

Son Tay Raid

by
Colonel Norman H. Frisbie

This article was given to me by Mrs. Pauline Frisbie in 2002 at a Son Tay Raid reunion in Las Vegas for use in writing my book about the Son Tay raid. I used Col Frisbie's inputs and urged his widow to donate the article to the Air Force Historical Research Agency at Maxwell AFB in Alabama. She agreed and I helped her with needed documentation to have it done. (K. 143.755-ICD)

Pentagon, June 1970-- An Idea is Born

Frequently in one's Military Career he (she) comes to an event that, with a little luck and a lot of effort, he can make that event famous, receive a lot of publicity and a promotion to General Officer rank. My time "at bat" was the Son Tay Raid.



It began with a small group of USAF officers who were monitoring every aspect of our POWs. I think this all began in early June of 1970. These guys received some sort of intelligence that one POW was working outside the Son Tay Camp. He thought, "Gee, those helicopters could rescue us." So our intelligence got word and passed it to my boss in the Pentagon, Brig. Gen. Jim Allen.

Gen Jim Allen was a brilliant West Pointer, several years my junior and was the best boss I ever had! I had just spent an entire weekend with a couple of Ops guys on preparing a briefing on a plan to invade Cambodia. Well, we had a plan that probably would have worked, but all of us in the military knew that the liberal press would have us for lunch on attacking those poor, poor Cambodians who were harboring the North Vietnamese Army and attacking our troops at will across the border!

Well, the General didn't buy the plan, but Gen. Allen realized that I had some moxie on planning a military operation. He called me in and under the strictest security measures

told me to lock myself up in my secure office and he'd like to have a paper from me on the feasibility of a prisoner of war rescue effort on the Son Tay Camp.

This camp was located on a river about thirty miles west of Hanoi, the North Vietnamese capital. It was quite isolated and almost anyone could have looked at the picture of the camp taken by the SR-71 Photo Intelligence Aircraft (The Black Birds). But, how are you going to get enough guys there, do the job and bring everyone home safely?

Working on the Feasibility paper for Gen. Allen

I started with about Fifty Green Berets using Hueys (normal Vietnam War helicopters) dropping in and with a few more empty ones waiting for the POWs. We knew there were only about sixty of our POWs there. It was a small camp in comparison to the others.

I went down to the Ops guys in the Pentagon basement and in strict secrecy I found all about the Huey; how many men they could hold; how far could they go etc. It was obvious to me that no matter how many Hueys there were, they could not do the job unless we sort of "hopped-skipped" our force, establishing a temporary operational base in enemy territory and leaped frogged to and from the POW camp. Well, if any of you guys watching a modern TV could realize that would be a hairy operation.

The Services try to send us military guys to joint (Army-Navy-Air Force) schools to give us training in working together. I went to the Armed Forces Staff College at Norfolk, Virginia. I remember very distinctly that establishing an Air Head (operational airfield) in enemy territory was one of the most risky and dangerous operations possible. This is what Col. Beckwith tried to do with marine helicopters when they tried to rescue the American hostages in Iran.

So, I carefully avoided asking any questions about what I was planning to do yet and tried finding any alternative aircraft. I discovered that the USAF was training their rescue helicopters and equipping them for air refueling which would be available in about three or four months. The HH-3 was a smaller rescue helicopter used generally to pull one downed pilot out of enemy territory and return home. The HH -53, "The Jolly Green Giant", could carry around fifty Green Berets. Both could refuel over friendly territory and continue to the target area, pick up the POWS and air refuel on the way home. I thought that with three Jolly Green Giant HH-53s, we could get the job done. I guessed that fifty Green Berets could break the sixty POWS out within thirty minutes and get the hell out of there before the entire enemy country descended on them.

Presenting the Feasibility Plan to the Joint Chiefs

My boss, Gen. Allen, looked at my paper and realized that I had a possible solution. We took my paper to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, which was called SACSA. I couldn't interpret that acronym, but they were responsible for "spook" operations. Their boss was an Army Green Beret, Brig. Gen. Blackburn. He was a hero to the Green Berets and had been on many secret missions behind enemy lines. They call it "Clandestine Operations".

Gen. Allen got a Blackbird air photo of the camp and its environs. Those Green Beret guys were enthusiastic! "A piece of cake" they all said. Gen. Allen knew SACSA would have to approve the plan and get it coordinated throughout the participating agencies. Gen. Allen told me to add that recommendation. Gen. Blackburn gave the project to one of his staff officers, also a Green Beret, Col. Norman. Nothing further was said.

SACSA and Col. Norman started working the coordination through the Joint Staff. But, there are warriors and there are "staff weenies" (guys who are brilliant in planning and briefing missions, but don't have the gumption to face an enemy, particularly when the enemy is trying to kill you--that is called 'combat').

Blackburn and I got along fine and he knew I had researched and prepared the plan. So he accepted me as Chief of the Joint Feasibility Study Group under his tutelage (direction).

Selecting the Study Group

He got together with Gen. Allen and they selected the rest of my group. Gen. Allen knew of an organization who was good at hauling around Green Berets and sent Major Larry Ropka, a planner in their organization. The weather people gave me Major Keith Grimes. The AF Intelligence people gave me a young brilliant Captain, Jack Knops. The Army sent a Chief Master Sgt. of the Green Berets. The Navy SEALs sent a brilliant Lieutenant Ted Grabowsky. The AF Special Operations people sent us Lt. Col. Warner Britton. The JCS (Joint Chief of Staff) sent me an NCO to help with briefing charts. And the Army Staff sent me a Lt. Col. staff officer, but with no Green Beret experience. A lot of the Army wheels resented the Green Berets with their reputation and publicity and didn't enjoy one bit that John Wayne movie, "The Green Berets". So, the Army wheels thought they were being dealt a planning exercise that would never be pulled off. For this reason, they sent just a normal Army Lt. Col., infantry type.

Gen. Blackburn was incensed, but he would not leak to the Army what the operation was. He would tell the Army that the Chief of Staff (highest ranking man in the Army) doesn't want you to know. So the Army blew him off.

