

5 *Son Tay to Cease-fire:* 1970-1973

Late November nights in Udorn, Thailand, are crisp and cool. The night of November 20, 1970, was cooler than usual because a cold front was moving into the area, a prelude to Typhoon Patsy building over the Gulf of Tonkin. Besides providing a break from the 100-degree heat of the tropical day, the weather acutely affected a group of men gathered at Udorn to fly an unusual and risky mission.

For several days people assigned to Udorn had wondered why tents had been put up beside the dispensary. No one seemed to know (or no one would say) who the "civilian" men and women were who lived in the tents, stayed together, and talked to none other than their own. The briefers at 432d Tactical Reconnaissance Wing enjoyed the respite from duties that these and other "civilians" brought. For several days the intelligence officers (especially the intelligence officers with their ceaseless questions) had been isolated from the aircrews. And, to preclude any chance of accidental drunken disclosures of information, fighter pilots were banned from the officers club bar. The base nestled in a tight blanket of security.

One hour before midnight pilots, navigators, pararescuemen, radio operators, flight mechanics and engineers, and a small group of assault troops boarded two C-130E transports, an HH-3E, and five HH-53 helicopters. Within ten minutes this armada was airborne and enroute to Son Tay prison, twenty-eight miles northwest of Hanoi. This contingent became the center of a task force that included five A-1Es, five F-105s and ten F-4 Phantoms hurtling northeastward toward the enemy's heartland. From the Gulf of Tonkin a diversionary Navy force of F-4s, A-6s, and A-4s flew toward Haiphong and the eastern coastal cities. The purpose of this mission was to rescue up to a hundred prisoners of war from the suffering and despair they had experienced at Son Tay prison. It was an operation unique in concept and bold in planning.¹

Plans for the Son Tay raid began on June 5, 1970, when Brig. Gen. Donald D. Blackburn, Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activity, received permission from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to undertake a study concerning the problem of rescuing up to fifty prisoners of war from Son Tay prison. After discussing the concept with Brig. Gen. James A. Hill, Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations at Headquarters, Military Airlift Command, and Brig. Gen. Frank K. Everest, commander of the Aerospace

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Rescue and Recovery Service, General Blackburn gathered representatives from all the services, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the Defense Intelligence Agency to form a study group. Lt. Col. Warner A. Britton, Chief of Flying Training at the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Training Center, Eglin Air Force Base, Florida, represented the Air Force. The group met for the first time at the Pentagon on June 10 in a session chaired by Col. Norman H. Frisbie of the Joint Chiefs of Staff's office. After a month of study, Colonel Frisbie told the Joint Chiefs that a rescue raid to Son Tay was possible. The Joint Chiefs sanctioned this concept, and directed that detailed planning begin immediately.²

An unusually heavy rainy season in northern Laos and North Vietnam caused the stream that ran by Son Tay prison to spill over its banks. Consequently, the wells that served the camp were filled with turbid, unhealthy water. Lately, too, the prisoners had insisted on holding religious services: Protestant services and separate Catholic masses. Following the death of Ho Chi Minh in 1969, the North Vietnamese had started treating the POWs better. And even though the prisoners at Son Tay seemed to be more recalcitrant than those held in Hanoi, this policy apparently also was applied to them. Because the water at Son Tay was fouled and because they wanted to separate the Protestants from the Catholics in a misconception that it would make practicing their respective religions easier and thus bring praise from the international community, Hanoi ironically, decided to close the Son Tay camp. On July 14 the last prisoner was taken from Son Tay to Dan Hoi prison seven and one half miles away. The POWs immediately named this prison Camp Faith.³

Nevertheless, activity at Son Tay continued. Some guards remained. Other people, possibly convalescing North Vietnamese soldiers, moved into the old guard quarters. Additionally, because the North Vietnamese ran a sapper school only a quarter of a mile from the Son Tay compound, the extra room might have been used to house additional students. In any event, there were enough people around the camp to plant a garden, keep the grass trampled, and leave enough signs of life so that overhead photography would indicate that the facility was, indeed, occupied.⁴

