

Son Tay Raid Search and Rescue Operation (SAR)

Colonel John Gargus, USAF (Ret)

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Official reports on the Son Tay POW rescue operation give only the basic details concerning the rescue of the two Firebird 5 crewmembers. Here is a more complete account of this event compiled from interviews, cockpit tape recordings, unit reports and histories of involved organizations.

F-105 Wild Weasel, Firebird 3, piloted by Major William Starkey, with Major Everett D. Fansler as the back seat EWO, sustained SAM damage at 1940Z or 0240L. The aircraft remained flyable and departed from its assigned station, returning safely to Udorn RATFB. Firebird 5, piloted by Major Donald W. Kilgus, with Captain Clarence T. Lowry as his EWO, was the Wild Weasel airborne standby that promptly took up the slot vacated by the battle damaged Firebird 3. Only 6 minutes later, at 0246L, Firebird 5 passed through an exploding SAM fireball that ruptured its fuel tank. Because the aircraft remained fully operational, Major Kilgus initiated a Shrike attack at the SAM site that had fired at him. Immediately after he launched his Shrike missiles, he discovered that his aircraft was losing fuel and that he had to depart for the nearest tanker over Laos. Unfortunately, his engines flamed out just as he came within the sight of the KC 135 tanker. He and his EWO opted to glide down to 12500 feet before bailing out of their free falling aircraft.

Captain Russel G. Wright and his EWO, Major James C. Malaney, flew in an F-4, Falcon 5 that was orbiting as an airborne spare for the F-4 MIG CAP just northwest of the area where Firebird 5 was hit. He departed his orbit and closed in on Firebird 5 just before it ran out of fuel. He did see its crew eject and reported its location to Bringham radar site as 8 miles out on 092 degrees from the Skiline TACAN over the Plaine des Jarres. This position helped the returning HH-53 Apples to locate the downed crewmembers. Apple 4, piloted by Lt. Col. Royal C. Brown, located Major Kilgus and Apple 5, piloted by Major Kenneth D. Murphy, found and positively identified Lowry by illuminating him with a spot light. Immediate pickups were not made even though the pilots had night vision devices. These devices were used for the first time by our Apple crews and had not been employed in prior rescue operations. Besides, operational procedures required daylight rescue and the presence of fire suppressing A-1Es to scout and clear the pick up site. There was also some concern about the security of our survivor locations because Apple 4 crew reported seeing small arms fire in Major Kilgus' area. Our own A-1E Peaches could not be used to provide the required on scene presence. They were low on fuel and suppressive firepower. They had to continue on to Udorn. Our MC-130, Cherry 2, was in its planned orbit northeast of the Skiline TACAN monitoring the return of our Apples and Peaches. It possessed the Fulton Recovery System that could pick up two people even at nighttime. Its crew was prepared to drop a two-man recovery kit if such a rescue became necessary even though the two survivors were not in the same location. But it was obvious to everyone that the situation was ideal for a delayed normal daytime helicopter

recovery.

Other aircraft that were not aware of our mission soon became aware of the Firebird 5's distress. One Airborne Command and Control Center (ABCCC) C-130, Alleycat, monitored that night's area radio traffic, which included the survival radios of the Firebird crew. The Alleycat instructed a nearby C-123 flare ship, Candlestick 31, to assume on scene command until a King, HC-130 aircraft from Udorn, could come to the scene. Candlestick 31 established contact with both survivors and reported them free of injuries.

Son Tay planners made prior arrangements with the 3rd Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Group (ARRGp) to have Search and Rescue (SAR) aircraft on a special alert for a first light recovery of any downed crewmembers. Udorn's Rescue Center received the report of downed Firebird 5 from Bringham radar at 0318L and alerted the 40th ARRS at Udorn and the 56th SOW at Nakhon Phanom at 0325L. Our own HC130P, Lime 1, which had returned to Udorn to pick up additional fuel to assist Lime 2 in refueling the returning Apples, took off just five minutes earlier at 0320L. The Rescue Center directed this aircraft to assume the SAR role. Its call sign was changed to King 21 and Captain Richard E. Frank assumed the Aircraft Commander's role from Major William Kornitzer, who had acted as the Aircraft Commander during this aircraft's first sortie for refueling of Son Tay bound helicopters.

Then at 0350L two HH-53 Jolly Greens were launched from Udorn and four A-1E Sandies from Nakhon Phanom to rescue the survivors. Sandy 1 assumed the on scene command from Candlestick 31 at 0530L. The sun came up at 0553L and at 0608L, Sandy 1 declared the area safe for pick up. In the meantime there was considerable chatter about who was to do what. The just arrived Jolly Greens were prepared to do their assigned work and so were our two Apples that had previously located both survivors and were just waiting for daylight to be cleared by the on scene Sandy for a pick up. It is not clear who resolved this issue, but the normal operational procedures were improvised. The alert Jolly Greens held back while Major Murphy and his PJ, SSgt John J. Eldridge, in Apple 5 picked up Captain Lowry at 0620L and Lt. Col. Brown and his PJ, SSgt Wayne L. Fisk, picked up Major Kilgus at 0628L.

We did not count any of the SAR involved aircraft in our official count of raid participants. We considered their assistance as one they would routinely provide for any distressed aircraft. Organizational accounts of these participants are interesting. None mention any connection to the Son Tay raid. The 56th SOW mentions only that its A-1E aircraft participated in a successful rescue of crewmembers of Firebird 5. Official report from the 3rd ARRGp claims credit for the rescue. It gives the names of aircraft commanders of both helicopters, but refers to them not as Apples 4 and 5, but as Jolly Green 54 and Jolly Green 61. After all, the helicopters belonged to their squadron at Udorn and so did the PJs Fisk and Eldridge. Apple 5's copilot, Captain William M. McGeorge was TDY to IVORY COAST from the 40th ARRS at Udorn. Apple 4's pilot and copilot Major Roy R. Dreibelbis were TDY from the 37th ARRS at DaNang. All these belonged to their parent 3rd ARRGp that authored the 210200Z Nov 70 SAR report.