a new camp until then unknown to the Americans. A photoreconnaissance of the alleged camp confirmed a significant enlargement of the facility to include guard towers that were currently manned.

Bennett's stunning news was delivered less than 24 hours after President Nixon had sent the mission launch-approval message to Manor. With every passing hour, a giant, incredibly complex machine was moving inexorably toward launching Operation Kingpin. What neither Bennett, his DIA analysts, nor any other intelligence organization in the US could do was *prove* the absence of POWs at Son Tay. In fact, infrared imagery of the camp showed the presence of "someone" at the compound.

In Benjamin F. Schemmer's authoritative book *The Raid*, Blackburn described his reaction to this uncertain intelligence in exceptionally candid terms: Had I known [Son Tay held no POWs] I'd have had to call it off. But I didn't want to know the truth, I just wanted any shred of evidence to let us hang in there. It was bigger than getting the POWs out. There were too many people who didn't have the perception to understand what this was really about, or could accomplish.

As if to reaffirm just how ugly decision making can really get "at the top," Bennett's news to the JCS chairman arrived with another bit of POW related intelligence. Only a week before, antiwar protester Cora Weiss had publicly released the names fed to her by the North Vietnamese of six POWs who had died in captivity. Bennett had just learned Weiss was about to release the names of 11 more such deaths.

Twenty-four hours before the launch of Kingpin, America's top military and civilian leadership were in an agonizing human quandary. The enormous risks in such high-stakes decisions are most assuredly glamorized most by those who have never had to make one. In the end, Bennett bowed to the enormous pressure not to be the one who said "no" to grasping at the "thin shred of evidence" waiting at Son Tay.

In the few short hours remaining, the situation was kicked up to the White House. President Nixon listened intently, then reaffirmed the go signal issued 24 hours earlier. No one in Ivory Coast was informed of these events taking place in Washington during the 24 hours prior to launch.

SON TAY WITH 20-20 HINDSIGHT

In hindsight, it seems fair to say that Son Tay was neither the splendid example of operational excellence some have since proclaimed, nor the failure that seemed so obvious to most at the time. So what exactly was Son Tay? And what was it not?

Son Tay was a demonstration of what can be accomplished when excellent leadership is selected for a task, given the necessary resources, and the operational freedom necessary to execute that task. Adm Thomas H. Moorer and General Blackburn deserve every credit for their role here, as do Manor and Simons, who assured the same philosophy was given their subordinates.

Son Tay was a reaffirmation that the really good talent makes its own luck. The critical error in putting the Support Element down at the “secondary school” could easily have changed Son Tay from a disappointment to a disaster had Simons’s group been pinned down or even overrun by the much superior forces they encountered. Instead, the raiders turned this error into a mission-saving plus by eliminating the major, and totally unexpected, threat to their mission.

The nationality of the heavily armed, oddly dressed troops encountered at the so-called secondary school has remained one of the most intriguing mysteries of the Son Tay legend for over a quarter of a century. After the raid, it was the question no one in the US government wanted to ask, for fear they couldn’t stand the answer.

Chinese? Russians? The options brought implications no one wanted to face; and the North Vietnamese weren’t talking either. Not until 1997 has a just-published book submitted a plausible explanation as to the identity of these “mystery soldiers.” In his authoritative book *SOG: The Secret War of America’s Commandos in Vietnam*, author and special operations veteran John L. Plaster describes the existence of a special NVA “counterreconnaissance” unit dedicated to tracking down US Special Forces reconnaissance teams operating in Laos, North Vietnam, and Cambodia. This deadly special operations unit was manned from personnel handpicked from North Vietnam’s only paratroop outfit, the Soviet-trained and superbly equipped 305th Airborne Brigade.³³ Both the 305th’s base and the training school for the counterreconnaissance unit were the same: Son Tay.

Son Tay was a modern-day example of a concept in the profession of arms that goes back to biblical times. Its motivation and execution speak in terms more eloquent than words can express of the valor, loyalty, and commitment to those ideals that represent America and its military at their best.

Son Tay was not an “intelligence failure.” To his credit, Secretary Laird said as much to various congressional committees and took the heat for their derisive response. The reality is that the mission could never have been planned or prepared for without excellent support from the intelligence community. To his discredit, the secretary could not or would not bring himself to tell the whole truth: the National Command Authorities had been briefed prior to the mission launch that no POWs would likely be found at Son Tay.

Son Tay underscored yet again why senior military and political leaders understandably cringe at the prospect of these high-risk, high-gain special operations. The historical success rate of these gambles is hardly reassuring to those who inevitably take the heat for authorizing their execution. The fact remains that the only thing these leaders can truly count on from missions such as Son Tay is that the political fallout will be enormous, taking directions not foreseen even by their advocates.

Son Tay generated tangible improvements in the conditions of the POWs' captivity. To discourage a repeat of Son Tay, the North Vietnamese concentrated their American captives in two large camps in downtown Hanoi.³⁴ As many POWs came together for the first time, the resultant improvements in communications and cohesion created a substantial and much-needed improvement in their morale.