Everyone had to be pledged to the utmost secrecy. My members were asked if they wanted to volunteer to participate in a planning activity in the Pentagon. If the slightest leak got to the enemy, which would include every Russian, Chinese, Vietnamese, or some smart aleck who figured he could gain by talking to the Communists, the entire mission would be doomed and a lot of our AF rescue guys, their passengers and the Green Berets would be killed.

I had no experience in Clandestine Operations, but I had become a good staff officer under Gen. Allen's guidance. I had about eighteen ribbons on my chest, so that any military guy would realize that I was not a 'wimp', afraid of combat. My strength and my contribution to the effort was my ability to work with and listen to anyone of any rank

that knew what they were doing i.e. experts in their field. Army resentment of the Green Berets didn't concern me.

That Navy Lieutenant had experience in being inserted behind enemy lines in a Huey helicopter and attempting to rescue our people. That Army Lt. Col. didn't participate in the early planning of the Green Berets' efforts. He "ordered" the Senior NCO and the Navy Lieutenant to come up with a plan and he would approve it before it went to me.

The Plan Develops

Well, that Navy Lieutenant was a marvelous "gung ho" officer and respected the Army NCO experience in insertions. The two of them got together and came up with an extremely radical-never-been-done-before idea of crashing a HH-3 into the relatively small trees in the center of the camp with about twelve Green Berets in it and have those guys break out of the POW camp-blowing a hole in the prison walls and let the rest of the fifty or so Green Berets in to take out the enemy and collect our POWs, herd them out through the hole they made and out to our two waiting HH-53s (Green Giants).

One other item I had no expertise on was how well the "Jollies" could navigate to the POW camp. Larry Ropka was a Navigator on AF Special Operations in C-130s (4 turboprop engines), which had exceptional navigation help. Warner and Larry agreed to let a C-130 lead the formation and the HH-3 and HH-53s fly formation close together on the C-130s. These helicopters had experience flying close to C-130s who refueled the helicopters.

One other thing that Larry and Warner added were the "Sandys". They were A-1Es conventional engine (non-jet) old Navy fighter planes that always accompanied the "Jollies" in rescue missions for pilots who were shot down over N. Vietnam or South Vietnam. These A-1Es could shoot rockets, machine guns and drop small bombs.

So we have an insertion force of 1 C-130, 1 HH-3 helicopter, two HH-53 Jollies carrying about fifty fully loaded and armed Green Berets and I think 3 Sandy A-1Es.

All aircraft were to rely upon the "spook" C-130 to lead the force and all aircraft flying in the middle of the night over hostile terrain in close formation up to the refueling C-130 close to the N. Vietnam border and hence to the Son Tay POW Camp and perform the mission and fly back to refuel and then to home base in northern Thailand.

The Jollies and Sandys never previously made any rescue attempts at night in those days. Nor had the Jollies ever flown in close formation over enemy territory with any aircraft at night. So, experienced pilots knew "Boy, this is risky!" It's going to take the best helicopter "spook" C-130 and Sandy pilots and crews in the US Air Force! But we knew that it was possible and certainly worth a try.

Major Keith Grimes, the AF weather expert, had experience in Clandestine Operations in Laos. He had worked with the Air Force Spooks and had excellent rapport with the Air

Force weather experts in the Pentagon. Keith told us that if we arrived over the camp at about 2:30 AM, Hanoi time, the moon would give enough light so that our people could see the river that ran right next to the camp. And yet, there wouldn't be too much moonlight so that some enemy soldier could see our aircraft and shoot it down. Keith was familiar with N. Vietnam weather and recommended a mid-late November as the best chance for reasonable weather.

So my Study Group had our force, our time of day and our method of accomplishing the mission and we were ready to brief the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Gen. Blackburn worked for the J-2, the Operations Chief of the Joint Staff. The Joint Staff was limited by law to approximately 270 officers. They were picked for joint experience. The top general slots are alternated among the services. It happened to be the Air Force's turn to run operations this time.

Problems among the Wheels

Well, wouldn't you know it that the great man and commander and experienced warrior, Brig. General (1 star) had to work for some damned Air Force Major General (2 stars) who had never flown a combat mission in his life and was a real wimp! Yet, he was brilliant and experienced in Joint Staff work. He had "slick wings" which was the lowest ranking pilot rating in the Air Force. It meant that he didn't have more than 1,500 hours total flying time. I was surprised to see him in the J-2 position. He certainly didn't have my respect and admiration. Lord, I would have given any royal part of my body away for a Brig. Gen. promotion!

It was obvious that Blackburn and this guy didn't get along. The 2 star AF guy was haughty and disdainful of Blackburn and disliked by about all the subordinates. But he had a responsible position and he protected the Air Force in the Joint Arena, so the AF Generals left him there.

Well, when Blackburn told him we were ready to get on the "agenda" (brief all the Joint Chiefs), old What's-his- name (God, I hope he's not still living!) wanted to find out about what his "cock and bull story" was about before he would let it go before the Chiefs. Old Blackburn was nervous as hell of his boss and could just see the whole operation going up in smoke!

So, Gen. Blackburn and only me with all of our charts, gave a briefing on this guy's desk. He had heard that it was a POW rescue mission, but had no idea how involved it would be. I went through the whole nine yards with him - our route in across North Laos into North Vietnam at 2:30 AM and get the job done. Well, would you believe, that damn AF two-star bought our plan lock, stock and barrel and we were scheduled to brief the Chiefs on a Friday morning in mid-June 1970? We all felt good about our efforts and worked all week on our briefings.

I would lead off the briefing and then turn it over to Larry to brief the aircraft flying in and then that Army Lt. Col. gave the Green Beret Army operation briefing. Major Grimes

and Capt. Knops (Intelligence) sat in on the briefing with their parts included in our briefing.

You can imagine the setting--top ranking Generals and Admirals, all with more than thirty years of dedicated service to our country, meeting three times a week all year long and arguing and fighting for their particular service, for funds, for their way of doing things and suddenly here comes an Air Force Colonel with some young Majors and Lt. Colonels on a project which would blow their minds!

