

Air Operations for the Son Tay Raid

Colonel John Gargus USAF (Ret)

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Planners of the bold attempt to rescue American prisoners of war from North Vietnam on November 21, 1970 put together a small joint special operations force that was believed to be just right for the task. They never anticipated that their carefully orchestrated operation would balloon into what became the largest nighttime operation of the Vietnam War up to that date. Even though today's military historians laud the raid on the Son Tay prison camp as a model for a successfully executed joint special operations mission, they do not address the extremely large air support it generated. Instead they focus their attention on the meticulous small force training of this joint service force in Florida and on its great professional performance during the raid itself.

The well-conceived Operation Ivory Coast plan called for a small joint force of Army and Air Force Special Forces to train in Florida. This had to be done away from Vietnam to ensure top secret security for the project. Once ready, the force was secretly inserted into the war zone for execution with minimal support from the US forces conducting the war. The Green Berets did not require any Army support because they brought everything they needed with them. They were secretly flown into a well-guarded isolation facility at the staging base at Takhli in Thailand. Air Force requirements were more involved because in theater air assets had to be borrowed to execute the raid under a new name called Operation Kingpin. Only two Combat Talon C-130s and two College Eye EC-121s flew in from the States. Helicopters and fighter aircraft had to be provided by theater units, hopefully with minimal impact on their war operations. After all, the raid was planned to be just a one night event. The Navy did not participate in the stateside planning and training, however, the planners wanted to have the carriers in the Gulf of Tonkin launch few aircraft to provide a diversion for the raiding aircraft which would enter into North Vietnam from Laos.

The most directly involved aircraft numbered only 15. There were two very special Combat Talon MC-130s with highly classified navigation and electronic systems that allowed them to operate inside of the heavily defended North Vietnamese air space. One Talon would escort the Assault Formation which had 56 Army rescuers in five Jolly Green Giant HH-53 helicopters and one HH-3 helicopter. The other would escort the Strike Formation with five A-1E fighters that would provide low level protection for the ground troops in the objective area. The planners always wanted to have a couple of high flying jets to protect the low flying formations against the North Vietnamese MIG interceptors. These high flyers would not only discourage the enemy against launching the MIGs, but would also invite a high altitude surface to air missile (SAM) response that would not impair the ground and low flying activity in the objective area. The two stateside College Eye EC-121T radar platforms were needed to monitor the Son Tay area from the Gulf of Tonkin and provide the high flying jet fighters vectoring against any enemy interceptors that would take off to challenge the aircraft fleet.



MC-130 with HH-3 and HH-53s.



MC-139 with A1-Es.

Theater coordination for the raid did not take place until November 1 when the top three planners departed for Southeast Asia to brief the top officials who commanded our country's military services. They were: Army Brig. Gen. Donald D. Blackburn, Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities (SACSA), under whose domain the raid plans generated; and Air Force Brig. Gen. Leroy J. Manor, Commander of the Air Force Special Operations Forces (AFSOF), who became the chief of the raiding Joint Contingency Task Group with his deputy the legendary Army Col. Arthur D. Simons. The reception from the limited number of key officials whom they briefed in on the daring plan was overwhelming. All offered unlimited support for the rescue plan. Army General Creighton Abrams, who directed the overall war effort from Saigon, was disappointed that the Army raiders did not need any of his troop support other than allowing the ready to execute force into his area of responsibility and ensuring utmost security for this important operation. The Seventh Air Force promised the trio unquestioned support and made sure that all Air Force units gave the raid coordinators everything they asked for without asking any questions. That opened the floodgate of enthusiastic support for the raid from the selected few who were tasked to support it.

On the way home, Gen. Manor and Col. Simons stopped at the Yankee station in the Gulf of Tonkin. There, Admiral Frederick A. Bardshar, Commander of Task Force 77, promised them very encouraging support to stage a credible show of force from the Yankee Station to distract the enemy from focusing on the incursion of the raider force into the son Tay area from the west. He welcomed the idea of sending his pilots north of the 20th parallel because there was an ongoing self-imposed bombing pause for targets in Hanoi and Haiphong areas since 31 March 1968. He knew that his pilots would love to hit those lucrative targets before rotating back to their home ports. However, the raiders had very strict rules of engagement. The only ordnance the Navy was authorized to dispense were Mark 24 flares to make the North Vietnamese wonder what kind of an attack was being staged. They were not allowed to attack any ground targets. However, their pilots could defend themselves against enemy interceptors and SAMs if they challenged them.

