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The Son Tay Raid:

How the Masterful Application of Surprise, Concentration, Audacity, and Tempo Enabled the Most Daring Operation of the Vietnam War

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Simons Center
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Fort Leavenworth, Kansas

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On November 21, 1970, U.S. Forces conducted a daring POW rescue attempt into a North Vietnam prison camp. With ground forces led Army Special Forces Colonel Arthur “Bull” Simons and overall mission commander Air Force Brig. Gen. LeRoy Manor, the operation known as the Son Tay Raid is a masterful demonstration of surprise, concentration, audacity, and tempo. Although the mission failed to recover any U.S. POWs, it was highly successful at both the tactical and strategic levels and proved that, despite the North Vietnamese air defense network, U.S. forces could inflict punishment in North Vietnam without massive bombing campaigns. The element of surprise enabled the numerically inferior ground forces to concentrate overwhelming firepower. Though the plan was audacious, the overall concept of the operation was fairly simple and remained relatively unchanged since its inception. Furthermore, leaders deliberately controlled the tempo throughout the preparation and execution of the operation realizing the importance of conducting very deliberate planning and preparation for the raid, ultimately leading to its success.

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Introduction

Early on the morning of November 21, 1970, Major Elmo Baker awoke to a series of explosions. He and his fellow prisoners of war (POWs) at Dong Hoi crowded around their cells' tiny windows and glared out through the iron bars. Miles away, they could see flares slowly falling from the sky. They could hear helicopters circling in the distance and a firefight raging on the ground. Some knew immediately what was happening. "They got our message," they thought to themselves as tears ran down their faces. They would not be rescued that morning.¹ Miles away, the would-be rescuers hit a dry hole. The Son Tay prison camp was void of POWs, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) having relocated them just weeks prior. While the mission failed to return any POWs from North Vietnam, the Son Tay Raid remained a tactical and strategic success, overcoming unthinkable odds through the masterful application of surprise, concentration, audacity, and tempo.

In 1970, over 350 U.S. military personnel, like Major Baker, were held captive across North Vietnam.² The treatment of these men was deplorable. The North Vietnamese paid little attention to international guidelines concerning the humane treatment of prisoners. American prisoners received little to no medical care, lacked adequate shelter, and were quickly reduced to ghostly figures from malnourishment and illness. The NVA claimed that their American prisoners were war criminals and therefore not entitled to the protections offered by the Geneva Conventions.³ As a result, U.S. servicemen who fell into North Vietnamese hands were routinely tortured. An American POW, Commander Jeremiah Denton, made this perfectly clear in 1966 when he ingeniously blinked the message "T-O-R-T-U-R-E" in Morse code during a televised North Vietnamese propaganda interview.⁴

While U.S. forces made more than 90 POW rescue attempts in South Vietnam between 1966 and 1970, they had not attempted any such missions into North Vietnam.⁵ A discovery in May 1970 would change that. On May 9, 1970, analysts assigned to the U.S. Air Force's 1127th Special Activity Squadron first identified the Son Tay prison camp after discovering clothing laid out in the camp's courtyard. While drying clothes in the sun was not uncommon in Vietnam, the pattern in which the clothing was arranged was quite unique. The POWs at Son Tay had cleverly arranged their uniforms to spell out the letters "S-A-R," the acronym for "search and rescue." News of the discovery quickly worked its way to the Pentagon,

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where Army Brigadier General (Brig. Gen.) Donald Blackburn, the Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, established a planning cell consisting of personnel from the Army, Navy, Air Force, Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to examine the feasibility of a rescue mission.⁶

Operation Polar Circle – The Planning Phase

Due to a lack of human intelligence sources in North Vietnam, planners were largely dependent on aerial photos taken by unmanned Buffalo Hunter drones and SR-71 spy planes.