On August 8, at the direction of General Blackburn, the Joint Contingency Task Group was formed. The following day Brig. Gen. Leroy J. Manor, commander of the Special Operations Force at Eglin Air Force Base, Florida, was called to Washington. On its way to the capital, General Manor's plane stopped off at Pope Air Force Base, North Carolina, to pick up Col. Arthur "Bull" Simons, a fifty-two-year-old Army Ranger assigned to nearby Ft. Bragg. Colonel Simons, General Blackburn's choice to lead the raiders, had extensive experience in covert operations and clandestine warfare that began in the Philippines in World War II and, more recently, included tours in Laos as well as Vietnam.⁵ During the invasion of the Philippines, Captain Simons led a Ranger company in an assault on a

Japanese prison camp. The Rangers took the camp to prevent the Japanese from killing the American prisoners of war before the main invasion force could liberate them.⁶

Other members of the task group of twenty-five people included representatives from the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the National Security Agency. Under the code name "Ivory Coast" they labored for nearly three weeks on details of intelligence and mission planning. Security was tight as evidenced by the code name which was deliberately chosen to conjure up images of Africa, a continent and a half away from the objective.⁷

While planning continued at the Pentagon, Manor and Simons selected people for the mission. Manor wanted men with Southeast Asia experience. Some, like Air Force Lt. Col. Royal A. Brown, were ordered to report to Eglin from combat assignments in Vietnam. Others came from Europe and bases across the United States. Almost half of the forty-six Air Force people selected for the raid were on the faculty of the rescue training school at Eglin.⁸

Meanwhile, planners in Washington decided on the composition of the task force. They determined that it would consist of two C-130E Combat Talon unconventional warfare aircraft, five A-1Es, five HH-53s, one HH-3E, and two UH-1s. During the training it was decided that the UH-1s were unsuitable for the mission, but they were still included in case they were needed as backup aircraft.⁹

As the plan emerged, it called for crashing a helicopter loaded with shock troops directly into the small compound to achieve surprise. Because of the trees in the compound this helicopter would be damaged and would have to be left behind. An older chopper, like the UH-1, was more expendable. Unfortunately the UH-1 could only carry a handful of combat-equipped troops. Furthermore, its limited range would make it necessary to preposition the chopper at Lima Site 32, Na Khang, in northern Laos. The Joint Contingency Task Group decided to use the HH-3, a larger chopper with sufficient range but nevertheless expendable. If the mission had to be aborted halfway to Son Tay, the HH-3 could, with refueling, return to Udorn. The UH-1, on the other hand, would have to land in Laos. Finally, the HH-3 could carry enough troops to keep the guards busy while other Rangers blasted a hole in the prison's outside wall so that the assault forces landing around the compound could get in to search the cells. The only possible flaw in the plan was that the HH-3s were due to be phased out of the Southeast Asia theater in December. Rather than risk a security leak by insisting that an HH-3 be kept on hand, General Manor decided to practice with both helicopters.¹⁰

Training for the flight portion of the mission began on August 20. The crews concentrated on night formation flying. By early September the ninety-two assault troops joined with the Air Force to begin their part of the

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training. This included attacks on a mockup structure made of wood and cloth which was put up every night and taken down before dawn to keep Soviet photo reconnaissance satellites from spotting it.¹¹

Aircrews for the C-130Es and A-1Es worked out their portion of the mission. The C-130s were to provide navigational assistance to and from the camp. Also, when these aircraft reached Son Tay, the plan called for dropping a pallet loaded with napalm canisters which would form a flaming pool to act as a reference point for the other aircraft. The A-1Es also carried specially configured napalm canisters which, upon bursting, would also form flaming pools — just in case the C-130s did not have a chance to drop their napalm. Also, the A-1Es were to bomb a bridge near the camp to slow down any enemy force that might try to intervene. If this failed they were to use their cannons to strafe the enemy troops.