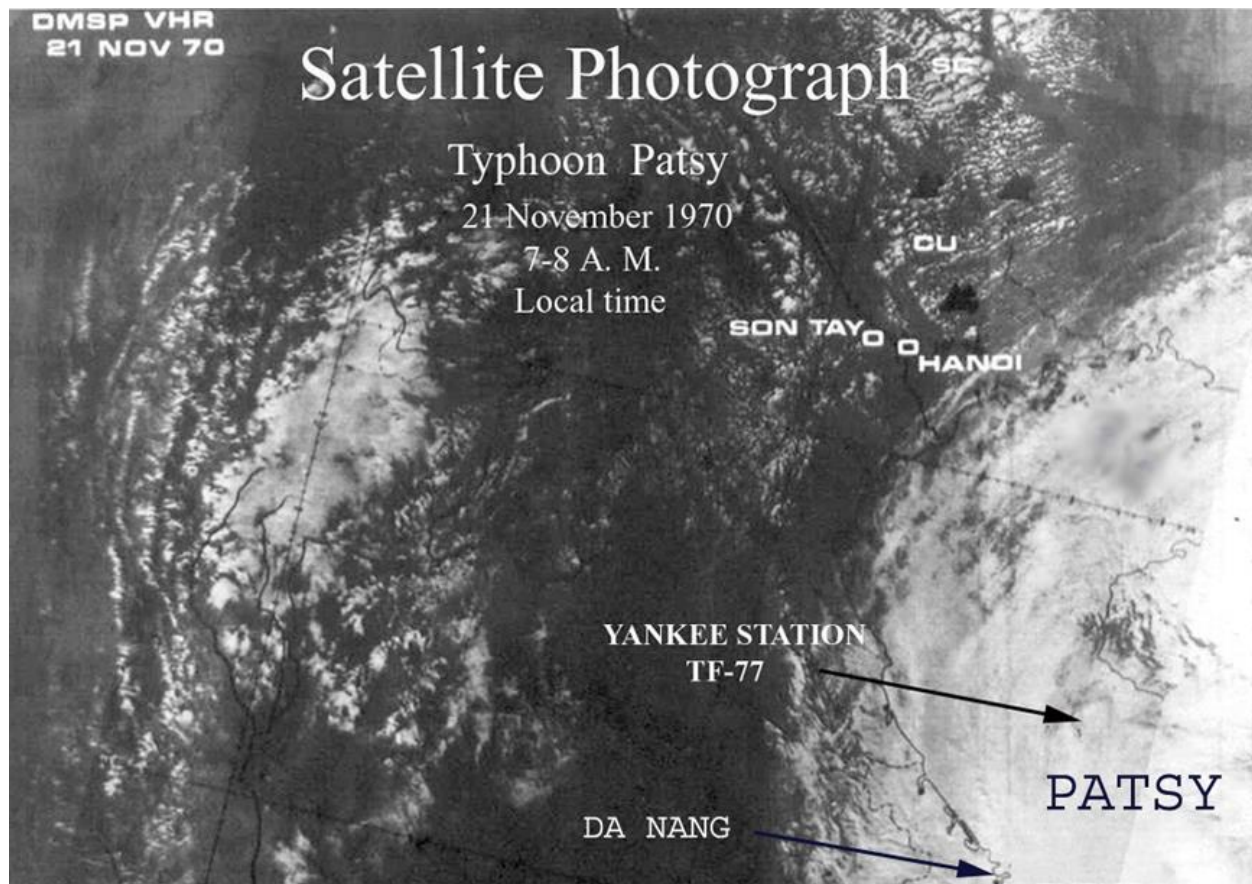
By November 17, just three days from the night of the raid, the planners were ready to task the needed Air Force units for their support. As one of the briefers and a member of the air operations planning staff, I was astonished at what ensued with the invited planners of each Air Force unit we included on our operation. Their enthusiasm for what we were about to do was

incredible. All were eager to fly into the restricted target zone north of the 20th parallel. They assured us that their fighter pilots would be eager to fly into this forbidden zone even with the strict engagement restrictions for our small scale surgical operation. They were not allowed to attack opportune targets outside of the small Son Tay geographical area. What was even more incredible for me was when these planners from Udorn, Korat and U-Tapao bases returned on the following day with their concept for our raid support. In Florida we started with such a small number of aircraft and now we were advancing past that special operations requirement for minimal, but optimum force. I worked with each planner on incorporating their flight tracks into our fixed and carefully orchestrated timing and inbound routes for the raid. This timing was designed to take advantage of the 0200 shift change for the prison guards.