Operation POLAR CIRCLE, the initial planning phase of the Son Tay Raid, began with collecting as much intelligence as possible about the Son Tay prison camp. Due to a lack of human intelligence sources in North Vietnam, planners were largely dependent on aerial photos taken by unmanned Buffalo Hunter drones and SR-71 spy planes. However, these intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) platforms had their limitations. The repeated employment of low-flying Buffalo Hunter drones over the Son Tay prison camp would potentially draw NVA attention to the area and compromise the U.S. intent to conduct a rescue mission. The effectiveness of the high-altitude SR-71 spy plane was severely degraded due to Vietnam's frequent cloud cover. While both ISR platforms had their limitations, they were able to gather enough information for the CIA to build a very precise model of the Son Tay prison camp, which proved invaluable throughout the planning process.⁷

The planning cell conducted a detailed analysis of the camp. The main compound contained four large buildings. Two buildings, the “Beer House” and the “Opium Den,” as they were nicknamed, housed the prisoners.⁸ The other two large structures consisted of a multi-story command post and a barracks for the guards. A series of smaller structures, including latrines, confinement cells, and storage huts, were spread across the camp and its periphery. A small courtyard, slightly larger than a volleyball court, lay just inside the compound surrounded by 40-foot-tall trees.⁹ For security, the camp had three bamboo guard towers and was enclosed by a seven-foot-tall wall on all sides.¹⁰ The camp was further isolated by the Son Con River flowing along the north and west walls; rice paddies and intermittent trees lay to the south and east.¹¹

Just as important as the camp's layout was information pertaining to enemy disposition, composition, and strength. The Son Tay prison camp was only 23 miles west of Hanoi, the North Vietnamese capital. While U.S. intelligence personnel estimated the Son Tay prison to have only 45 to 50 guards, an artillery training school, a supply depot, an air defense site, and a North Vietnamese

airbase were all in close proximity.¹² Only 500 meters to the south was another small compound, known as the “secondary school,” a complex believed to house additional NVA soldiers. In all, the CIA and DIA estimated that nearly 12,000 NVA soldiers were stationed within a 20-minute drive of the Son Tay prison camp.¹³

As they completed their initial analysis, the planning cell began developing multiple courses of action. After war-gaming their ideas, the planners identified a general concept that met their criteria. The plan called for a combined fixed- and rotary-wing air element to launch from Thailand and penetrate North Vietnamese air defenses at night. The air element would then insert a ground force of Army Special Forces (SF) soldiers, colloquially known as “Green Berets,” to assault the camp and rescue the prisoners. All personnel would then reload the helicopters and exfiltrate in the same manner in which they infiltrated. Pleased with the course of action, Brig. Gen. Blackburn ordered the planning cell to continue developing the concept in detail.¹⁴

The air infiltration required perhaps the most attention to detail. At the time, North Vietnam had one of the most advanced air defense systems in the world. To penetrate the system, the raiders would fly at low altitude and use direct terrain masking to conceal the element from radar. The National Security Agency (NSA) would assist by identifying gaps in the NVA’s air defense network.¹⁵ Every turn of the flight would be precisely timed to pass between NVA radar sites as the antennas’ rotation created momentary deadspace in the network.¹⁶

To support the mission’s unique requirements, the raiders would require a variety of aircraft. Helicopters would serve as the lift assets for the ground assault force and prisoners. The plan called for five HH-53 Super Jolly Green Giants, callsigns Apple 1 through 5. Apple 1 and 2 would carry the SF support and command elements, respectively. Apple 3 would act as a gunship, providing aerial cover with 7.62mm mini-guns. Apples 4 and 5 would stay high, dropping flares and acting as reserve aircraft in the event the raiders required additional lift assets. A lone HH-3 Jolly Green, callsign Banana, would insert a small SF assault force directly inside the prison camp.¹⁷

To support the heliborne raiders, planners added several fixed-wing aircraft to the rescue force. Two MC-130 Combat Talons, Cherry 1 and 2, would lead the helicopters to the objective using advanced navigational aids, including forward looking infrared (FLIR). Five A-1 Sandies, (Skyraider aircraft), callsigns Peach 1 through 5, would provide close air support for the raiders and prevent reinforcements from reaching Son Tay.¹⁸ An HC-130 would accompany the air element to and from Laos to conduct mid-air

