

# **Keith Grimes on the Son Tay Raid**

**Colonel John Gargus USAF (Ret)**

*This story is based on the interview of Lt. Col Keith Grimes who did not have an opportunity to edit its transcript.*

*Transcript was edited and filled with appropriate photographs and submitted to the Air Force historical Research Agency at Maxwell AFB, Alabama.*

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## **Introduction**

Who was Keith R. Grimes?

He was the Air Force Major recruited as a weatherman for the Pentagon study group on the feasibility to conduct a rescue of American Prisoners of war held in North Vietnam. After the U. S. Joint Chiefs of Staff approved the proposed rescue concept, he came to Eglin Air Force Base in Florida where he served as the liaison officer between the carefully selected Army and Air Force special operations troops who planned and trained for the raid on the POW camp at Son Tay. That is where I met him. He worked closely with our small Joint Contingency Task Group's air operations planning and training staff, keeping us well informed on the planning and training of our Army colleagues. After the joint task force deployed to Southeast Asia, he played a vital role in the weather decision that determined the timing of the raid. Sadly, Keith perished in an aircraft accident in the mountains of New Mexico on September -- 1977 while enroute to a Red Flag exercise in Nevada.

The Son Tay raid might have been the highlight of Keith's Air Force career, but it was only one of his many notable career accomplishments as a weatherman and a special operations operative and advocate. He became known as the Special Operations Weatherman and was posthumously

inducted into the Air Commando Hall of Fame in 1996 for his contributions to the U. S. Special Operations.

Before his tragic and untimely death, Keith made two U. S. Air Force oral history interviews which documented his productive Air Force career. Both were conducted as part of a documentation of what was then a highly classified CORONA HARVEST weather related project. Each recording contained a detailed account of his involvement in the Son Tay raid. I located one unedited transcript of his June 10, 1971 interview at the Air Force Historical Research Agency (AFHRA) at Maxwell AFB, Alabama, where it is catalogued as K239.0512-478C.1. Transcript of the other interview, conducted at the Air Weather Service in 1974 by John Fuller, was later edited and preserved by him in an unpublished book length volume under the title of *Keith R. Grimes, Special Operations Weatherman* (AFHRA K239.0512-1565C.2). See Attachment 1

Declassified transcript of the AFHRA interview has a cautioning cover letter from Major Richard B. Clement, one of the officers who conducted it. He explains why the document was not proofread, that it has many transcription errors, and suggests that its user should ensure accuracy by listening to the interview tape. See this letter in Attachment 2.

In spite of too many transcription errors, missing words and phrases, sizeable intelligible lines, as well as deletions of some still classified passages, I found this interview to contain more detailed accounts about the Army and Air Force planning, training and raid execution than any other single source document. Because of my work as an air operations planner and my extensive research of available Son Tay raid documents, I had no problem relating to the events Keith talked about in the interview. I was able to visualize his references to maps, sketches and photographs because I had either seen them before or prepared similar ones myself.

It is unfortunate that Keith did not get an opportunity to proofread this interview. Besides obvious transcription errors, he would have edited many of his enthusiastic exhortations where he started a sentence, then rephrased it for a more complete or coherent thought. He also might have changed his occasional shifts from the past to present tense when he was enthusiastically describing actions during the raid. Certainly, he would have omitted his frequently used phrase “of course” because he was discussing the raid with two officers whom he knew very well and who had already significant amount of information about the subject.

To give you an idea of the problem that an uninitiated researcher would have with this transcript, here are a few examples: General Blackburn, the chief architect of the raid is *Blackwell*, Colonel “Bull” Simons is *Saunders*, Lt. Col. Sydnor is *Cindor*, and Sergeant Lupyak is *Lubijack*. These were some of the principal players in the operation. Vietnamese names were unrecognizable. Dien Bien Phu was *Binh Dinh Phu*. Military weapon systems were also very garbled. Rocketeers were *rock bys*, chaff was *shakes*, and white phosphorous, referred to by Keith as Willie Pete became *sooded heat*.

I resolved to do something about this valuable document. On my subsequent visit to AFHRA, I volunteered to proofread the transcript to eliminate at least these obvious errors so that it would become more researcher friendly. But, because I was not the principal subject in the interview, the agency rules would not permit it.

After I finished my book on the raid, *The Son Tay Raid America POW in Vietnam Were Not Forgotten*, I began compiling a notebook of documents for the Son Tay Raid Association. In it I collect articles about the raid, about individual raiders and articles written by the raiders. I also include recorded interviews, biographies, obituaries and many photographs. This transcribed interview should definitely be included in this collection of Son Tay related documents.