Needless to say, we had their attention. They all seemed friendly, respectful and supportive. The only question asked was by the Marine General who wondered why we didn't use gas to temporarily take out the enemy guards. Gen. Blackburn jumped up and said that gas would require our guys to wear gas masks and that would slow them up too much, restricting their vision, thus delaying getting out of there in thirty minutes before all of North Vietnam woke up and realized what was happening. So our briefing was over. They excused us and they went into secret seclusion to decide what to do about this fantastic operation.

Presenting Plan to Secretary of Defense

Surprise! Surprise! We got word to present our briefing to the SECDEF (Secretary of Defense), Melvin Laird. This was on a Friday morning and all of us few that knew anything about our plan were ecstatic! So we got to work all Saturday and Sunday polishing up our briefing and waited for our Monday morning briefing time to come.

My Feasibility Study Group realized that the best military minds in the world agreed with our planning and we realized that this bold exercise, if successful, would go down in history! This operation would have been the highlight of that whole miserable seven year war and would make President Nixon a hero!

So we presented our briefing to Mr. Laird and his assistant, Mr. Packard, who was known for his brilliant ideas in the business world. As I remember, Melvin Laird came from the academic arena and later he was a respected Congressman from Georgia, I believe. Nixon picked him for his Secretary of Defense.

Well, the briefing went well, no slip ups--we did the Joint Chiefs proud! Our final recommendation was all on one slide, which showed a time schedule for the entire operation. It showed a time for the force to be assembled and trained at Hurlburt AFB, Fla., near Destin, Fla.; a time for the force to be transported to Thailand; the time for take-off from Udorn Air Base, Thailand; the arrival over the POW camp; the thirty minutes of clearing the camp and the time for the return to Udorn. Our recommendation was that the schedule on this slide be approved.

Well, we finished the briefing feeling very proud of ourselves and I asked if Mr. Laird or Packard had any questions. Mr. Laird did not even give a nod nor a "thank you" to me. He just immediately got UP AND LEFT! Can you imagine our consternation? We had

just asked him to approve an operation that would go down in history, if successful, and make his boss, President Nixon, a hero and he gave us no response whatsoever. Hillary Clinton, First Lady at present, served as a clerical assistant to Mr. Laird when he was a Congressman. She said he was honest, hard working and a fine man.

We didn't hear anything for a few days. So I asked Gen. Blackburn and Gen. Allen if I could have some leave and it was approved. I'm not sure where we went, maybe camping in the Shenandoah, but I had to call back daily to Gen. Allen to see if we had a decision yet. Each day I got a disappointing answer, "Nothing yet, stay on leave."

All during this planning when Gen. Allen gave me the job to write feasibility plan for him, I was the only one in the world working on this operation and I couldn't say a word to Millie. I always worked with top secret stuff in the Pentagon (we worked in a vault with a combination lock on it and no visitors were allowed). I never discussed my work with Millie. She knew by the long hours I was working that something special was happening. I told her that what I was working on might be a wonderful, wonderful thing, but I couldn't tell her anything about it. She accepted that without showing much curiosity and gave me her usual support and love. Several of my subordinates knew that I was working on something special and were curious as hell, but I had to put them off and tell them nothing. They understood.

Finally two weeks after this monumental briefing, we got the word that Laird had approved the operation "for training only". Well, of course, that had to be done first.

Plan Given the Go Ahead - Choosing a Commander, Staff, and Crews

The JCS gave the Air Force Commander of the operation the go ahead and the other Chiefs agreed to support it as much as possible. I found out that the AF was going to give the command to the commanding General of their Special Operations Command, a Brig. Gen. Manor. I was a little disappointed. I didn't know him and I thought Gen. Allen should be in charge.

I made a special appointment with Lt. Gen. (3 star) Daugherty, the man in charge of all operations and planning in the Air Force. He was two steps above Gen. Allen and he had supported me and my briefing and was a great guy! Later he became a 4 star General in charge of SAC (all the bomber force in the AF). I asked Gen. Daugherty if he could give the command to Gen. Allen, but he said no. I was persistent to the degree of almost being insubordinate. But being the gentleman he was, he smiled at me and said that it had to be General Manor. I found out later that as usual, he was right.

So one Saturday morning Gen. Allen and I met in his office to call Gen. Manor and tell him to report to SACSA (Gen. Blackburn) Monday morning. We called Hurlburt AFB, but they couldn't get a hold of General Manor. What!! There's no General in the Air Force YOU CAN'T GET A HOLD OF!

Well, those guys at Hurlburt were used to the Pentagon calling down on weekends etc. and asking for all kinds of things. No one seemed to care at Hurlburt. Finally he called back in the afternoon and Gen. Allen told him to come to the Pentagon for a Monday morning meeting.

Gen. Allen, Gen. Blackburn and I met Gen. Manor in Blackburn's office and gave - him the same briefing we gave the Joint Chiefs. Of course, he was impressed. Gen. Manor had been a Wing Commander of F100s in Vietnam, the predecessor of the F4. They were used for close support for the Army troops 'in country', meaning South Vietnam. He had flown approximately 200 combat missions in Vietnam. He was a true gentleman--not haughty or overly proud. I was happy with the choice of him as our commander.

Gen. Blackburn pulled "Bull" Simons up to command the Green Berets. He was a college graduate with a degree in journalism, yet he was the ultimate warrior. He was the best leader and commander of Green Berets we had. He had had a small heart attack previously, but recovered and was a perfect physical specimen. He could do fifty pushups and 100 sit-ups in the morning. He later became famous for leading some civilian agents that worked for millionaire, Ross Perot, out of Iran (made famous in the book "On the Wings of Eagles "). Bull selected the rest of the Green Berets. He selected a Major to redo and expand the plan for the Beret Operations in the Son Tay Camp and had a Capt. Meadows and Lt. Col. Sydnor, expert Berets to help him.

The Green Berets settled into barracks at Hurlburt and Bull decided to restrict them to the base so that nothing would leak out. They were not told what the mission was but were kept in the dark. Later this helped form our logo (our shield) which was a big mushroom symbolizing "being fed on horseshit and kept in the dark"!

Lt. Col. Warner Britton, the AF helicopter pilot on my study group picked the AF helicopter pilots and crew and Larry Ropka picked the C-130 crew to lead the force into Son Tay. We had the best crews in the Air Force, probably the world, except one.