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refueling en route. Additional air support would circle high above the objective and provide an umbrella of cover over the rescue force. Five Air Force F-105 Wild Weasels, Firebird 1 through 5, would target enemy radar sites and surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems. Meanwhile, ten Air Force F-4 Phantoms would provide protection against enemy MiGs.¹⁹ The U.S. Navy would also contribute to the raid by conducting a feint toward Haiphong on North Vietnam's east coast.²⁰

Actions on the objective were relatively simple. At H-hour, the assault on the objective would initiate with mini-gun fire from Apple 3 on the prison's guard towers. The ground forces would land in three distinct elements: assault, support, and security. As Apple 3 neutralized the guard towers, the HH-3, Banana, would crash-land inside the prison's courtyard, rapidly delivering the 14-man assault element, callsign Blueboy, onto the objective. The Blueboy element would quickly dispatch the NVA guards and free the POWs. Apples 1 and 2 would insert the support and security elements outside the south wall. The 22-man support element, callsign Greenleaf, would clear buildings south of the camp, breach a hole in the wall, and assist the assault element if needed. The 20-man security element, callsign Redwine, would also clear buildings along the south wall and establish security positions along likely enemy avenues of approach to cut off reinforcements. As planned, from touchdown to takeoff, the raiders would be on the ground for only 26 minutes, ensuring ground forces were airborne prior to the anticipated arrival of significant enemy reinforcements at H+30.²¹

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Operation Ivory Coast – The Training Phase

On July 31, 1970, the Joint Chiefs agreed with the feasibility of Brig. Gen. Blackburn's plan and authorized the assembly and training of the raiding force.²² With this decision, the Son Tay Raid transitioned from Operation POLAR CIRCLE to Operation IVORY COAST. Army and Air Force special operations immediately assembled a joint task force capable of executing the operation. They assigned Special Forces legend Colonel (Col.) Arthur "Bull" Simons as the ground force commander while Air Force Brig. Gen. LeRoy Manor would serve as overall mission commander.²³ The rescue force mustered at Eglin Air Force Base (AFB) in early August 1970 and commenced training.²⁴

Training initially focused on individual and low-level collective tasks. Ground forces mastered their ability to engage targets at night and conduct breaches. They also familiarized themselves with new

and mission-specific equipment, such as ArmaLight red-dot sights, breaching charges, chain saws, crow bars, wire cutters, bolt cutters, and acetylene torches.²⁵ The air element also required familiarization with new equipment and techniques.²⁶ The aircrews flew 368 sorties and logged 1,017 flight hours. They mastered unique formations that mixed fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft, direct terrain masking, and mid-air refueling at night, all under strict radio silence while maintaining a predetermined flight route at high speeds.²⁷

Upon mastering the individual skills required for the mission, Brig. Gen. Manor and Col. Simons integrated air and ground training. The raiders conducted more than 170 rehearsals for the operation, sometimes executing as many as six rehearsals in a 24-hour period.²⁸ The raiders conducted their rehearsals on a mockup built out of 2x4s and target cloth hammered into the sand. While the fabricated camp was nothing spectacular to look at, the reproduction provided a to-scale layout of the prison camp.²⁹ Each rehearsal was a live fire exercise, incorporating everything from small arms to the A-1 Sandies' 20mm cannons.³⁰ After each rehearsal, the raiders conducted an after action review and refined the plan to increase efficiency and prepare for possible contingencies, resulting in a plan that was precise, yet flexible.

In late September and early October, Brig. Gen. Manor and Col. Simons briefed the Secretary of Defense (SECDEF), the Director of the CIA, and the National Security Advisor. The SECDEF authorized Brig. Gen. Manor and Col. Simons to proceed with in-theater coordination. They met with the leaders of all major U.S. commands in Southeast Asia. The mission was well received, with the various generals and admirals pledging their full support. On November 10, the task force initiated movement to Thailand and was fully staged for execution by 17 November. Operation IVORY COAST, the training and preparation for the raid, was complete.³¹

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Operation Kingpin – The Execution Phase