Finally, I approached the AFHRA with a proposal that they let me listen to the tape and decipher some of the garbled transcript's passages. Well, that did not go well either. Recorded tapes contain voice passages that have not yet been declassified. I, as a civilian researcher, have no access to this information. In print, classified passages can be cut out or blanked out. Cutting out passages from a magnetic tape would destroy their content for everyone. All that aside, I can still pursue my idea to preserve this valuable recollection of Keith Grimes for future researchers, by doing what Mr. Fuller did with his interview at the Air Weather Service. I resolved to write an article based solely on this roughly transcribed interview. This gives me the license to edit it and fill it with missing maps, sketches and photographs that I believe Keith used during the taping. My corrections and additions to Keith's comments, including numerous notes, are included to clarify the intended meaning of his narrative. I used print in italics to identify those inputs.

I will donate this article with my editing and additions of maps and photographs to the AFHRA where it can be preserved forever.

### **Washington D. C. – Genesis of the Plan**

Lieutenant Colonel Keith R. Grimes began the Son Tay raid portion of his CORONA HARVEST interview with this opening statement:

In March 1970, a couple of professional Air Force intelligence officers approached Brigadier General Allen, Hq. USAF, with the possibility of a raid on one of several North Vietnamese prisoner of war compounds.

General Allen felt that there was enough intelligence to at least look seriously into the possibility of attempting a raid to break out prisoners from one of the prisons.

On the 25th of May, in a meeting of the Joint Chiefs, General Blackburn, who was then SACSA (*Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities*) for the Joint Chiefs and had been in contact with General Allen about this, presented to the Joint Chiefs the idea that it would be worthwhile to look into the possibility of a raid on one of the prison camps in North Vietnam. At

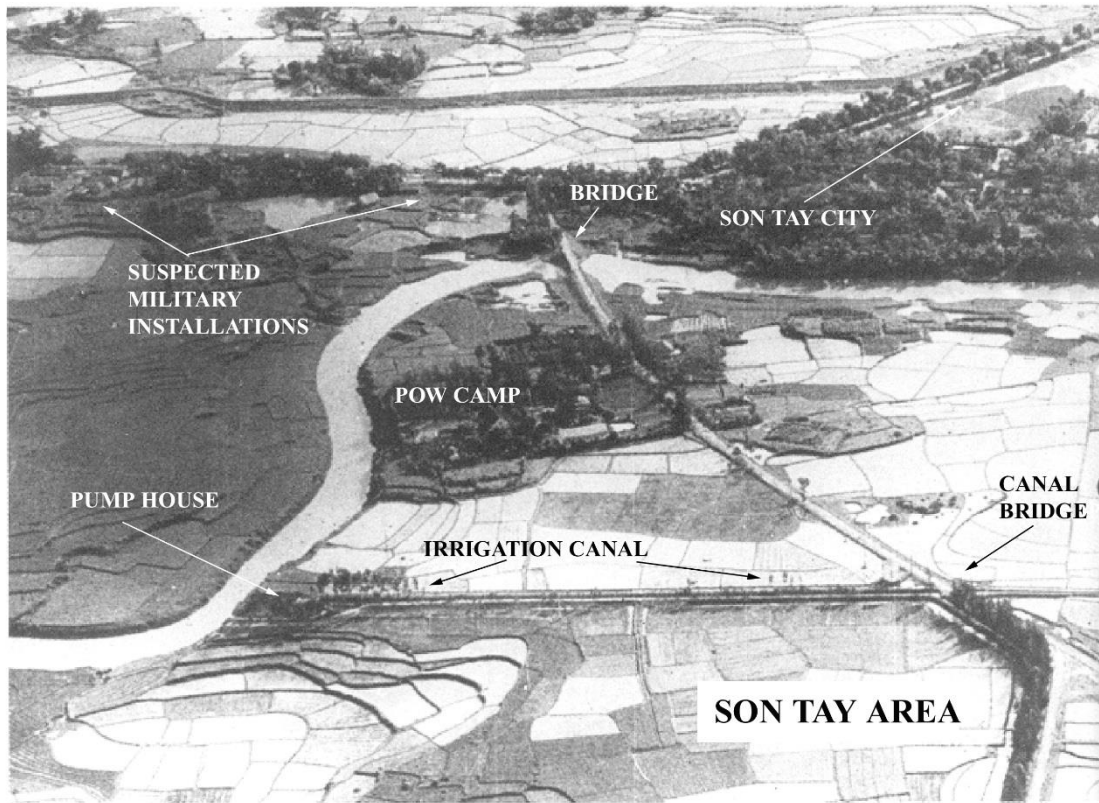
this meeting, General Wheeler directed that a feasibility study group be convened as soon as possible to study the possibility of a raid.

