

THE RAID

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Harper & Row, Publishers

NEW YORK, HAGERSTOWN, SAN FRANCISCO, LONDON



1817

uties for operations, there were only 19 other names on the list. Mayer was "stunned," therefore, when Defense Secretary Laird walked into the room around 1:30 P.M., followed by an entourage of about 15 people, mostly civilians. Laird's military assistant, Air Force Brigadier General Robert Pursely, shrugged his shoulders, raised his eyebrows discreetly, and thus "told" Mayer to let everyone in.

Laird's entourage and most of the others present sat in a low balcony at the back of the command center, the Service Deputy Chiefs of Staff for Operations in the front row with elaborate communications consoles before them. Laird, Moorer, and Vogt sat with Mayer in a sound-proofed, glass-enclosed room to their right—the "National Command Authority" room. The Joint Chiefs sat at a conference table below the balcony, looking up at the display consoles. With them was General Bennett of the DIA, the man who—unbeknownst to all but a few of those present—had "blown the whistle" about 20 hours earlier, signaling that Son Tay might be empty. But instead of his usual seat on the far left of the Joint Chiefs, Bennett was sitting at the end of the table, facing them and in front of a podium from which Blackburn and Spots Harris would "brief" those present on the raid's progress.

"Sitting there, doing what?" Bennett was asked later.

"Sitting there, dying!" he answered.

Suddenly the reports began to accelerate. At 2:29, Manor signaled, "MIG threat"; one minute later, "Landed in objective area safely." Blackburn checked the Kingpin timetable on the huge screen above them. The assault was 11 minutes behind schedule, but there was no explanation. He did not know that the raiders were "right on the button" but that Manor's communications system was way off its mark. Another three minutes passed, then "MIG threat all clear"; three more minutes, "Situation satisfactory."

There were no more reports for a quarter of an hour, then: "All aircraft departed objective area."

Periodically, Vogt would call the White House situation room, or Al Haig, with a crisp progress report on the raid. Everyone was waiting to hear one thing: had Simons rescued any POWs? There was no word about the prisoners at Son Tay.

Twenty-five minutes later, at 3:15 P.M., there was another signal from Manor: "Task Group crossed Laos border." Still no word on the prisoners, or about casualties among Simons' force. Forty-six minutes had passed since the planes had landed "safely."

Twelve more minutes passed before the next message: "SAR effort required. F-105 down."

Vogt almost leapt out of his chair: "F-105! What the hell's an F-105 doing up there?" He turned to Mayer. "Where did *it* come from? What's going on?"

Mayer didn't have the foggiest notion, nor did Blackburn. Nowhere in planning or training for the Son Tay mission had the use of F-105s been mentioned. Every aircraft employed in the raid was spelled out in the black, three-ring binder Kingpin briefing book, before the senior officers in the room. No one could find any F-105s listed.

Everyone had different thoughts. It was the only "glitch" so far, at least as far as anyone in the command center could tell. But it *could* be a big one. Blackburn wondered if "some crazy, frustrated bastard" had taken off from Thailand to renew the air war or challenge the North Vietnamese air force all by himself. Or was it part of that "other operation" he had heard of, but wasn't cleared to know about? If so, why was Manor sending the message?

The F-105s were Manor's idea. At the last minute, in Thailand, he had decided to have the raiding force escorted by a flight of five F-105 "Wild Weasel" aircraft from the 388th Tactical Fighter Squadron at Korat. They would work as "decoys" to jam North Vietnam's "Fan Song" radars, direct SA-2 missiles away from the assault force, knock out the "hot" SAM batteries with Shrike radar-homing missiles, and help protect the ten F-4s flying combat air patrol against MIGs.

They were, to put it bluntly, "bait."

In the crush of all the problems they had to wrestle with between November 17 and 20, Manor and his staff simply forgot to tell Washington that the F-105s had been added to the Son Tay strike force.

The two pilots in each Wild Weasel fighter knew they were bait. They were flying at only 13,000 feet, well within the SA-2s' lethal range. Only minutes after Marty Donohue flew over Son Tay Prison, the first SAM went off—but it was aimed at the F-105s, not the helicopters. In all, 16 of the 18 SAMs fired near Son Tay were directed at the F-105s. At one time, six of them were airborne at the same time. The "bait" worked; all of the SAMs were "high flyers."