On November 18, President Nixon personally authorized the rescue attempt; Operation KINGPIN was a “Go.”³² At 1800 hours on November 20, 1970, Col. Simons briefed the raiders, “We are going to rescue 70 American prisoners of war, maybe more, from a camp called Son Tay. This is something American prisoners have a right to expect from their fellow soldiers. The target is 23 miles west of Hanoi.”³³ This was the first time most of the raiders had heard of their true purpose. They had all been kept in the dark for operations security purposes. At first, there was total silence. A moment later,

While the raiders infiltrated through the mountains, the Navy launched the largest night raid of the war in a diversionary attack on Haiphong.

the men broke out in cheers and applause. The remainder of the brief took only 45 minutes, the raiders having rehearsed the mission so many times before. At 2317 hours, the helicopters lifted off from Udorn, Thailand, and began their long and arduous flight to Son Tay.³⁴

While the raiders infiltrated through the mountains, the Navy launched the largest night raid of the war in a diversionary attack on Haiphong.³⁵ Naval aviators flew a total of 59 sorties using a variety of aircraft.³⁶ At high altitude, F-4 Phantoms provoked North Vietnamese radar and stood poised to engage enemy MiGs. A-7 Corsairs flew routes over the Haiphong Harbor, dropping flares and confusing the enemy. Finally, A-6 Intruders, feared for their ability to conduct highly accurate bombing, flew in over the coastline for the first time since 31 October 1968.³⁷ The substantial number of aircraft and unique activity were enough to excite the North Vietnamese air defenses and draw their attention eastward, helping the low-flying rescue force approach Son Tay undetected from the west.³⁸

At 0213 hours, the rescue force reached its initial point; three minutes later the aircraft broke formation and took to their specific tasks. At 0218 hours, H-hour, the lead MC-130 dropped flares over the Son Tay prison camp, initiating the assault.³⁹ Apple 3 immediately neutralized the enemy guard towers with its mini-guns. Within seconds, Banana, the lone HH-3, crash-landed inside the prison. The Blueboy assault element, having achieved complete surprise, quickly eliminated the dozen or so remaining guards inside the camp. Meanwhile, Apple 1 mistakenly inserted Col. Simons and the Greenleaf support element at the secondary school. Greenleaf quickly found itself in a firefight but was able to return overwhelming fire, killing an estimated 100 enemy soldiers before departing the secondary school and reinserting outside the prison camp. While Greenleaf fought at the secondary school, the Redwine security element took on the roles of both security and support, one of many contingencies for which the raiders had planned for and rehearsed.⁴⁰

While the ground forces cleared the camp below, the Air Force maintained its umbrella of cover over the objective. The HH-53s circled above, dropping flares and engaging targets with mini-guns. The A-1s circled the area at only 100 to 200 feet above ground level, strafing the bridge over the Son Con River and preventing enemy reinforcements from approaching the camp.⁴¹ As the NVA activated SAM sites, the F-105s engaged them with Shrike anti-radiation missiles. Seeking self-preservation, the enemy ignored the rescue force's low-flying aircraft and targeted the F-105s, firing between 14 and 16 SAMs.⁴² The Air Force F-4s loitered above, prepared to intercept enemy MiGs.⁴³

Only five minutes after crash-landing inside the camp, members

of the Blueboy assault element reached the POW cells; they were empty. The Blueboy spent the next four minutes re-clearing the camp to ensure no POWs were present. At H+11,0229, Captain Dick Meadows, the Blueboy team leader, reported, “Negative items,” signaling the absence of POWs at Son Tay.⁴⁴ Shortly thereafter, the ground element commanders ordered their men to withdraw to the extraction point. The raiders quickly placed an explosive charge inside Banana, the damaged HH-3, and exited the camp. The Redwine security element continued to keep nearby enemy forces at bay as Apple 1 touched down to extract the Blueboy and Greenleaf elements.⁴⁵ Less than a minute later, Apple 2 set down to extract the Redwine security element at H+27.⁴⁶ The raiders quickly departed the objective, flying fast and low as they escaped into the relative safety of Laos.