The task force expected considerable enemy opposition. In addition to the guards at the prison there was the sapper school up the road. Son Tay also lay at the outer perimeter of Hanoi's northern defenses, accounting for the eight missile sites which would threaten the task force. And, as if that were not enough, there was a battery of 85-mm radar-controlled antiaircraft guns located only two miles from Son Tay. However, because of geographical features and the way these guns were built, they could only be depressed to an angle that made them effective down to 3,000 feet in the vicinity of the camp. Likewise, the missile threat would force the task force down to 500 feet on their way to Son Tay, but because of the missiles' slant range and other factors bearing on their capabilities, the missile threat over the compound was above 3,000 feet.¹²

While tactics were refined at Eglin, the Joint Contingency Task Group put the final touches to the mission plan. A weather expert on the planning staff estimated there would be a ninety-seven percent chance of clear weather over Son Tay on any given day in October and November. Other planners, considering light conditions, decided lunar phases would have to be just right to provide enough light for Army night viewing devices to work, but not silhouette the choppers or the assault troops when they unloaded. With this advice, the planners determined the dates had to be between October 21 and 25 or November 21 and 25.¹³

On September 16 the Joint Contingency Task Group presented the plan to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. They told the Joint Chiefs the force would be ready to go by October 8. Briefings to Melvin R. Laird, Secretary of Defense, Richard M. Helms, Director of the CIA, and Adm. John S. McCain, Jr., Commander in Chief, Pacific, who was in Washington for a conference, followed. Secretary Laird agreed with the recommended target date of October 21 to 25, but deferred approval until "higher authority" could be consulted.

On October 8, the task group briefed Dr. Henry Kissinger, Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs. Kissinger was en-

thusiastic but ordered the operation delayed until November. Although he did not say so at the time, this was probably done for political reasons. On that very day Ambassador David Bruce, in Paris, handed North Vietnamese negotiator Xuan Thuy a new American peace proposal that promised the United States would never invade North Vietnam and offered a total withdrawal of American troops from South Vietnam. Kissinger probably wanted to get an answer from Hanoi before he authorized any operation that would put up to 150 Americans on the ground so close to the enemy's capital.¹⁴

Training at Eglin continued through October. In early November General Manor called all the participants to a mess hall, where he unveiled a model of the POW camp, complete to the last detail including a forty-foot palm tree in the courtyard and clothes on a clothesline. They called it "Barbara", and from the model it was apparent to those who did not know where the mission was headed, that it would be in the tropics. Some theorized that they were going to Cuba to kidnap Fidel Castro. Others, more correctly, thought the raid would free political prisoners held in some tropical dictatorship. For security reasons, only a handful had been told that the suburbs of Hanoi was their destination.¹⁵

On October 27 the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, gave his approval for a November 21-25 raid. To maintain security no messages had been transmitted concerning the operation. In keeping with this policy, General Manor flew to Scott Air Force Base, Illinois, to brief Gen. P.K. Carlton, commander in chief of the Military Airlift Command. General Carlton personally authorized the C-141 jet transports and C-130s needed to airlift the force to Southeast Asia. General Manor and Colonel Simons flew on to Pacific Command headquarters at Hawaii, where they briefed Admiral McCain who, incidentally, had a son in a Hanoi POW camp. Finally they flew to Saigon to brief Gen. Creighton Abrams, commander of MACV, and Gen. Lucius Clay, commander of the Seventh Air Force.¹⁶

After General Abrams and General Clay had been briefed, the staff that had accompanied Manor and Simons went to work in Southeast Asia securing seven HH-53s and two HH-3Es as primary and backup helicopters for the mission. The seven HH-53s were obtained from the 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron at Udorn and the two HH-3Es were contributed by the 37th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron at Da Nang. The squadron commanders, although close friends with most of the rescue crews on the raid, were not told how these choppers would be used, just that it was important.¹⁷

On November 10, the task force began to move from Eglin to Takhli Royal Thai Air Force Base. Just in case the HH-3Es could not make the flight from Da Nang to Udorn, a dangerous undertaking in itself because it entailed flying across the highly-defended Ho Chi Minh Trail at relatively

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low altitude, the raiders took along one of the UH-1s. Security was tight during the trip to Takhli. Most of the men still did not know their exact destination, but to further confuse anyone they met along the way they were told to make cryptic references to a special operation in the Middle East.¹⁸ On November 18, the last rescue elements reached Takhli.