Warner asked his people to volunteer "for a dangerous mission". A Maj. Kalen volunteered to pilot the smaller HH-3 that was going to crash land into that tree in the center of the camp. Probably the best helicopter pilot in the AF would not volunteer, so we decided to let Warner tell him a little bit of what we planned to do. Of course, he jumped at the chance to help. He became the co-pilot of the HH-3. Now we had the best crew in the world! They began training and practicing at Eglin.

Gen. Manor had to run his Headquarters Special Operations Force, supervise the training of the Son Tay Force. He asked that I come down to Eglin to help him. It was wonderful to leave the Pentagon and get back into a flying suit and work with the troops.

Setting up Model Camp and Practice Missions at Eglin AFB, Fla.

The CIA, built us a model of the camp. It folded up into a wooden case. I flew it down with me when I went to Hurlburt. We knew that Russia had spy satellites flying over

Eglin, which was famous for spook missions, so we drove 2x2 tall wooden stakes for each corner of the building in the camp and ran long strips of cloth to form the walls. No satellite would ever recognize the model. From this model we built our practice camp.

I flew one practice mission with the C-130. The rest of the practice missions, I think there were around thirty, I stayed on the ground at our fake camp to see how things were going.

While the Berets were training with the Air Crews, every time in the pitch dark, the rest of us were sharpening up the plans. I rode with the HH-3 helicopter one time and they had discovered that by flying at a certain position behind the wing of the C130 that they could reduce power and fly the same position. Somehow the airflow over the wings made it easier for the helicopters. This had never been discovered before. We did another first.

Gen. Manor and I went to Mass together several times. He appeared to be devout, which further endeared him to me in my estimation.

Security Leaks - Intentional and Unintentional

We had set up a small group of intelligence specialists and tapped every one of our telephones. They had someone listening all the time. One time Gen. Blackburn was reading Gen. Manor's briefing schedule over an insecure phone indicating when he would brief a 4 star Admiral in Hawaii (he had a son, a Naval flyer, who was in one other POW camp) and also when Manor would brief the Generals in South Vietnam and when he would brief the Navy Admirals on the Carrier Force. We asked them to make a fake attack on Hanoi, but to drop harmless flares and lighten the sky. This would draw everyone's attention in N. Vietnam. They had not been allowed to bomb or harass Hanoi in months.

President Johnson was offering N. Vietnam a "carrot"-we'll be nice and not bomb you, if you will stop fighting". Of course it didn't work. So the Navy was happy to go back to work. We had planned and briefed the JCS that we wanted our mission to be strictly peaceful and that we would forego a bombing attack on Hanoi.

Later, when Gen. Manor and Col. Simons were on their briefing tour, I was asked by the SACSA staff to let the Navy drop bombs on Hanoi. I told them "No", we had planned and briefed a peaceful mission as possible."

In retrospect, that was stupid. The world would have understood if we bombed the bell out of Hanoi as a diversion for our humanitarian rescue effort. We should have thought about that in our planning and briefing to the JCS.

One Sunday morning Gen. Manor received a written report from the guys monitoring all our phones that **THEY HAD DISCOVERED WHAT WE WERE PLANNING TO DO!** What a shock! We all had been so careful of security and kept our wives and friends from knowing what we were doing. I remember sitting at Mass next to Gen. Manor with my chin hanging on my chest knowing that all that work, all that planning and all that

suspense and excitement, and all the disappointment and those poor guys in the Son Tay POW Camp was all for naught!

Of course all that was assuming that the enemy was tapping our phones. Our Code Name was "Polar Circle". With Blackburn's call telling Manor his schedule for briefing, all those Generals and Admirals in the Vietnam area, those guys didn't have much trouble figuring out that we were all going to the Polar Circle! Also we had been spreading miss-intelligence around that we were training for rescuing hostages in the Mideast, like Iran.

These guys knew that we were dealing with helicopters and everything was such a big deal that we obviously were going for some hostages or prisoners of war in Vietnam.

Blackburn's call to Manor was on the military radio phone network used all over the world. As long as you didn't discuss any classified info, it was OK. Giving a briefing to Generals and Admirals in the Pacific as such wasn't classified, but tying those Generals and Admirals in with our flying helicopters at night would make anyone suspicious.

Major Andraitis was one of the AF Intelligence Officers working with us as well as a Capt. Jacobs, at least we called him "Jake". He was our photo interpreter who could read those SR71 Blackbird photos like a map. Andraitis noticed an old machine gun bunker right next to the camp on a photo. It was so overgrown that it hadn't been used in years. He figured that if our mission ever lead out, the N. Vietnamese would clean that old gun placement out and make it usable for a machine gun to kill all of our rescue aircraft and Berets. So he cooked up a deal that the day before our mission, an SR-71 would take a picture of the camp and Andraitis would be there when he landed and rush the film to the lab (now it's called "I hour photo" at Wal-Mart). All he would look for was for that gun emplacement. If it was being cleared out, the mission was cancelled. If the old gun emplacement was still overgrown, it was a "Go!"

This settled our crews and Green Berets down. Knowing they wouldn't be ambushed because of a security leak. The enlisted Green Berets were still kept in the dark.

Gen. Allen and I met in Gen. Ryan's (4 star and Chief of the Air Force) office and asked Gen. Ryan to give letters to Gen. Manor to carry to the number 1 General in charge of Airlift and to Gen. Momyer, Gen. Manor's boss and to the General in charge of Eglin-Hurlburt complex telling them to give Gen. Manor anything he wanted. These letters worked wonders and no questions were asked.

In the Book, "The Raid", which told of the Son Tay Raid, Gen. Blackburn praised my efforts, but he was a little concerned with my leaking security.

Well, this is what happened! I happened to run into Brig. Gen. Pete Everest in the Pentagon parking lot. He knew me well and said, "What the hell is going on, Friz?" Pete was an AF hero and was a famous test pilot, the second man to exceed the speed of sound, had a book written about him and Chuck Yeager was his best friend. I had worked for him at MacDill in Tampa, Fla. and I was his recorder when he was president of an

accident board. I had done a good job for him. He commanded the outfit that was checking out all the fighter pilots checking out in the F-4 Phantom. Pete had been very touchy when he didn't get what he wanted for his outfit. All the helicopters and all the pilots we were using belonged to his organization.