Son Tay also allowed the senior US officers in the two remaining POW camps to establish surreptitious but effective command of the 591 POWs finally released three years later. The timing of these improvements was more critical than many knew at the time, as the POWs would later face an ordeal the likes of which no American prisoner in the history of this country had ever before suffered.

Jane Fonda's singular decision to personally harangue the vulnerable American POWs in their camps took the antiwar sentiment in America to an extreme to which no POW could possibly have been prepared. Those POWs forced to undergo her abuse as stage props for the filmed sessions endured a torture coming from a direction they did not expect. Those who refused to appear in such sessions were savagely beaten for their refusal.³⁵

Had it not been for Son Tay and the improvements it alone made possible in the POW camps, the impact of Fonda's personal actions on the debilitated prisoners could have been catastrophic.



American POWs forced to appear as stage props for Jane Fonda's propaganda films in Hanoi were in a far stronger position to deflect her verbal assaults as a result of the earlier "failed" raid on Son Tay. Improvements in morale and the establishment of a surreptitious but effective chain of command in the POW camps followed North Vietnam's decision to bring Americans together in larger groups to discourage "another Son Tay."

Operation Kingpin Chronology of Events

<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>
May 1968	Son Tay POW camp is activated.
May–Nov 1968	Fifty-five American POWs are transferred to Son Tay.
May 1970	1127th USAF Special Activity Squadron first confirms POW camp at Son Tay, as well as unique POW signals requesting urgent rescue.
2 June	Defense Intelligence Agency provides Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities, Joint Chiefs of Staff, with SR-71 photos confirming 1127th report.
10 June	With JCS authority, SACS convenes 12-man rescue feasibility study group from all three military services, as well as from DIA.
10 July	JCS informed that a rescue effort at Son Tay is feasible.
?? July	Removal of POWs from Son Tay due to flooding of area. Removal is undetected by US intelligence.
8 August	JCS authorizes Joint Contingency Task Group Ivory Coast to “organize and train” for rescue mission designated Operation Kingpin. JCTG commander is Brig Gen Leroy J. Manor, USAF, commander of Special Operations Force, Eglin AFB, Florida, and deputy commander is Col Arthur D. Simons, USA, J-4, XVIII Airborne Corps, Fort Bragg, North Carolina.
20 August	JCTG mission training begins at Field 3 (Duke Field), Eglin AFB, Florida.
8 September	JCTG commander confirms mission feasibility to JCS.
1 November	Chief, JCS, authorizes JCTG commander to coordinate mission with senior (US) Army and Navy commanders in South Vietnam.
8 November	JCTG mission training at Duke Field terminates.
14 November	JCTG and logistical support arrive at Takhli Royal Thai Air Force Base, Thailand.
18 November	President Nixon approves JCTG’s Operation Kingpin.
20 November	The mission is launched from Udorn RTAFB; recovered early A.M. hours of 21 November.

Source: Comdr William H. McRaven, USN, “The Theory of Special Operations” (graduate thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 1993), 441–50.

Notes

1. James R. Arnold, *The First Domino: Eisenhower, the Military, and America's Intervention into Vietnam* (New York: William Morrison & Co., 1991), 127.
2. *Kings Island Golf & Country Club News*, June 1993, 3.
3. Benjamin F. Schemmer, *The Raid* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 13.
4. "Acting to Aid the Forgotten Men," *Time* 96, no. 23 (7 December 1970): 15–21.
5. Comdr William H. McRaven, USN, "The Theory of Special Operations" (graduate thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 1993), 444.
6. Schemmer, 80.
7. McRaven, 462.
8. "Acting to Aid the Forgotten Men," 15–21.
9. McRaven, 449.
10. Schemmer, 76.
11. Ibid.
12. History, Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service, 1 July 1970–30 June 1971, Annex, "The Son Tay Raid," 10.
13. Lt Gen Leroy J. Manor, USAF, Retired, "The Son Tay Raid: November 21, 1970," *Daedalus Flyer* 35, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 9.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Manor, 10.
17. McRaven, 479.
18. Earl H. Tilford Jr., *Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia* (Washington D.C.: Center for Air Force History, 1980), 108–9.
19. Ray L. Bowers, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia: Tactical Airlift* (Washington D.C.: Office of Air Force History, 1982), 431.
20. Schemmer, 159.
21. Manor, 14.
22. Schemmer, 167.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid., 171.
25. Ibid. See also Manor, 13.
26. Schemmer, 172.
27. McRaven, 491.
28. Ibid., 190.
29. Ibid.
30. Schemmer, 140.
31. Ibid., 142–43.
32. Ibid., 220.
33. John L. Plaster, *SOG: The Secret Wars of America's Commandos in Vietnam* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 84–85.
34. Manor, 16.
35. Maj Gen John K. Singlaub, USA, Retired, with Malcolm McConnell, *Hazardous Duty: An American Soldier in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Summit Books, 1991), 350.