Analysis and Conclusion

Despite the precision in which they executed the operation, the raiders returned to Thailand disappointed, with their heads held low. When the American media caught word of the raid, they quickly chalked it up as yet another U.S. military and intelligence failure in Vietnam.⁴⁷ While the mission did fail to achieve its principal goal of recovering U.S. POWs, it was anything but a failure. In fact, the mission was highly successful at both the tactical and strategic levels.

Tactically, the rescue force was able to penetrate the North Vietnamese air defense network and conduct the raid with impunity. With the exception of Apple 1 initially landing at the secondary school, a contingency for which the raiders had planned and rehearsed, the operation went off without a hitch. The ground force escaped relatively unscathed, the most serious injury being a broken ankle when a fire extinguisher broke loose during the HH-3’s intentional crash landing inside the prison camp. The U.S. only lost two aircraft during the operation: the HH-3 and an F-105 that was able to lumber back to relative safety after being damaged by a SAM over Son Tay. Estimates of NVA casualties ranged from 100 to 200 men.⁴⁸

Strategically, the raid was proof that U.S. forces could inflict punishment in North Vietnam without massive bombing campaigns. This helped reinforce President Nixon’s warnings to North Vietnamese negotiators during peace talks.⁴⁹ As events unfolded, the Son Tay Raid also resulted in improved treatment of American POWs in North Vietnam. The North Vietnamese, fearing repeated rescue attempts, shut down many of their smaller POW camps

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and consolidated prisoners at two major facilities in Hanoi. After consolidating, the POWs lived in groups rather than in solitary confinement as many had before the raid. Once in Hanoi, they were no longer exposed to harsh jungle elements and received a more nutritious diet. The prisoners' morale immediately improved, as did their health.⁵⁰ These second and third order effects likely saved several of the POWs' lives.

When viewed through a doctrinal lens, the Son Tay Raid is a masterful demonstration of surprise, concentration, audacity, and tempo. These characteristics of the offense were indeed the operation's defining characteristics. Through their meticulous integration and application, the Son Tay Raiders overcame tremendous odds, achieving a tremendous tactical victory with strategic effects.

SURPRISE

The Son Tay Raid was successful, in large part, due to the element of surprise. The North Vietnamese did not anticipate the time, place, and manner in which the raiders attacked and were therefore ill-prepared. From the raid's first inception, planners knew that surprise would play a critical role in the operation. If the mission was compromised prior to the raiders reaching the objective, the would-be rescuers would likely fly directly into a trap and surely be killed or captured.

Mission planners took numerous steps to ensure they maintained the element of surprise. The Navy's diversionary air strike turned the full attention of the NVA's air defense network to the east, allowing the raiders to approach from the west without detection.⁵¹ The low-altitude, terrain-masking flight path further ensured the raiders arrived at their objective undetected. Perhaps the greatest shock was the tenacity of the mission itself. The U.S. had never attempted a rescue operation so deep into North Vietnam and, as such, the NVA was ill-prepared to repel or respond to such an operation. As a result of these efforts, the raiders achieved complete tactical surprise, providing them initiative and shock effect which enabled them to quickly neutralize the camp's guards.

Stringent security measures helped maintain the element of surprise. From the initial stages of the operation, an elaborate counterintelligence system helped monitor for and prevent security leaks. The raiders lived and trained in a fenced compound on Eglin AFB.⁵² A security detail maintained a 24-hour guard and enforced a strict access roster to prevent unauthorized access and observation of the raiders and their pre-mission training. To keep information from leaking from the inside out, U.S. Air Force security services tapped the raiders' phones throughout the duration of the operation, closely monitoring their communications for any unintentional leaks

of critical information.⁵³

To further mitigate the risk of potential security leaks, only key leaders knew of the operation's true objective. With few exceptions, the rescue force at Eglin was unaware of the motive behind its grueling training cycle. The raiders' leaders maintained a strict cover story, stating they formed the group for humanitarian contingency operations.⁵⁴ The raiders believed they were secretly training to rescue hostages from a hijacked plane, as there were several hijackings taking place at the time.⁵⁵ When the task force initiated movement to Thailand, the air movement commander briefed the raiders a fictitious flight plan to conceal their true destination.⁵⁶ Only hours before the operation did Col. Simons brief the raiders the true nature of their mission. As a result of their strict security measures, the raiders achieved complete surprise, affording them a marked advantage, not only over the Son Tay prison guards but the NVA as a whole.