Twelve minutes into the raid, however, one of the F-105s, Firebird Three, had a close call. Two SAMs were streaking toward it; but when the "flying telephone poles" got within a mile of his plane, Major William J. Starkey rolled over and dived to 5,000 feet. As the two missiles arched down to follow his aircraft, he forced the plane into a hard pull-up. The first SAM passed over him and detonated behind the F-105. The second passed under him and exploded below and slightly

behind his left wing. For 12 to 15 seconds, it looked like Starkey's wing was on fire. His "back seater," Major Everett D. Fansler, couldn't believe it when he saw the fire go out and Starkey told him calmly the plane was now flying normally.

Six minutes later, Firebird Five was hit. A SAM had detonated close enough to fill the cockpit with a "brilliant flash." The plane shuddered in a "mild shock wave." Major Donald W. Kilgus knew he had lost his "stability augmentation control system." In an F-105, that was bad news. He could not get it to reengage. Captain Clarence T. Lowry, Kilgus' back seater, knew the news was going to get worse; his fuel gauges told him the plane was leaking more fuel than its engines were burning. Kilgus headed for southern Laos and, hopefully, Thailand. Over the Plaine des Jarres in Laos, at 32,000 feet, the F-105 "flamed out." Kilgus and Lowry fought to restart the engine until 8,000 feet; then they pulled their eject handles. Their "silk afterburners" worked perfectly, but they landed in very unfriendly territory.

About this time, Marty Donohue finally took off in Apple Three from his holding position near the Son Tay compound. Apple Five, piloted by Major Kenneth Murphy, had just intercepted him, to escort Donohue home, when the radio crackled that an F-105 was down. Donohue picked up "trail" on John Allison in Apple Two, while Murphy in Apple Five and Lieutenant Colonel Royal C. Brown in Apple Four stood by in the area to refuel and rescue the downed pilots. Soon a C-130 dropped flares where the survivors were thought to be. Murphy located both men, but started taking ground fire. Another refueling followed, and then several A-1 strike planes arrived to protect the helicopters. Everyone decided to wait for "first light" to make the "pickup." Finally, Brown swooped down and rescued Kilgus, while Murphy went in half a mile away and hoisted his back seater, Lowry, out of the jungle.

By then, Murphy and Brown had been flying their HH-53s for more than nine hours, almost all of it over hostile terrain and at night. But they brought the last two Son Tay raiders home alive.

As Simons' helicopters flew the last leg of their lonely, long flight back to Udorn, Manor's cryptic message, "Possibly Negative POWs" arrived at the Pentagon Command Center. It was 3:35, Friday afternoon, November 21.

The message was in code, of course. When it was deciphered, an Army brigadier general who was the senior command center "watch officer" that afternoon grabbed it and rushed to the Command Authority room. He was supposed to hand all incoming messages to Mayer or