So when Pete asked "What's going on? ", I knew he wouldn't take "No" for an answer and would drag his foot on everything we tried to do. Warner Britton, our helicopter pilot on my Study Group and one of our HH-53 pilots on our air attack-airlift effort, said that Pete had asked him what was going on and Ray said, 'I can't tell you.' That made Pete mad.

So, I told him briefly that it was a POW rescue attempt and he was ecstatic. Before we parted, he asked me what was the code name and I told him 'Polar Circle'.

I didn't think much more about it until about two weeks later Gen. Allen and I got called in a four star General's office. He had been a famous fighter pilot, shot down several Germans in WWII and also had commanded SA (the bomber co-man). Evidently Pete Everest had worked for him at one time or another. Well, this four star General received a letter from Pete and asked if Pete could command the "Polar Circle" operation. The General's question was, "Who told him?" Well, it was me.

I never got chewed out for my 'leak", but I know Gen. Allen was disappointed in me. Another thing, one time Gen Blackburn briefed the AF Generals in our briefing room in the Pentagon and there were more general sitting around the table than he had told the entire Army about. Blackburn never realized that AF Generals need to know and they keep secrets. Of course our Chief, Gen. Ryan was there and also Gen. Daugherty. Our Ops Deputy who discussed the operation before it got to the Chiefs of staff and then Brig. Gen. Shoning, who ran the JCS agenda for Gen. Ryan. So that blew Blackburn's mind that all these Generals knew what was going on.

One time I was briefing Pete Everest on our operation since he was the Air Force commander and expert on air rescues. The former Green Beret, now civilian assistant to Blackburn, walked in and looked suspicious. I knew that he told Blackburn that I had leaked again. Well, I guess I could have kept my mouth shut, but we were doing some very dangerous flying even during our training. If we had had an accident, Pete Everest would have been responsible and all hell would have broken out! Pete knew all about rescue flying and could have commanded the force. But he could not have gotten along with Bull Simons. Manor and Simons were the best team possible. But that was why Blackburn was concerned with my security. He never mentioned in the book "The Raid" about the phone calls on Manor's briefing schedule that allowed our security guys to find out what we were doing.

Westmoreland, the famous 4 star Army General in Vietnam, was Chief of Staff for the Army, but had never been briefed on our operation. He wasn't present for the Joint Chiefs' Briefing. He was known as a brave leader and warrior, but he handled the Press badly and they blamed him for many of the failures of the War. I'm not sure, but I think

that he was part of the Army who didn't like the Green Berets taking the best of our Army away from them. You would have thought that Blackburn or someone would have briefed him, but I gave him the complete briefing, even the Green Berets' part. He was respectful and receptive and had no complaints.

Soon our training was about finished and we were about ready. We had formed a detailed planning group of about twenty AF and Army experts to draw up a complete 'Battle Plan', considering logistics, the amount of ammo etc. the Berets would use. CIA gave us help with some weaponry they had devised. They gave our Berets a duck billed shotgun that would spread buckshot across a twenty foot front. Also in our plan, we had our C-130 that led the helicopters to the camp fly off a ways and drop a CIA developed "firefight decoy" device. It was a plastic sheet of fireworks sounded exactly like a bunch of infantry machine gunning and shooting at each other. Our Green Berets listened to one go off one at a time and they thought it was the real thing!

I had met with George Carver, who was the CIA expert on spook operations. He was a great guy and gave up unlimited support. He was just under Mr. Helms, the famous CIA director.

Gen. Manor took over my job as briefer. He definitely wanted it that way. He gave a briefing to Mr. Helms, whose comment was, "It is a bold plan!" He also briefed Admiral McCain, who was the 4 star Admiral in charge of the Pacific theater in Hawaii. When we finished the briefing, he enthusiastically came to each one of us and shook our hands and thanked us graciously for our efforts. He was a true warrior of WWII fame. The reason he was so enthusiastic about our project was that his son, a Navy flyer, was a POW at a different camp.

One of the perplexing questions we had about our operation was "What would be the reaction of the N. Vietnamese to our operation? Would the RVN shoot all of our POWS?" "We had no experience and couldn't even guess on this very important aspect of the operation. Early in our planning, Keith Grimes, our weatherman, knew a civilian expert on the Vietnamese, spoke the language, read their newspapers and worked for Dr. Kissinger, Nixon's famous National Security Advisor. Keith came to me and told me about this guy and said that he was reliable and was sure that he could give us an answer to this perplexing question.

I agreed with him and I asked if he could set up a meeting with the three of us. He thought he could. I knew that this was a big gamble. I knew I couldn't get anyone to approve of my going to the Whitehouse (Kissinger's Office) to get an answer to our question. So Keith and I agreed to go secretly. I knew that Blackburn or Allen would have thrown me off the project if they heard about us going to Kissinger's office. I guess it was a fool's gamble. Most planners would never have taken this risk.

Keith made the arrangements and this civilian arranged for us to get into the Whitehouse and come see him. He was nice, enthusiastic, knowledgeable and sort of non-committal on what the N. Vietnamese would do about our operation. Keith and I knew that he would go to Kissinger, but it wouldn't go any farther than the President and surely there would be no interference from the State Department or no notification to the Press.

One of our recommendations to the JCS was that such an individual be added to our planning group. Blackburn thought it was a good idea, but the JCS (probably Blackburn's boss) never did anything about our recommendation.

Later I told Gen. Manor about our clandestine meeting and Gen. Manor said he knew that guy well. He had come to Gen. Manor's Headquarters and partied and entertained Manor's pilots and staff. So I guess I hadn't made a blunder, or at least I lucked through another effort in order to get the job done.

During Manor's briefings to these National higher ups--Helms, McCain etc., I was backstage behind the slide screen, helping our slide man put the correct slides on. It was a back-lighted system. We were behind the screen so the audience could only see our slides, but I could hear every word the audience said. I stayed there after the briefing team was excused and that was when I heard Helms say, "It was a bold plan!" So I had secret information of what all those wheels said about our operation.

