

# Were the North Vietnamese Forewarned about the Son Tay Raid?

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There were many probing questions about the empty POW Camp found by our specially trained rescue forces at Son Tay in North Vietnam on November 21 1970. Why was the POW camp empty? Were the North Vietnamese forewarned about our plans to conduct this raid? The Pentagon was so concerned that the Army Chief of Staff issued specific orders to conduct an investigation to find out if such a warning had taken place. The Army picked its best investigator, Special Forces Lt Col Sully Fontaine, to ferret this out. Fontaine knew the existing foreign spy networks in Southeast Asia where he could find agents who would be expected to have information on this subject. He interrupted his honeymoon and went undercover to explore the murky intelligence dens in the capitals of that region. When he returned home, he was convinced that no one had warned the North Vietnamese about the daring rescue attempt. The raid was a total surprise to the intelligence networks of Southeast Asia.

In spite of that official conclusion, speculations continued. Our specially trained Joint Contingency Task Force did not rescue anyone, however, the execution of the Operation Kingpin was judged to be a tactical success story that is still used as an example for a model joint special operation. Was it also completely successful in achieving total surprise?

Mr. Benjamin Schemmer wrote the first detailed book on the raid in 1976. From it the North Vietnamese learned much about how the raid was planned, trained for and executed. Later, one of their writers, Mr. Dang Vuong Hung, who identified himself as an English speaking deputy editor the “World Security Newspaper” (Bao An Ninh The Gioi), contacted Schemmer with his stories about the Son Tay raid. One of these was a fantastic revelation about how one intelligence officer, who monitored Paris peace talks as a reporter, provided the North Vietnamese with a warning about the POW rescue. Because I was assisting Ben Schemmer with inputs for his forthcoming 2002 book revision, he shared his Hung’s encounter with me. We agreed that the story about the warning could not possibly be true and Ben chose not to address it in his revised edition. He made this choice even though the claiming agent, Mr. Gia Huy, identified Lt Col Sully Fontaine as a commando who could lead such a rescue.

Schemmer urged me to write my own book about the raid in which I could pursue my own urge to include in it stories about the raid as seen by North Vietnamese sources. He shared with me his e-mail exchange with Hung who had upset him by the way he plagiarized his text and the way he mixed it in with communist political propaganda and jargon. Hung also asked Schemmer for \$1,500 to cover the cost of 15 photographs that depicted the raid scenes.<sup>1</sup> I never contacted Hung because I established contact with Mr. Merle L. Pribbenow, a retired CIA operations officer and linguist who now translates Vietnamese historical accounts about the war. Pribbenow

contacted me in his attempt to locate Sully Fontaine whose name surfaced in one of Hung's stories. Once we established mutual contacts, the three of us agreed that Gia Huy's account was just a good story intended to put the effectiveness of North Vietnamese intelligence network in a more positive light and also to make himself look good. Identification of Fontaine as a likely candidate to lead the raid must have come from his notoriety back at home in Belgium and the story about his investigation of a possible raid warning that was described by Schemmer in his book.

Gia Huy's account was first published in the "World Security Newspaper" as one of Mr. Hung's articles presenting the North Vietnamese side of the story about the Son Tay raid. Mr. Hung's complete account of the raid "The Truth About the Son Tay Raid to Rescue American Pilots" was published in 2000 in a trilogy book titled *Escape and Missing*. Pribbenow translated this book and made it available to me and the Son Tay Raider Association. I obtained two copies of it through our embassy in Hanoi. It has all the photographs that were available for sale by Mr. Hung. In this book, Gia Huy claims that he received a folded note from a disgruntled US reporter in a Paris restroom. The story is best told with Pribbenow's translation.

"The U.S. Defense Department is currently making urgent preparations for a raid to be launched into an area northwest of Hanoi to rescue U.S. pilots who are being held as prisoners of war. According to a Vietnamese priest in Belgium, DIA has selected a number of experienced Western European commando officers to take part in this operation."