CONCENTRATION

To achieve concentration, one must mass overwhelming force at a given point to achieve a single purpose. At first glance, the raid's 56-man ground assault force may not appear to meet this criterion. However, the concentration of relative firepower on the objective as well as the number and scale of U.S. Navy and Air Force shaping and supporting operations clearly satisfy this characteristic of the offense.

While the raiders on the ground lacked numerical concentration, they were able to compensate through the concentration of overwhelming firepower. The 56-man ground force carried a total of 111 weapons, including 48 CAR-15 carbines, two M-16 automatic rifles, 51 M1911 pistols, four M-60 machine guns, and two 12-gauge shotguns. To feed this arsenal, the raiders carried over 25,000 rounds of small arms ammunition, allowing them to sustain a high rate of fire throughout the duration of the rescue.⁵⁷ In addition to small arms, the raiders carried 213 hand grenades, 15 M-18 Claymore mines, 11 demolition charges, four M-79 grenade launchers, and a small number of M-72 Light Anti-Tank Weapons.⁵⁸ This concentration of firepower proved essential when the support element, led by Col. Simons, found itself engaging a numerically superior force after initially landing at the secondary school.

To support the raiders' decisive operation, the U.S. Navy and Air Force conducted several large-scale shaping and supporting operations. The largest was the Navy's massive diversionary air strike. The Navy flew 59 sorties in support of the raiders, the Navy's largest night operation of the entire war.⁵⁹ The Air Force was the next largest contributor to the raid. The MC-130s, HH-53s, and A-1s

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were all in direct support of the raiders on the ground, while F-4s and F-105s prevented interference from enemy MiGs and SAMs. Beyond the combat sorties, the Air Force conducted multiple supporting operations. The Air Force contributed tankers for mid-air refueling, command and control (C2) aircraft for advanced communications, a radar surveillance aircraft to monitor enemy air threats, and radio intercept aircraft to track and disrupt enemy communications.⁶⁰ In all, more than 100 U.S. military aircraft and thousands of soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines were concentrated on supporting the Son Tay Raid in some capacity on the night of November 20 to 21, 1970.⁶¹ This concentration of combat power overwhelmed NVA defenses and prevented enemy forces from effectively responding to the raid in a timely or organized manner.

AUDACITY

While the possibility of recovering American POWs presented a tremendous payoff, the mission also carried potential consequences from the tactical to strategic levels.

Special operations frequently offer high payoffs at exceptionally high risks, making audacity a critical element for success. As the British Special Air Service (SAS) says, “Audacity! Audacity! Audacity! Who dares, wins!” Those words convey the idea that a simple, daring plan boldly executed offers distinct advantages. The plan for the Son Tay Raid was, without a doubt, audacious. While the plan did contain many complex elements, the overall concept of the operation was fairly simple and remained relatively unchanged since its inception. Col. Simons was more than pleased with the plan’s simple concept, stating, “I had never seen such a simple plan and so clearly written that even I could understand it.”⁶² While the general concept was simple, the plan called on daring and bold execution. Sending a small heliborne rescue force deep into enemy territory at night was a significantly bold risk. While the possibility of recovering American POWs presented a tremendous payoff, the mission also carried potential consequences from the tactical to strategic levels. At the tactical level, based on the number of personnel involved, it was quite possible the mission would cost more U.S. lives than POWs it was intended to recover. Operationally, if the NVA were able to kill or capture the raiders, it would present them a tremendous propaganda victory. Finally, at the strategic level, conducting the raid had the potential to significantly disrupt ongoing peace talks and negatively sway international public opinion. Ultimately, the Commander-in-Chief accepted the risk, personally authorizing what was unequivocally the most daring and boldly executed operation of the entire Vietnam War.