Meanwhile, in-theatre coordination had begun. At Udorn some of the newly arrived "civilian" men and women were Air Force doctors and nurses brought in from bases throughout the Pacific to attend any sick or wounded prisoners or raiders who might be brought back from Son Tay. Across the base, special "civilian" briefers detailed the Mig combat air patrol role to those F-4 crews scheduled for the mission. At Takhli other briefers filled in crews slated to fly the F-105 Wild Weasel surface-to-air-missile suppression sorties.

Weather stepped in to determine the final hour for the raid. Typhoon Patsy was bearing down on North Vietnam. By November 21, the original target date, the Gulf of Tonkin would be too rough for aircraft carrier operations, and the Navy would not be able to make the diversionary flights needed to confuse the North Vietnamese. Late on the morning of November 20, General Manor decided the raid must go one day early — that night.¹⁹

At 1600, Manor gathered the aircrews and assault troops at the Takhli base theater. There he told those who did not already know, the name of the target and its location. The men cheered when they heard they were going to Son Tay. Many of the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service crewmen knew Tom Curtis, an HH-43 pilot who had been a prisoner of war since 1965. They were delighted to see him on a roster of POWs thought to be in Son Tay. At dusk the task force members boarded C-130 transports for the flight to Udorn where the choppers and C-130Es waited. After a briefing specifying routes, times, and altitudes, the raiders reviewed the actions they would be taking when they reached Son Tay.²⁰

When the two C-130s, the HH-3E, and five HH-53s were airborne, about 2310 Udorn time, they set course for North Vietnam. At the first ridge of mountains north of Vientiane, Laos, they flew into clouds. The choppers spread out, giving each other room. The single HH-3E, flown by Maj. Herbert R. Zehnder and Maj. Herbert D. Kalen, stayed behind the lead C-130, riding the crest of its propwash like a racing car drafting in the slipstream of a preceding vehicle. Otherwise, the HH-3 would have been too slow to keep pace with the C-130s and HH-53s.²¹

As the choppers crossed northern Laos and approached North Vietnamese radar coverage, a vast force of 116 mission support aircraft took off from seven bases in Thailand and three carriers in the Gulf of Tonkin.²² Five F-105 Wild Weasels passed the task force to reach the Son Tay area early in order to keep the SAM sites from acquiring fixes or radar locks on the approaching aircraft. Ten F-4Ds from Udorn held in a Mig combat orbit over northeastern Laos. Eight KC-135 tankers orbited near the F-4s

ready to fuel the gas gulping jets. Four more KC-135s were standing by over the Gulf of Tonkin to provide the same service to Navy jets. Two Lockheed EC-121Ds, four-engine Constellation transports used by the Air Force as Early Warning/Ground Control Intercept and Mig warning aircraft, flew along the Laos/North Vietnam border gathering intelligence on enemy fighter reactions. Three RC-135 Combat Apple Electronic Intelligence collection aircraft from the Strategic Air Command provided communications support which included relaying messages to the National Military Command Center in the Pentagon.²³

Twenty minutes before the raiders reached Son Tay, fifty-nine Navy aircraft started confusing North Vietnamese radar defenses in the east. Flights of A-7s flew across North Vietnam, just far enough north of the Hanoi-Haiphong area to activate Chinese radar, thus drawing more elements into the problem and saturating the Chinese/North Vietnamese cross border defense system. Meanwhile, other A-7s raced along the coast off Haiphong dropping flares while A-6s flew low toward the harbor, making the enemy think that Air Force B-52s were heading for their cities. Farther out to sea, F-8 Crusaders and F-4s patrolled for Migs.²⁴