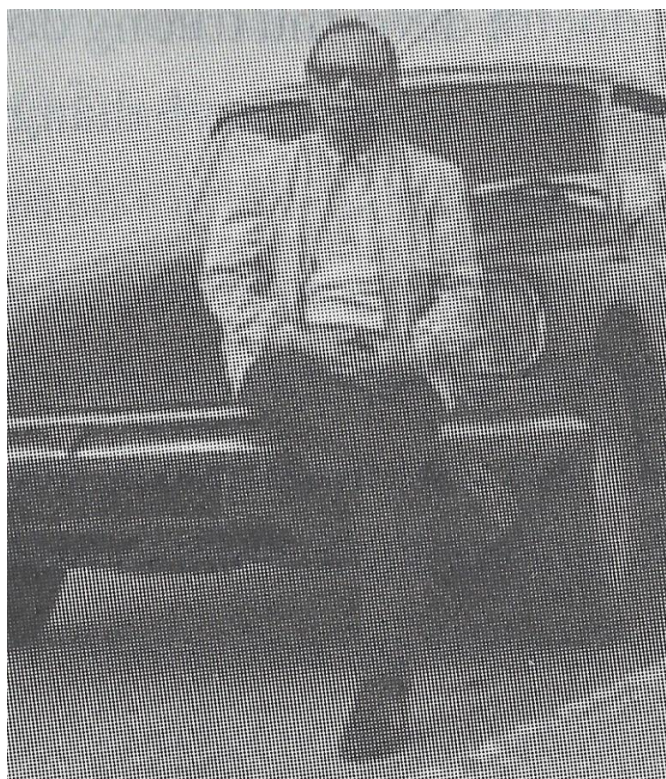
"I wracked my brain while considering this information. I knew that the soldiers and civilians of North Vietnam had shot down many U.S. aircraft and captured many pilots. Naturally we had prison camps, but the truth was that I had no idea where these prison camps were located."

"The next morning I was in Brussels, Belgium, to look up a former guerrilla officer who had fought against the German fascists during the Second World War and who was very sympathetic towards Vietnam. He enthusiastically told me, "There aren't many airborne commandos in this area, but there are a few who are rather well-known in military circles. One is "Phongten" [Fontaine?], a Belgian citizen of French extraction. He is a military intelligence specialist and is skilled in training airborne commandos. He worked with U.S. intelligence during the Second World War. After the war Fontaine joined the U.S. Army. During the early 1960's he was sent to South Vietnam and Laos a number of times to train commandos there. I have heard that, even though he retired some time ago, the Americans recently invited Fontaine to participate in some kind of special mission."

"I decided to quickly send the following report back "home": "The enemy may be planning to parachute troops into Vietnam on a raid to rescue American prisoners being held northwest of Hanoi. This report is being submitted for your analysis and evaluation."

"Later, when I returned home to report on the results of my mission, Minister Tran Quoc Hoan personally decorated me. The Minister told me that the information I had sent back had fitted very well with suspicions which had already been raised by a number of reports from other sources saying that the enemy might launch a raid against Son Tay but which we had not yet been able to confirm. After weighing this information, higher authorities decided to secretly evacuate the American pilots being held at the Son Tay prison camp to a back-up camp, leaving behind only a unit stationed there full-time to maintain the camp and be prepared to combat the enemy when he

mounted his raid. The evacuation of the American prisoners of war was carried out exactly according to plan. As for the unit on permanent combat alert, at first the unit had been very serious in carrying out its mission, but because we did not know the exact date of the raid, after a few weeks of maintaining constant full combat alert our troops dropped their vigilance and turned the camp over to another element. When the enemy did attack the camp the unfortunate incident of which the readers are aware occurred”<sup>ii</sup>



*Gia Huy*



*Sully Fontaine*

There is another individual identified in Mr. Hung’s book who claimed to have warned the authorities in Hanoi. He is Maj. Gen. Nguyen Don Tu who served as chief of the Research Section at the Paris peace talks. His warning was in the following message: “Information from U. S. Congressional minutes reveals that the enemy has a plan to conduct a raid against the Son Tay Prison Camp to rescue U.S. prisoners of war. Precautions should be taken against this possibility.”<sup>iii</sup>

General Tu came to the raid suspicion after scrutinizing documents provided to the North Vietnamese by progressive American friends, voluminous Congressional records and a report about a mockup POW camp built on a military installation. Because he knew of prisoners being confined at Son Tay and was familiar with the geography of the surrounding area, he concluded that this would be the likeliest place for a rescue attempt. He followed up on his warning during a visit to Hanoi where he learned that the prisoners had already been moved out of that location because of similar concerns he himself had reached. Mr. Hung quotes him relating that: ”About two weeks later the raid was carried out just as I had predicted.”<sup>iv</sup>



*Major General Nguyen Don Tu*



*Mr. Dang Vuong Hung*

Mr. Dang Vuong Hung's book was published in 2000. A more recent, 2010 publication of *The History of the General Staff During the Resistance War Against the Americans to Save the Nation* is very critical for their lack of preparedness for American intrusion so deep into their homeland. The two areas of attack the General Staff addressed were at Son Tay and the diversionary mock attack at Haiphong. Mr. Pribbenow's translation of their account follows:

“On 29 November 1970, during a meeting of the Central Military Party Committee, the General Staff provided a briefing on the combat situation in North Vietnam on 21 November 1970, including the battle against the enemy forces that landed to rescue American airmen at Son Tay. The General Staff stressed that this enemy operation sent into North Vietnam was part of an overall enemy plan that had been organized, prepared for, and conducted very meticulously. The evidence of the operation was relatively clear. The two areas that were attacked were inter-connected, and the enemy's aims were to rescue airmen, destroy North Vietnam, and at the same time to deceive public opinion.”

“As for our side, in general our air defense and air force troops in the Ha Tay and Hoa Binh area and our anti-aircraft and militia forces in Military Region 4 were ready for battle and fought the enemy in a timely fashion. However, a number of units and local areas (especially in the area where the enemy used helicopters to land troops) displayed a lack of vigilance, their awareness of the need for combat readiness was very low, they missed opportunities to kill the enemy, and they allowed the enemy to inflict a number of losses on us. “

“The General Staff was very clear in stating that this represented a serious shortcoming on the part of our air defense-air force troops. The primary reason was a low spirit of vigilance, a failure to anticipate that the enemy might take the risky action of sending helicopters deep into our

territory to rescue captured airmen, and the lack of a prior plan to deal with this situation. As a result, when the situation developed, all levels of command were caught off-guard, they were confused and uncertain, they reacted too slowly, and they were unable to attack the enemy. Communications between different command levels were not good, our personnel were too rigid in their use of communications channels, and there was a lack of plans to provide communications in an unexpected situation. As a result, higher command levels were not provided with the information they needed to fully grasp the situation so that they could direct and utilize our forces in a timely fashion. Although there had been supervision over air defense operations in Military Region 4, when the enemy attacked we suffered a large number of casualties. ....”<sup>v</sup>

The most recent account about the absence of prior warning comes from Colonel General Phung The Tai who was the North Vietnamese Deputy Chief of the General Staff at the time of the raid. He wrote the following comment about Gia Huy’s claim in his 2014 pre-mortem confessing memoirs. Once again, General’s story is best told as translated by Mr. Pribbenow:



*Colonel General Phung The Tai .*

“In just two years I will be 90 years old and will have been a Party member for 70 years. It will not be long before I leave this earth to follow Uncle Ho. That is the reason that I wanted to tell people about all of the things that previous books have not been able to discuss about my seventy years of following Uncle Hoi and the Party while serving in many different positions and participating in matters that were so secret we were supposed to keep them secret until our deaths. ...”<sup>vi</sup>

“There was an article about the Son Tay Raid by certain author that claimed that our intelligence obtained advance information about this raid and that this was why we transferred around 100 prisoners of war to another location, and that was why the raid failed to rescue any prisoners. That’s a bunch of bull! That is not true. This raid took us completely by surprise. If we had received advance warning we would have captured several of their helicopters and all of the enemy commandos.”<sup>vii</sup>

“When the raid took place, I was away on a working trip to Military Region 4 with Van Tien Dung. Vo Nguyen Giap sent me an urgent message instructing me to return to Hanoi right away and summoning me to come in to brief him on the raid. All I could do when I got there was to hang my head in shame and accept responsibility. However, I still strove to defend myself by saying that we had received not a single report from Department 2 (the Military Intelligence Department) to alert us that this raid was coming.”

“This may have been the most painful, most humiliating incident of my entire military career. For several days after the raid I could neither eat nor sleep. Sometimes I just sat in my office thinking about how almost one hundred American commandos had arrogantly swept through the prison camp carrying pliers and hammers, knocking down walls and destroying rooms, and then had climbed back onto their helicopters and got away scot free – it almost drove me crazy.”<sup>viii</sup>

“I gnashed my teeth and pounded my fist on my desk as I told myself, “If we had just had some advance warning, we would have gotten all six of their helicopters and captured this entire team of their most elite commandos. We would have been so happy...”

“However, I told myself that at least it was fortunate that I had transferred the prisoners to another location so that at least Nixon had not been able to recover them. If I had not done this, then a thousand years would not have been enough time for me to get over my anger and my shame about this incident. ...”<sup>ix</sup>

General Phung The Tai is no longer with us because he followed his Uncle Ho out of our midst last year in March. He sounds as a very devout Communist who followed his Party’s guidelines for constructive self-criticism. His story is convincing. The North Vietnamese had no idea that a POW raid was being contemplated. The General also claims responsibility for transferring the prisoners out of the Son Tay camp.