The two HC-130P tankers for helicopter refueling on the way in and out during training remained as in Florida. We planned to use two tankers from the SAR (Search and Rescue) fleet at Udorn. The number of couple of F-4 fighters we wanted for high altitude bait for SAMs and for ensuring that the enemy's interceptors did not get launched against us increased to ten. There would be two packages of five F-4 MIG killers that would launch in two waves, ensuring that there would be four of them high overhead throughout the ground operation, with one off to the side as a replacement spare if someone got shot down. Next, because we anticipated a SAM defense from the enemy, we needed F-105s to fly a missile suppressing mission. That package came to five more aircraft to cover the 30 minute time period we planned to be on the ground. Naturally, these fifteen newly added aircraft required refueling support. Shockingly, this added another twelve KC-135 tankers. These would be deployed, not only over Laos to support the jets from Thailand, but also over the Gulf of Tonkin to refuel three Air Force C-135s and any Navy aircraft needing emergency fuel. Normally, there was one RC-135M, Combat Apple from Okinawa flying over the Gulf monitoring all electronic transmissions from North Vietnam. It had Vietnamese speakers on board who translated voice transmissions and issued MIG warnings to friendly aircraft. This RC-130M maintained continuous contact with the command post at Monkey Mountain near Da Nang. Brig. Gen. Manor was going to be commanding the raiding force from there. His command post back up, Col. Norman Frisbie was going to be on board of Combat Apple One. We needed a spare Combat Apple. So on the night of the raid, there would be two RC-135Ms flying over the gulf. In addition, we decided to have all the electronic traffic generated by the raid recorded and for that we needed a specially configured RC-135 from U-Tapao, Thailand. Finally, we must add to this grooving number three regular C-130s that were used to shuttle the planners and troops between the Thai bases as well as the T-39 for Brig. Gen. Manor's staff. This brought up our originally planned 15 aircraft to 57.

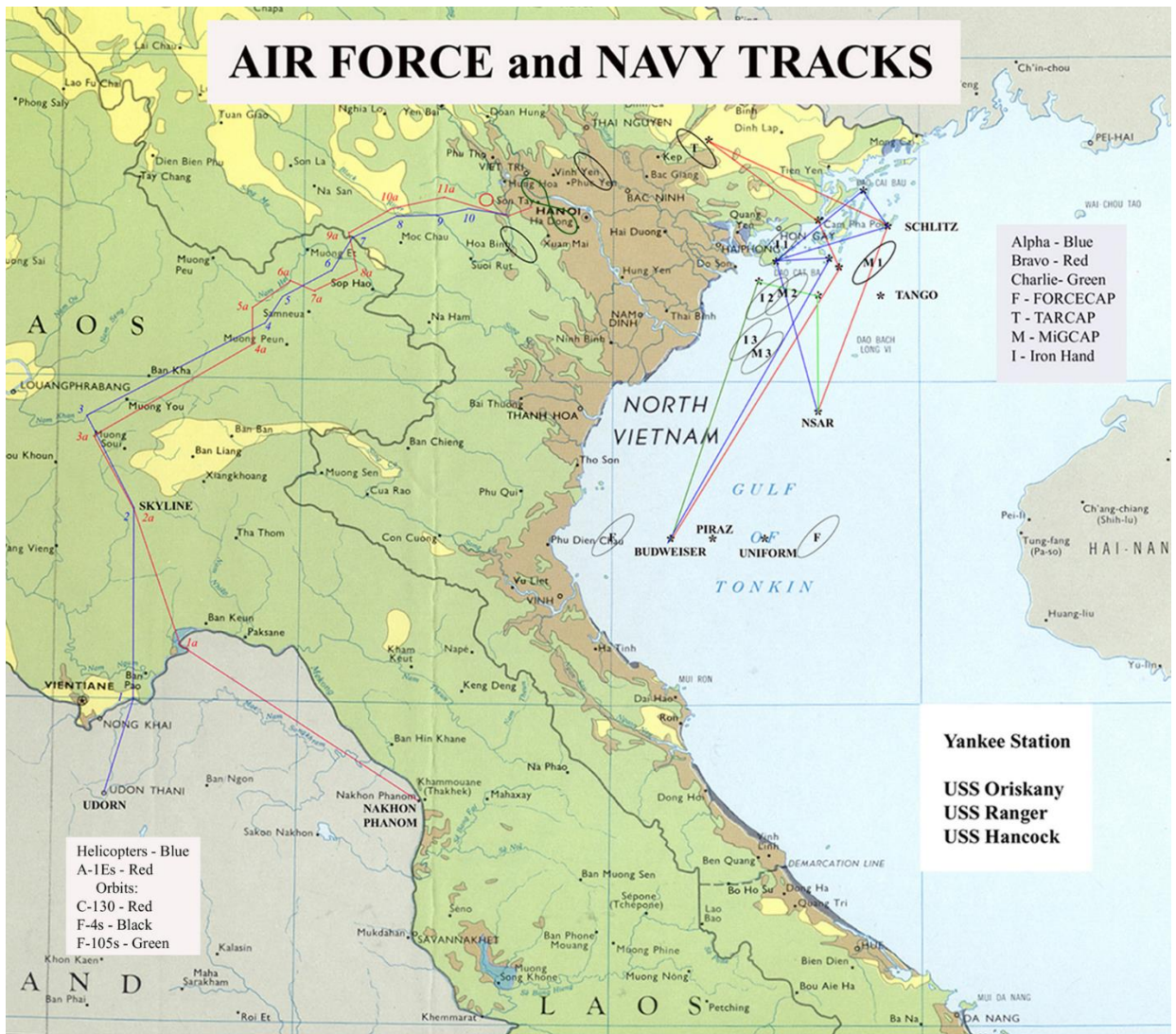
One thing we did not plan on was the approaching typhoon Patsy. Because of that nature's event Brig. Gen. had to move the raid up by 24 hours. It was either that or postpone it for several days. Such postponement would carry with it potential for a mission compromise. Preparations for an unprecedented nighttime operation from five Thai bases was sure to generate some suspicions among the servicing flight line crews. There would be too many available days for speculations if the mission did not go early. This was one of the reasons we did not get to review the Navy plan for the raid which did not become available to us until we were in our pre departure crew rest. I learned of it after we landed at Udorn empty handed. Incredibly, the Navy surpassed the Air Force