One time after the briefing I heard Helms ask about any recent intelligence on our special source that never needs to be revealed since it could hinder POW efforts in the future. I put our slide on this subject. Helms said, "Oh, hell, he had it up here on the screen!" This source later proved to be consternation.

One other event that centered on the operation was when Gen. Manor and Col. Simons left for their briefing tours in the Pacific Theater of Operations described in Blackburn's phone call that spilled the beans to our intelligence guys monitoring our phones. Gen. Ryan, knowing that the Air Force was the Force responsible for the Son Tay Raid, wanted to make sure that it would not fail. So he sent his director of Operations to us to check us out.

This director of Operations was Maj. Gen. Carlos M. Talbot I had known him for years. He was in my company at West Point and he was the first upperclassman to "recognize" me (meaning he could only treat me as a friend and never as an upperclassman). This was a limited use tradition at the Point. The practice could be abused. We called him "Tote". Tote was a Capt. flight leader in our P-47 squadron in France when I joined them in WWII in July of 1943. I was only a First Lt. at the time and we met at the bar several nights. I would sing a solo 'On the Road to Mandalay' and he would recite the poem 'Dangerous Dan McGrew'. We were on several missions together even though I was not in his flight. Also he had risen rapidly in the AF. One time when I was in Safety, my boss

and I were scheduled to give a Safety Inspection to an F4 fighter wing stationed at Holloman AFB, New Mexico. "Tote" was a senior and full Col. and Wing Commander of that outfit and I was a Lt. Col. he passed our inspection and Tote was on the promotion board that selected me for full Colonel.

So, you see, we went way back and now he was inspecting me, but by now I was a full Colonel. We went through a practice mission for him at night and gave him a briefing. I'm sure his report on us was good. But he asked me, "How's your security?" I told him about the gun emplacement check that Andraitis invented and told him that our enlisted men were restricted to base and that our little Intelligence unit was monitoring our phones. He asked, "Did they discover anything?" I had to confess about Blackburn's phone call. He nodded understanding, but didn't say anything further.

Deployed to Takhli, Thailand

Later that night we had dinner and I asked him not to relay Blackburn's phone call gaff. He nodded approval. So he went back to the Pentagon and reported to our Chief, Gen. Ryan. Very soon thereafter, all of our officers and men were loaded up at about 2 AM one morning on a C-5 and flew to Takhli Air Base in Thailand.

All of us had very peculiar orders which allowed us to go anywhere at anytime. Never have such orders been issued (at least to my knowledge). So, I hopped on an airline and spent an overnight at Hickam AFB, Hawaii. That night at the Officers' Club, I ran into a Major that worked for me in the Pentagon. We were both surprised and both of us said, "What are you doing here?" I asked him to keep my presence unknown for about a week and he agreed so that none of my people knew where I was or what I was doing.

I arrived at Takhli and joined up with Gen. Manor and Bull Simons. There was supposed to be a CIA compound at Takhli that was secured except the Vietnam War was winding down and they closed the secure communications facility. We had no way to send secure communications to anyone. That hampered us, but it was not impossible to overcome. We just had to be extra careful not to call anyone.

The U.W. Vietnam Hqtrs. MACV gave us an Air Force Brig. Gen. as Liaison Officer. I had flown with him as a fellow instructor pilot in P-47s at Hammond and Abilene twenty years or so ago.

While we were there the 'stuff hit the fan!' Talbot could not possibly refuse to tell Gen. Ryan about Blackburn's phone call. It was not right that I asked him not to tell and of course, Gen. Ryan jumped all over the army and SACSA (Blackburn's JCS staff) about that security leak. Most of the Generals like to jump on Generals or Admirals of other services when they goof. Well, Blackburn was devastated! I understand that he was ready to resign his commission and other drastic measures.

One other dramatic event occurred while we were at Udorn, already deployed. Utmost pressure was put on by Pres. Nixon, Kissinger and Helms to find out from the original source about Son Tay. Well, the rest in the country panicked and did their best to gather the intelligence needed. We didn't know that all this was going on. One source said, "They have moved us out of Son Tay!" Another source said, "Come and get us!" Oh, Lord, now what to do? Well, President Nixon himself asked Admiral Moorer, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs (Like Gen. Powell was during the Gulf War) if any casualties could occur. Moorer revealed our briefings and told him that they shouldn't have any casualties. So Nixon himself, said, "OK, go ahead!" and the word trickled down to us that it "was a Go!"

My job was to fly with an intelligence gathering aircraft circling over the ocean next to Vietnam, called "Combat Apple". This plane was loaded with radio and sharp looking USAF airmen of Oriental parentage who could interpret the enemies' radio conversations. They received every transmission made by the enemy over their radios. They could tell by listening to radio contact if any Vietnamese aircraft were in the area. I was to receive a radio coded two word message from our C-130 when our force arrived over the N. Vietnam border on the way to the camp. Then I was to relay that to a Communication Center in S. Vietnam where Gen. Manor was monitoring the operation.

The Raid

The afternoon before departure they finally told the Green Berets where they were going. They cheered and yelled and clapped and jumped up and down! Knowing that they were going to be the most famous Green Berets ever! They never thought about getting killed.

We assembled the force for an initial briefing at Takhli. Lord, there were about 250 people there. I noticed that Manor and Bull seemed very unfriendly. They never said anything, but I later found out that they were pissed off at me for telling Talbot about Blackburn's famous "scheduling call." Keith Grimes, our weatherman, met with Manor and told him that a damned typhoon was headed toward Hanoi and that his forecast for decent weather looked glum for the date of our operation. So, Manor decided to move the operation up one day. I had to leave immediately to make my take off with Combat Apple at Okinawa and found out later that this was when Blackburn was going through his torture about his phone call.

The planning and briefings were that we would use in-country aircraft. We would provide the aircraft commanders the military in Vietnam and Thailand would provide the aircraft and the co-pilots so that they would know if any local regulations that might apply to use i.e. the radio frequencies of local towers and other controlling agencies etc.