“Why were the prisoners moved? The story begins sometime around 20 December 1969 when Hoang Van Tien (Hoàng Văn Tiến), the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, came to see me to discuss granting permission for a priest and two singers (I think that Tom Boye was also part of the group) to come to visit the prisoners for the Christmas holiday and to put on a performance for the entertainment of the prisoners of war. I forwarded this request to Brother Van (General Vo Nguyen Giap) and Brother Dung (General Van Tien Dung) and both of them approved the visit. I then called in the officers from the Army Security Department to discuss the arrangements.”

“The group arrived in Hanoi on 23 December 1969. At 1730 hours on the afternoon of 24 December 1969 we held a reception for the visitors at the Metropol Hotel and then sent them straight up to Son Tay by car. We also arranged for the captured American airmen to have an early meal. We gave the prisoners a special meal which included barbequed duck, and each prisoner was given a glass of new rice wine. When they learned that two priests and some American singers were coming to perform for them, the entire camp was filled with shouts of joy and happiness. “

“I instructed Thai, Deputy Director of the Army Security Department, to place special emphasis on monitoring the activities of the Catholic priest, because it turned out that he went around to each cell, looking in and making furtive glances all around the camp. Later, after the raid took place, we concluded that this group of singers and the accompanying priest had requested this Christmas 1969 visit in order to confirm the exact number of prisoners being held and to determine the layout of the camp to help the Americans plan their big operation. However, I must confess that before the raid we had idea that this is what they were doing.”<sup>x</sup>

“As for the movement of the captured enemy airmen out of the Son Tay prison camp, in fact that was simply a coincidence, a matter of chance. I personally gave the order to move the prisoners and I closely monitored their movement from beginning to end, from their starting point in Son Tay down to the Nga Tu So prison camp, the location that had previously occupied by the Ministry of Culture’s Fa Fim movie film organization. The movement of the prisoners took place six months before the raid. It was a special movement that had to be kept absolutely secret and that had to be very meticulously planned.”<sup>xi</sup>

“Two Deputy Directors of the Army Security Department participated in this operation from the time it was in the planning stage, and these two officers accompanied the trucks during the move, with one of them leading the convoy and the other one bringing up the rear. Each truck had four soldiers serving as guards. As I recall, the movement took place one night in May 1970. This means that the movement of the prisoners took place six months before the raid.”<sup>xii</sup>

I believe that the soul-searching confessions of General Phung The Tai give the best evidence that they did not have any warning about the rescue attempt. General recalled the wrong date for the prisoner transfer and fabricated the story about the Christmas event at Son Tay. None of the Son Tay POWs remember such a visit. The Vietnamese suspected all foreign visitors to the POW camps, especially the priests. Consequently, such a visit might have taken place at some other camp and at some other time. None of my POW contacts recall a Christmas duck dinner with rice wine. July 1970 transfer of prisoners out of Son Tay came about because they concluded that this location was vulnerable to a rescue attempt. There was no connection between our plans and preparations for the raid and that movement of prisoners. Our secret planning, training and raid execution was never compromised and the enemy was stunned by our performance.

I thank Mr. Pribbenow who has been providing me with translations of everything he encounters on the Son Tay raid in his research on the North Vietnamese side of the story of the war. Sully Fontaine and I live in Nevada. He was my sponsor for joining the Las Vegas Special Forces Chapter 51 as an Associate Member

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<sup>i</sup> Schemmer, e-mail message to Gargus, 6 Nov. 2001.

<sup>ii</sup> Dan Vuong Hung, *Escape and Missing*, 370-71.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.* 367.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>v</sup> Senior Colonel Tran Quoc Tuan, Senior Colonel, PhD Do Duc Tinh, Senior Colonel, PhD Nguyen Thanh Huu, *The History of the General Staff During the Resistance War Against the Americans to Save the Nation (1954-1975), Volume 4 (1969-1972)*, 264-5.

<sup>vi</sup> Colonel General Phung The Tai, *An Entire Life Spent Following Uncle Ho: The Memoirs of Colonel General Phung The Tai*, 9.

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.* 37.

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.* 42.

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.* 43.

<sup>x</sup> *Ibid.* 38.

<sup>xi</sup> *Ibid.* 37.

<sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.* 38.