On the 26th of May, messages went out to a very small group of people who were ordered to come to the Pentagon and report to SACSA for a special study group. On the first Monday in June, this group convened at the Pentagon and was briefed by General Blackburn on the purpose of that meeting. Nobody really had any idea prior to attending this meeting what it was going to be. I say, the exception to this was Larry Ropka who was pretty much read in throughout from the initial look into the project.

The encouragement wasn't what I could call enthusiastic in the early days because the few people who knew about it simply thought that it really wasn't possible. We couldn't pull it off without unacceptable risk. But several things were pressing on us. One, we knew that a lot of the prisoners were dying and we knew that after all these years their state of health was not just in a process of slow deterioration, it was in a process of rapid deterioration. We also knew that some of them were being tortured to death. We had other hard facts like the large contingent of Moroccan prisoners who were released by the North Vietnamese in 1967. These prisoners had been captured after the fall of Dien Bien Phu in 1954 thirteen years earlier. Thirteen years after the North Vietnamese had achieved what they wanted to achieve in that particular stage of the Indo-China war. They still had prisoners. So clearly, their attitude on the prisoners was to extract as much misery and as much suffering by as many people as possible. So, it's just this, combined with the fact that nothing whatever, from any source, accomplished better conditions for the prisoners. It seemed like if it ever was going to be done, it was going to have to be done with some dramatic move.

Our original study group had Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps; less than a dozen people. We all realized that if we were going to find a rescue to be feasible, we would have to give the finding of our study early in July. If we found it to be feasible, we would have to come up with at least an outline of a workable plan.

The center of the plan rested inside the prison walls. All planning went backwards from that point to the raid launch, or forward from that point to the final termination of the mission. And we would work backward or forward and at each step insure that what we had proposed was sensible, feasible and practical. If we found that it wasn't, we'd start back at the compound again and start working our way back.



*This low altitude photograph from a reconnaissance drone shows the isolation of the Son Tay POW camp area that it made an attractive target for the raid. It is bordered on the west and north by the Song Con River. Paved road borders it on the east and the irrigation canal separates it from the rice fields on the south. The nearest military installations are just across the bridge to the northwest. Outskirts of the city of Son Tay are just off the photo on the northeast. (USAF photo annotated by John Gargus)*

One of the earliest ideas that came up, and this came up on the second or third day of the feasibility study, was of how are we going to get inside the compound? Several things were considered. First, a HALO drop of a small team that could land at a reasonable distance away. They'd go into the Song Con River, scuba fashion and surface to blow the walls at a very precise, pre-determined time, which would simultaneously coincide with the arrival of other troops. Other troops could arrive by helicopter or low-level troop drop. We didn't want a low-level troop drop. It was dismissed because even with the quality and experience level of the troops we had, who knew how to handle the parachutes and stow them in very fast order, we were talking about the necessity for impact shock within 30 seconds, two minutes, three minutes. That just wouldn't permit us to regroup the troops. So, we gave up on a low-level troop drop. We still had not put out a HALO drop. Now, there were other considerations for just not having a HALO drop; landing outside the compound and fighting our way into the compound. But this was time consuming. We were losing time, and if, as we suspected could well be the case, the North Vietnamese inside the compound had orders to kill prisoners in case there was ever an attempt to rescue them. Then we couldn't take