in the number of aircraft they launched. They employed 59 aircraft, two more than the Air Force, to provide a very convincing diversion to our attack on Son Tay.



The Navy had three carriers at the Yankee Station in the Gulf of Tonkin: The *USS Ranger*, the *USS Oriskany* and the *USS Hancock*. They launched twenty two A-7 attack aircraft on three tracks dropping only flares. These fighters required six dedicated carrier based A-7 takers and seven land based tankers from Da Nang. One of them was KA-3B and six were EKA-3Bs that also provided electromagnetic jamming of enemy radars. They flew two E-1B radar platforms to direct four F-4 MIG killers. Five A-7s flew Iron Hand SAM suppression missions. Eight fighters (six F-8s and two F-4s) flew protective orbits for the Yankee Station and for all other airborne aircraft. Finally, there were four A-7s dedicated to rescue and one EP-3 from Guam, which had the same mission as the Air Force's Combat Apple from Okinawa. Consequently, not counting the always ready rescue helicopters, the Navy launched 59 aircraft to support the Son Tay raid.

Counting the five Air Force aircraft flying over the Gulf of Tonkin that night, the North Vietnamese radars had 63 distracting targets to look at in the east while the Florida trained Attack and Strike Formations with only 13 aircraft sneaked into Son Tay undetected. None of the planners who started working with these 13 aircraft anticipated the employment of 116 to support the 56 men we put down on the ground. Likewise, none of us anticipated to return home empty handed.



AIR FORCE AIRCRAFT

in the

SON TAY RAID

Combat Talon C-130E(I)



Two Combat Talons flew as lead aircraft for the raiding helicopter and fighter formations.

HH-53 Super Jolly Green Giant



Five Super Jolly Green Giants (Apples One through Five) flew in the Assault formation led by Combat Talon Cherry One.



One Jolly Green Giant (called "Banana") flew in the Assault Formation.



Five Skyraiders (Peaches one through Five) flew in the Strike Formation led by Combat Talon Cherry Two.



HC-130P tankers (Lime One and Two) provided refueling for the raid's helicopters.



Two College Eye aircraft (Frogs One and Two) flew as Air Force radar platforms over the Gulf of Tonkin during the raid.



*Ten F-4s, called Falcons, flew MIG Combat Air Patrol over Son Tay.
Twelve KC-135 tankers provided refueling for jet aircraft.
Ten tankers flew over Laos and two flew over the Gulf of Tonkin.*



F-105 Wild Weasel

Five F-105 Wild Weasels, called Firebirds, provided suppression of enemy surface to air missile (SAM) and antiaircraft artillery (AAA) radars during the raid.