The infiltration phase of the operation was audacious in its own right. Just attempting to penetrate the North Vietnamese air defense was extremely risky, let alone flying within 23 miles of the well defended capital city of Hanoi. The flight plan called for several

bold maneuvers, including flying through mountainous terrain at night and mid-air refueling, both of which pushed the aircraft and crews to their limits. Perhaps most audacious was the intentional crash-landing of the HH-3, Banana, inside the Son Tay prison camp to rapidly deliver the Blueboy assault element.

The raid's audacity did not end with the air movement to the objective. Once on the ground, the 56-man raiding force was deep inside enemy territory. Intelligence suggested over 12,000 NVA soldiers were located within a 20-minute drive of the Son Tay prison camp.⁶³ If an information leak compromised the mission or the NVA managed to destroy the helicopters, the ground force would be trapped over 100 miles from Laos without a ride home.⁶⁴ In that event, the raiders planned to put their backs to the river and fight the enemy tooth and nail to their own demise.⁶⁵ While these factors made the Son Tay Raid extremely dangerous, it was this audacity that made it so unexpected by the enemy and, therefore, likely to succeed.

TEMPO

The Son Tay Raid's tempo, or rate of military action, was also critical to the operation's success. Leaders deliberately controlled the tempo throughout the preparation and execution of the operation. During Operations POLAR CIRCLE and IVORY COAST, leaders quickly realized the importance of conducting very deliberate planning and preparation for the raid. They knew if such an audacious mission were rushed into action, it would merely contribute to the number of American POWs in North Vietnam. To prevent hasty planning and execution, the planners established a deliberate, conditions-based timeline.

Weather played a significant role in the operation and, thus, played a pivotal role in the operational timeline. To support mid-air refueling, the sky would need to be as cloud-free as possible. A quarter-moon, approximately 35 degrees above the horizon, would provide aviators ideal light conditions for flight and enough illumination for the ground force to accomplish its mission.⁶⁶ Based on these conditions, experts identified two target windows for execution. The first was October 21-25; the second was November 21-25, 1970.⁶⁷ By establishing target windows, the Son Tay planners influenced the tempo and provided the raiders with the best possible weather and light conditions to complement the operation.

During its opening hours, Operation KINGPIN necessitated a very deliberate and methodical tempo. To penetrate North Vietnamese air defenses undetected, the raiders flew a very precise flight plan with strict adherence to established timetables designed to exploit gaps in enemy radar coverage. The number of shaping

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and supporting operations made these timetables essential. Had one element's rate of action been too fast or too slow, the entire rescue force would have been placed in jeopardy. To maintain this deliberate tempo, Brig. Gen. Manor established several C2 nodes throughout Southeast Asia to track and control the progress of all forces involved in the operation.

When the raiders arrived at Son Tay at H-hour, the operation took on a far more aggressive pace. While the rescue force had anticipated the element of surprise, they knew this advantage would be fleeting. The raiders had to rapidly exploit their tactical surprise through violence of action on the objective to rapidly accomplish their mission before NVA reinforcements could arrive. The intentional crash-landing of the HH-3 inside the prison camp to rapidly deliver the Blueboy assault element serves as a brilliant illustration of the plan's focus on speed and violence of action. The timely and fluid manner in which the raiders conducted the operation can be directly attributed to effective communication and rehearsals. Just as important as the raiders' weapons was their communications equipment. The ground force carried 58 UHF-AM and 34 VHF-FM radios on the operation to enable flat communications across ground forces, facilitate air-to-ground communication, and assist in SAR if required. Beyond communications, the quantity and quality of rehearsals the raiders conducted as part of their training at Eglin AFB enabled them to rapidly execute the operation in a smooth and efficient manner, even when the Greenleaf support element initially landed at the incorrect compound.⁶⁸ Ultimately, from touchdown to takeoff, the raiders were on the ground for only 27 minutes.

CONCLUSION

The Son Tay Raid was unequivocally the most daring and boldly executed operation conducted by U.S. forces during the Vietnam War. With the odds stacked against them, the raiders conducted a successful attack deep behind enemy lines. While the operation ultimately failed to liberate any POWs, the Son Tay Raid will forever serve as an example of what is possible given the skilled application of surprise, concentration, audacity, and tempo during offensive operations. **IAP**

Endnotes

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