The C-130 we borrowed was connected to spook operations like ours at Hurlburt. In the planning we had "spared" every aircraft meaning we had two aircraft lined up just in case one "crumped". I'm not sure, but as I remember, the HH-3 was no longer used in the

Pacific Theater anymore. We may have taken it with us from Hurlburt in the C-5 that brought our troops and crews to Udorn.

But we had not 'spared' the C-130. They were usually so reliable that it was considered unnecessary. Well, wouldn't you know, comes take off time for the whole force and the C-130 could not be started! Oh, Lord, what a beginning

They took off quite a bit late, but by speeding up the flying as much as possible, the force (C-130, HH-3 and two or three HH-53s arrived at the N. Vietnam border just about on time when they called me. I relayed their position to Gen. Manor.

The take-off and join-up in the dark and the air refueling went as scheduled with no problems. Initially we had planned the C-130 to mark their position in the moonlight on the river next to the camp. The C-130 guys we trained with said that they had better instrumentation and did not need to look for the river. They could navigate right straight to the camp. Their first task was to take out (machine gun) the guard towers just as the HH-3 left the C-130 and crashed into the tree in the center of the camp. Then they were to proceed to an area away from the camp and drop their sheet of fireworks simulating a firefight between infantrymen to confuse the enemy and draw them away from the camp.

The CH-53s were to land and wait on a sand bar in the river about 100 yards of so away from the camp, waiting for the twelve or so guys in the H-3 to blow a hole in the prison walls so that they could go in and clean out (kill) the enemy guards and then round up our POWs.

Well in the dust and confusion over the camp, Warner Britton landed his H-53 and his fifty guys about a mile away at a place we called "the school house". His Berets scrambled out to clean out the place and ran into a lot of panicked huge Oriental soldiers. A bunch of them came around a corner and one Beret fired a couple of shots from that duck-billed shot gun and he eliminated about twelve enemy instantly with one load (maybe two shots). The duck bull spread the shot parallel to the ground and devastated an enemy group a short distance away.

All this was happening about two in the morning with a tiny bit of moonlight, but the CIA had provided us with brand new night vision goggles. You could see pretty well in the dark but at that time, you couldn't move your head around much. As long as you kept your head still, you could see quite well.

Well, Warner realized immediately upon landing at the schoolhouse that he was in the wrong place. He told the Beret leader (Lt. Col. Sydnor) and he quickly disengaged operations. This is no small task. You are most vulnerable to the enemy when you are retreating. But they did it quickly and Warner landed them at the correct place within fifteen minutes. By then the "hole in the wall" Berets had done their work and Warner's guys swarmed all over the camp. Bull Simon did encounter one enemy and he drilled him quickly. They quickly went through the camp and found it completely empty. They destroyed the crashed HH-3 and all of them got back on their HH-53s.

The crew chief of the HH-3 had a broken leg. That tree in the center of the camp grew a lot from our first picture and it was a giant. Of course it did major damage to the H-3. A mounted fire extinguisher broke off in the crash and hit the crew chief in the leg breaking it. The twelve Berets were firmly seat belted in, protected by helmets and body armor and were not injured in the least. Herb, the pilot and the Col. co-pilot were shook up, but safe and they all made it back to the waiting HH-53. A few Berets blew up the HH-3 to prevent the enemy from using any of our technology.

I think Bull was probably the only one of us to kill an enemy. There was no one around the camp. However, one of the huge Berets was posted outside to cover any attacking enemy. His backpack was around 200 pounds, consisting of a rocket launcher and rockets. He had night vision goggles and noticed an enemy jeep coming down the road about 100 to 200 yards away. He fired a rocket and hit that jeep square! What a fantastic shot! He "took out" that jeep and several enemy soldiers riding on it. The only Beret that was injured or wounded was one that received a thigh bullet wound which hardly slowed him up. He got that at the "school house". Bull quickly rounded up the guys and they loaded up in the two Jolly Green Giants and headed for home safe, but sadly disappointed.

Aftermath of the Raid

Our plan originally called for two F-4s to orbit over the area where enemy MIGs usually orbit during enemy attack. Jack Knops told us about that intelligence. We planned to use them against MIGS, just in case. They received no action.

When Gen. Manor briefed 4 star Gen. Momyer, commander of TAC (Tactical Air Command - all the fighters and spook operations in the AF), Manor and I prepared the briefing in detail. I sat outside his office for about an hour while Manor was in there.

Momyer was a famous perfectionist and drove his subordinates considerably. He was Manor's boss, but they got along famously. The only thing Momyer recommended was that we use a couple of F-105s for SAM (Surface to Air) missile suppression. They supposedly could lock on the enemy radar and zap one of their rockets at the SAM missile site. It was an extremely difficult thing to do and was rarely successful.

Jack Knops knew the enemy would not fire on our F-4s where MIGs always orbited. So Jack said the F-105s were not needed. But Manor couldn't turn his boss down, so we added a flight of F-105s to the plan.

The Navy lit up Hanoi and N. Vietnam was in a panic! One of our A-1E Sandys thought he saw something on a hillside, so he unloaded his rocket and immediately someone either an HH-53, or the C-130 hollered, "MIGs". Then we panicked. The NCO in charge of the Airmen and listeners to enemy radios told me "No, MIGs had taken off. There are no MIGs in the area". On second thought, I should have relayed that info to our guys. I just wasn't that confident in their ability.

The two HH-53s and the two or three Sandys joined up over the mountains at low level to avoid radar attention and headed for the tanker and then home.

On the route home, one of our HH-53s piloted by Murphy, as I remember, picked up the F-105 pilot that had been hit during the raid and had to bail out over Laos. The in theater rescue people couldn't believe it. "Those guys even provided their own rescue effort!"

Sydnor called me on the radio and said, "Negative Items". Item was our secret word for POWs. Nuts, hell, damn, what happened? Manor received that info also and then he panicked. He couldn't believe it, so instead of relaying that info back to the Pentagon, he hopped in a helicopter to fly to Udorn to meet our guys.

Well, he should have realized that President Nixon, Kissinger plus a few White House guys, all the Joint Chiefs and a considerable amount of high-ranking Civil Servants like Mr. Helms were hanging on pins and needles. It was about 2PM Washington D.C. time, all waiting on word from Manor on the success of the rescue mission. AU those wheels had to wait about four hours for Manor and the Berets to get back to Udorn. We were all devastated! We figured someone leaked the operation, but who? President Nixon was probably the only one who knew they may have been moved previously. The rest of us were completely surprised.