The raiders entered the objective area below 500 feet. The C-130s led the six choppers until Son Tay lay only three and one half miles ahead. At that point the leading C-130 climbed to 1,500 feet followed by two HH-53 choppers: Apple 4, piloted by Lt. Col. Royal H. Brown and Maj. Ryland R. Dreibelbis, and Apple 5 with Maj. Kenneth D. Murphy and Capt. William M. McGeorge at the controls. Brown's Apple 4 was the primary flare chopper and one of those designated to haul back the released prisoners. Apple 5 was the secondary flare helicopter. Over the Son Tay compound the flares worked perfectly, so the two choppers flew to a planned orbit area nearby while the C-130 circled to drop a fire-fight simulator (firecrackers with timed fuses) on the sapper school. It then released its pallet of napalm before flying off to its designated orbit. The second C-130, only a minute behind the first, came in leading the five A-1s. After the A-1s pulled away, this C-130 dropped a napalm marker and then joined the other C-130 in its orbit while the Skyraiders bombed a nearby bridge before taking up their orbit over the flaming pool of napalm.²⁵

In most operations something goes wrong. The Son Tay raid was to be no different in that respect. In the third helicopter, Apple 3, flown by Maj. Frederick M. Donohue and Capt. Thomas R. Waldron, an instrument panel light marked "transmission" flickered on. Captain Waldron jabbed excitedly at the instrument panel. Both men knew the transmission is the most vital piece of machinery in any helicopter. Transmissions can disintegrate in a matter of seconds. If that happens the chopper crashes. Instrument panel lights, however, often short causing them to flicker on when nothing, in fact, is wrong. Donohue weighed the factors. Normally he would declare an emergency and land the chopper in the first available safe

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spot until he could determine if anything was, indeed, amiss in the transmission. These were not normal circumstances, and if he declared an emergency and pulled out of the operation the entire mission might be jeopardized. Donohue coolly told his copilot, "Ignore the sonofabitch."²⁶ In those few seconds of confusion, Donohue let Apple 3 drift slightly off course.

Apple 3 was directly on course for the sapper school instead of the Son Tay prison, some 400 yards beyond. Just before his gunners opened up on the guard towers, Donohue realized his mistake and wheeled his chopper north toward the camp. In Banana 1, the HH-3E just behind Apple 3, Colonel Zehnder and Major Kalen did not realize they were over the wrong compound until they had settled down inside the walls and the gunner had blasted the guard towers. When Zehnder and Kalen realized their mistake they poured on the power, lifted their chopper over the school's walls and headed for the camp. In Apple 1, Lt. Col. Warner A. Britton and Maj. Alfred C. Montrem were too busy concentrating on landing and getting a stuck rear ramp down to hear the radio warnings from Donohue and Zehnder. As their parajumpers blasted the buildings and guard towers with the chopper's gatling-like miniguns, assault troops rushed out the back and fanned out across the landing zone. After a few minutes Col. Bull Simons realized he and his men were in the wrong compound. By this time Simons' troops had breached the wall and were inside the courtyard encountering very heavy opposition. Nevertheless, Simons gathered his troops and beat a hasty retreat back to the landing zone. Meanwhile, Britton and Montrem had relaxed enough to hear the frantic calls of their comrades warning them that they had assaulted the wrong target. Britton spun the chopper around and rushed back to the landing zone just as Simons and his troops arrived. Within three minutes they were loaded up and off to the Son Tay compound. Behind them they left many dead enemy troops.²⁷

In his book, *The Raid*, author Benjamin F. Schemmer claims the raiders killed a number of Chinese or Russian advisors at this school. While intelligence sources do not confirm this allegation, some of the raiders say that the men they fought at the school were larger than the normal Vietnamese and were wearing jockey shorts and white T-shirts rather than black pajamas. Nevertheless, it should be noted the North Vietnamese Army wore western-style fatigue uniforms while black pajamas, traditional Vietnamese peasant garb, were sometimes (though not always) worn by the Viet Cong. In any event, the mistake that caused the attack on the sapper school may have been a fortuitous one. It probably caused considerable confusion and may have been responsible for keeping the troops, whoever they were, at the school and prevented them from interfering with the raiders at Son Tay Prison.