United States Air Force

Assault Force

Aircraft	Code Name	Rank	Name	Parent Organization
HH-3	Banana 1	Lt. Col.	Herbert E. Zehnder	ARRTC
		Maj.	Herbert D. Kalen	ARRTC
		TSgt.	Leroy M. Wright	ARRTC
HH-53	Apple 1	Lt. Col.	Warner A. Britton	ARRTC
		Maj.	Alfred C. Montrem	ARRTC
		MSgt.	Harold W. Harvey	ARRTC
		MSgt.	Maurice F. Tasker	ARRTC
		SSgt.	Jon K. Hoberg	40th ARRS
HH-53	Apple 2	Lt. Col.	John V. Allison	ARRTC
		Maj.	Jay M. Strayer	40th ARRS
		TSgt.	William E. Lester	ARRTC
		TSgt.	Charlie J. Montgomery	ARRTC
		SSgt.	Randy S. McComb	40th ARRS
HH-53	Apple 3	Maj.	Frederic M. Donohue	ARRTC
		Capt.	Thomas R. Waldron	ARRTC
		SSgt.	Aron P. Hodges	ARRTC
		SSgt.	James J. Rogers	ARRTC
		SSgt.	Angus W. Sowell, III	ARRTC
HH-53	Apple 4	Lt. Col.	Royal C. Brown	37th ARRS
RESCUED KILGUS		Maj.	Roy R. Dreibelis	37th ARRS
		TSgt.	Lawrence Wellington	ARRTC
		SSgt.	Wayne L. Fisk	40th ARRS
		SSgt.	Donald Labarre	ARRTC
HH-53	Apple 5	Maj.	Kenneth D. Murphy	703d SO Sqdn
RESCUED LOWRY		Capt.	William M. McGeorge	40th ARRS
		TSgt.	David F. McLeod	ARRTC
		SSgt.	John J. Eldridge	40th ARRS
		SSgt.	Daniel E. Galde	ARRTC
HC-130P	Lime 01	Maj.	William J. Kornitzer, Jr.	ARRTC
C-130	Cherry 1	Maj.	Irl L. Franklin	7th SO Sqdn
		Maj.	Thomas L. Mosley	7th SO Sqdn
		Capt.	Randal D. Custard	7th SO Sqdn
		Capt.	Thomas K. Eckhart	7th SO Sqdn
		Capt.	William A. Guenon, Jr.	7th SO Sqdn
		Capt.	James F. McKenzie, Jr.	7th SO Sqdn
		Capt.	Thomas L. Stiles	7th SO Sqdn
		MSgt.	Leslie G. Tolman	7th SO Sqdn
		TSgt.	William A. Kennedy	7th SO Sqdn
		TSgt.	Kenneth C. Lightle	7th SO Sqdn

MIG Combat Air Patrol Group

Aircraft	Code Name	Rank	Name	Parent Organization
F-4	Falcon 1	Maj.	Kenneth L. Gardner	13th TFS
		Capt.	Larry L. Henry	13th TFS
F-4	Falcon 2	Capt.	John D. Landin, Jr.	13th TFS
		Capt.	George E. McKibben	13th TFS
F-4	Falcon 3	Maj.	George E. Coats	555th TFS
		Capt.	Stuart B. McCurdy	555th TFS
F-4	Falcon 4	Maj.	Hubbard W. Lee	555th TFS
		Capt.	Michael T. Golas	555th TFS
F-4	Falcon 5	Maj.	James C. Malaney	13th TFS
		Capt.	Russell G. Wright	13th TFS
F-4	Falcon 11	Maj.	Orville B. Baird	555th TFS
		Capt.	Carl Paladino	555th TFS
F-4	Falcon 12	Capt.	Douglas P. Brown	555th TFS
		Capt.	Charles E. Smith	555th TFS
F-4	Falcon 13	Capt.	John L. Cantwell	13th TFS
		Capt.	Larry L. Henry	13th TFS
F-4	Falcon 14	Capt.	Ronald M. Hintze	13th TFS
		Capt.	Joseph R. Preston	13th TFS
F-4	Falcon 15	Maj.	Jimmy C. Pettyjohn	555th TFS
		1st Lt.	Thomas A. Wagner	555th TFS

Wild Weasel Decoy Group

Aircraft	Code Name	Rank	Name	Parent Organization
F-105	Firebird 1	Lt. Col.	Robert J. Kronebusch	388th TFW
		Maj.	John Forrester	388th TFW
F-105	Firebird 2	Maj.	Raymond C. McAdoo	388th TFW
		Maj.	Robert J. Reisenwitz	388th TFW
F-105	Firebird 3	Maj.	Everett D. Fansler	388th TFW
		Maj.	William J. Starkey	388th TFW
F-105	Firebird 4	Maj.	Murray B. Denton	388th TFW
		Capt.	Russell T. Ober	388th TFW
F-105	Firebird 5	Maj.	Donald W. Kilgus	388th TFW
		Capt.	Clarence T. Lowry	388th TFW

Maintenance Support Group

Rank	Name	Parent Organization
Capt.	Gerard M. Carroll	Det 2, 1st SOW
Capt.	Lionel E. Faggard	AFLC
MSgt.	Thomas E. Hogan	1198 OE&T Sq