What Went Wrong?

Early in our training and intelligence gathering, our technology guys were trying to get some complicated drones with cameras right over the camp for a good low level photo. But damn, they had one failure after another. Finally they got one right over the camp, but it was in a 90 degree bank and it took a picture of the horizon miles and miles away!

Jack Knops got word from the Combat Apple guys (radio listening) that the N. Vietnamese were tired of those damn little drones flying over the NW of Vietnam and they discussed how they could beef up their low level air defense capability to shoot these drones down. Well, Judas! That as all we needed! That was exactly where our force was going to fly through to get to the camp. So Jack asked me to stop the drones and we would have to rely on SR-71 photos.

Well, I went to our top intelligence guys--Lt. Gen. Phillip, a successful West Point classmate of mine. Jamie was our basketball team captain at West Point. I had practiced with him as a Plebe. Jamie agreed with our assessment of the drones and called them off.

After the failure of the mission, the Press wanted to know why we didn't know that the POWs had been moved. Mr. Laird answered that we hadn't invented a camera yet that could see through roofs yet! Had that damn drone flown straight and level over the camp, instead of at a ninety degree bank, we would have know that the camp was empty, such was our luck.

One time when Manor and Simons were briefing the wheels in the Pacific, Jake (Capt. Jacobs?) told me that his photo interpretation lead him to believe that the camp was empty. The most recent photo we had showed a dark patch of something in the middle of the camp. But there were some obvious paths through deep grass, looking in the windows of the POW cells. Jake put more credence on that dark patch of stuff in the middle.

I told Jake, "Yeh," Jake, but how about that other source of info that told us 'they were there and come and get them?" Jake agreed, but dumb me. I was like Blackburn, Manor and others. We just "couldn't believe" that they had been moved. That precious bit of intelligence we believed in was almost seven to six months old! It was on that slide that I showed Helms when he was briefed.

I still wonder what would have happened if we had believed Jake or if that damn drone could have flown straight over the camp and we would have known they weren't there. I'm sure the whole effort would have been cancelled.

Well, I continued flying the rest of the mission with Combat Apple. Our mission was about twelve hours long (that's a long time for an old fighter pilot!). We operated off of Okinawa prior to take off. I was in the front cockpit with the pilot (a Captain) and co-pilot (1st Lt.) and the tower called them to see if Col. Frisbie was aboard. We said yes. The tower relayed a code word to me that meant the mission was a "go". I replied enthusiastically. This meant that gun emplacement had not been cleared out and the enemy didn't know that we were coming. The crew knew it was important, although they had no clue as to what we were doing yet.

During the mission, those slick young Airmen were extremely enthused. The enemy radio transmissions told them that the country was in a panic. They said this sounded just like the old days when the Navy used to bomb Hanoi.

After the mission, I debriefed them. I told them that I didn't know why the prisoners were not there. I assumed there had been a leak. I thanked them for a job well done and told them that their info was the basis of a lot of our planning.

Their intelligence told us that the enemy radar sites changed shifts around 2 AM. That was why we timed our arrival over the border. We flew under normal radar cover as close to the mountains as we could. They told us about the MIG orbit point. I asked them to please keep on tuning those dials listening to the enemy and "keep the faith." They appreciated my talk.

I collected the tapes the Airmen had run on the mission to take with me and I headed home. An AF Major who had been watching our security and also flew the spare Combat Apple, accompanied me on the trip home. We flew military based on our "go anywhere anytime orders". We were headed for the Pentagon and had an overnight stop at Maxwell, AFB, Ala. When we went into the VOQ quarters to get a room, the TV News was on telling about our raid. AT LAST we could tell everyone what we have been working on for the past six months!

We assembled the force back at Eglin. I brought Millie and Renee with me. We got together and wrote up medal citations for everyone to go with their medals to be presented. Manor asked me about an Air Force Cross for Warner Britton (that is only one step down from the Congressional Medal of Honor). Manor was concerned with Warner's goof of landing at the school instead of near the camp.

I told him, heck, he made two landings in enemy territory instead of only one like he was supposed to and his action was the only one that resulted in any enemy getting killed. He agreed, so Warner got his well-deserved Air Force Cross. They wrote me up for the Legion of Merit since I wasn't involved in any danger. Of course we were all disappointed at a failed mission.

We didn't realize what effect it had on N. Vietnam. Their center of Govt. panicked. Their Pres. Ho Chi Minn (he may have been dead by then, but it would have been his successor) and all the wheels fled by aircraft all the way to China!

What was most important was that all of our POWs knew about the raid that night and they were ecstatic! Many of them had been sitting in solitary confinement for seven years. They had never received any indication whatsoever that the U.S. Govt. cared if they were alive or dead. Now they knew that their country cared enough to land a force near Hanoi and attempt a rescue.

Also, the Raid panicked the N. Vietnamese knowing that some POW camps were isolated and rescues could be made. So they consolidated all the POWs into one camp. For the first time ever, they had a roommate! Someone they could talk to and strangely they were treated a little better because the N. Vietnamese realize how valuable we held our POWs. So all of our efforts were not in vain. But we didn't know this at the time-not until the POWs came back from the war.

Ross Perot, the billionaire and later Presidential candidate, paid for a reunion between the Green Berets and the Son Tay POWs. Somehow, I don't remember, but I think I was invited, but couldn't come to that reunion. I know that Pres. Nixon had a big White House reception set up for their return with Berets. It was it Thanksgiving reception, but he opened it up for the GIs in the hospitals.

If they hadn't moved our POWs we all knew that our raid would have been successful. We all would have met at Nixon's Whitehouse. I'm sure that I would have been promoted to Brig. Gen. and probably Bull Simons also. Gosh, what would I have done as a retired Brig. General? I would have probably tried for a big job with some military industrial outfit making a big salary and having all kinds of frustrations and stress in that high-paying job. So that is probably for the better that I didn't and I retired as a happy full colonel!