RC-135M Combat Apple

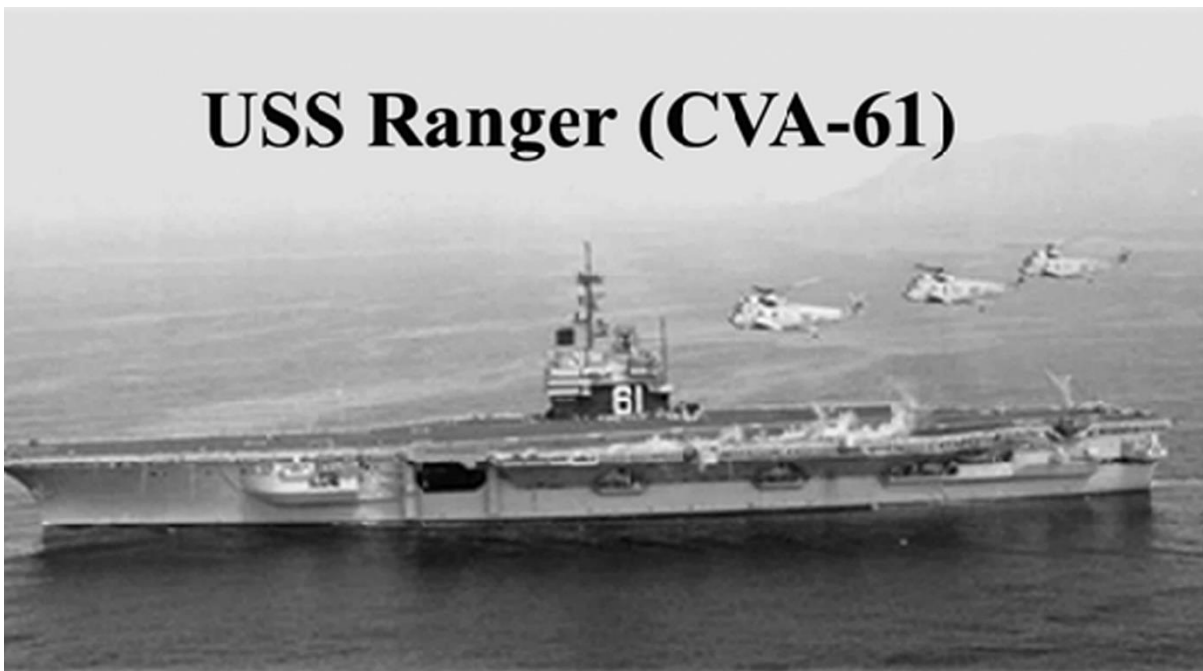
Two Okinawa based Combat Apples flew over the Gulf of Tonkin, monitoring aerial activity over North Vietnam during the raid.

One similar C-135 aircraft from U-Tapao, Thailand provided radio relay transmissions between the raiders on the ground and the Command Post near Da Nang in South Vietnam.

NAVY CARRIERS and AIRCRAFT



USS Oriskany launched 27 aircraft to create a diversion for the Son Tay raid.



USS Ranger launched 29 aircraft in support of the raid.

USS-Hancock (CVA-19)



USS Hancock launched two EKA-3B Tanker/ECM aircraft from Da Nang AB.



E-1B

Two E-1B aircraft flew as radar platforms for the TF-77 diversionary attack on Haiphong during the Son Tay raid.

A-7 Corsair



Twenty seven A-7s flew diversionary attack tracks near Haiphong in support of the Son Tay raid.

Fourteen were attack aircraft. Five flew "Iron Hand" mission.

Four flew RESCAP. Four were tankers.

A-6 Intruder



Ten A-6 Intruders supported the raid on Son Tay by flying diversionary tracks in the Gulf of Tonkin.



Six F-4s flew MIGCAP on the coast of North Vietnam during the Son Tay raid.



Six F-8 Crusaders flew BARCAP over the Gulf of Tonkin in support of the Son Tay raid



*One KA-3B tanker aircraft flew in support of the diversionary attack
in the Gulf of Tonkin*



*Six EKA-3Bs flew as tankers and ECM jammers over the Gulf of Tonkin
supported the Air Force and Army raid on Son Tay POW camp west of Hanoi.*



One P-3 Orion from Guam, flying over the Gulf of Tonkin, supported the Son Tay raid by monitoring North Vietnamese electronic and voice transmissions.