Four hundred yards from the sapper school the battle raged. First, Donohue flew Apple 3 across the prison blasting the guard towers with its

miniguns. Zehnder brought Banana 1 in fast on Apple 3's heels. Herb Kalen, copilot in Banana 1, cut the engines at precisely the right second and the HH-3E dropped into the compound, swinging around on its rotors as the blades sliced into the forty foot tree, just as expected. When it hit the ground, troops rushed out the rear ramp, each running to his assigned objective. Above the roar of battle a bullhorn sounded, "Keep down! We're Americans."²⁸

Inside the cell houses two-man teams began a systematic clearing of each cell block. One team broke in on the camp commandant and shot him in his bed where he lay. Every North Vietnamese they caught, they killed. Nine minutes after landing the first assault team reported, "negative items" no POWs. Three minutes later all teams had reported the same "negative items". Three more minutes passed while the choppers returned from their holding area. While the bulk of the assault force loaded aboard the helicopters outside the compound, a team rigged explosives on Banana 1, the crippled HH-3 inside the prison walls. Twenty-seven minutes after the first C-130 flew over Son Tay these men rushed up the ramp of the last chopper out of Son Tay. Seconds later Banana 1 blew up.²⁹

People in Son Tay village heard the fire-fight simulators and the aircraft overhead. They watched as sixteen SAMs arched across the sky. For half an hour they saw the napalm burning and the planes circling above. One man home on leave from the army, when subsequently captured in South Vietnam, told U.S. Air Force interrogators that he saw tanks moving toward the camp just as the last chopper pulled away.³⁰

Above and to the west, on the receiving end of those sixteen SAMs, two F-105s were damaged. One of them limped back to Udorn to make an emergency landing. The other flew toward Udorn but, over northern Laos, the crew ejected.³¹

In the darkness over western North Vietnam, a Mig sought the remnants of the task force heading back toward Thailand. His air intercept radar found Apple 4 piloted by Lt. Col. Royal H. Brown. When Brown realized his chopper was under attack he put it into a violent turning dive. The Mig pilot fired a heat seeking missile, but it streaked by the twisting helicopter to hit a hill. With the HH-53 turning and maneuvering low to the ground, the hunter soon realized he would not be able to find his prey. The Mig turned for home.³²

It was almost 0300 when Apple 4 found Apple 5, flown by Maj. Kenneth D. Murphy. Together they continued toward Udorn. Suddenly they received a mayday call from the F-105 in trouble over Laos. These two choppers, slated to carry back the prisoners, were empty, so they rendezvoused with Lime 01, an HC-130P tanker, refueled, and flew toward the downed crewmen. An Air America C-123 showed up and began dropping flares. The rescue choppers searched, but could not spot the survivors. When they started picking up small arms fire, the HC-130P, acting as air-

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borne mission control, ordered them to orbit with him until dawn. About three hours passed before the sunrise brought four A-1s from Nakhon Phanom. Sandy Low, the lead, soon located both men, ordered his three wingmen to strafe the area, and then told the choppers to make their pickups. Apple 4 got the backseater and Apple 5 picked up the pilot. Both choppers refueled and headed for Udorn.³³

Success cannot always be measured in unqualified triumphs. The Son Tay raid was a tactical success in that the plan worked. Had there been prisoners at the compound, and had the raiders met with a similar level of enemy resistance, they probably would have been rescued. Additionally, the raid showed the Hanoi leadership that their country was still quite vulnerable to attack. It also focused the attention of the world on the plight of American prisoners of war in North Vietnam. Moreover, it served to bolster the morale of the prisoners who knew they had not been abandoned. Finally, the North Vietnamese, fearing the Americans might attempt another raid, moved all of their American POWs to two or three central complexes. This afforded individual prisoners more contact with each other and boosted their morale.³⁴

~~— continued rescue operations in the period from~~