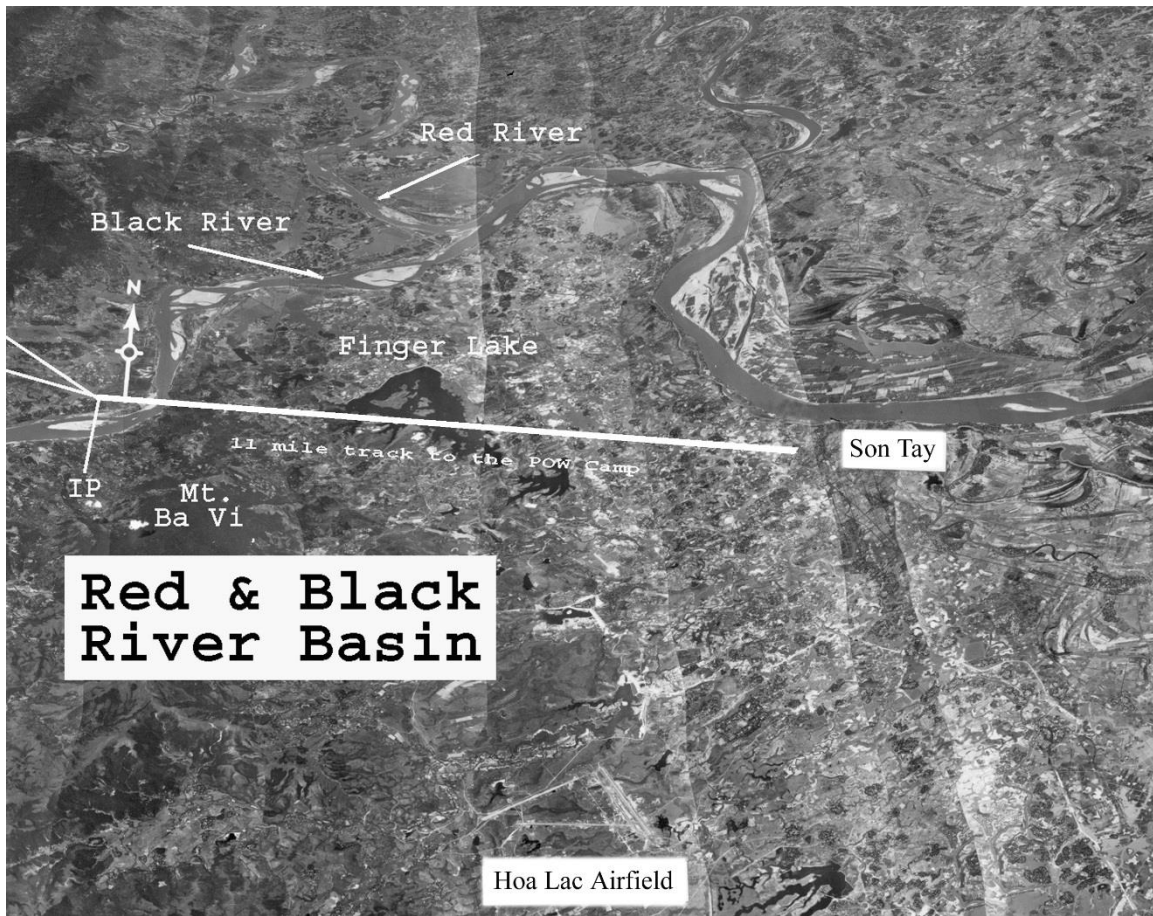
that time to fight our way into the compound. You've got to have somebody inside that compound very early.

Another idea of landing helicopters some distance away, maybe near a leading road, and having the troops loaded up in jeeps with battering rams and drive right through the camp and right through the gate, crashing through the gate. This was an idea that we thought was a workable one. We even considered to have a C-130 make a STOL type landing on one of the crushed limestone roads leading into the area. There was one a few hundred yards to the southwest of the compound. This idea had certain attractiveness. There was a great resistance at first to leaving the helicopters in the area for twenty, thirty, forty minutes before bringing the men out again. We felt maybe we should bring the men in and then have the helicopters return for them for a last minute extraction. So, this received some considerable appeal, again with the idea of the jeeps rolling off, crashing their way through the compound, through the gates.

But all the time there was one central thing. Where do you want to be? You want to be inside the walls of that prison. That's where you want to be. And why not try to start off at that point? Then all of a sudden what was once a barrier that you had to overcome became your protection and your fortress. This, by the third day, became obvious to all of us in the study group. The way to do this was to land the helicopter inside the compound and land it in such a way that you spent minimum time hovering down into the ground. All you want to do is get those troops on the ground safely and insure that the helicopter didn't hit so hard that it would crash and burn. And if you intended to take the helicopter out again, that your method of landing would have to be so careful in a very, very confined space of only a few feet on each side of the rotor blades. You would have to land so very carefully that you would lose time. You would lose precious seconds in the most critical moments of that entire operation. So, don't plan to bring it out. Take it in fast, throw it on the ground, and leave it there. Come out in one of the other helicopters and blow this one up before getting out. Well, this basic plan seemed to make sense.

Then our planning began from that point after we ironed out some other kinks. The remaining kinks, like where are you going to land a couple of helicopters outside? How are you going to get in flying formation? What kind of firing patterns does it look like we should have? What kind of accuracies can we expect at these speeds? With these helicopters, how are we going to establish firing patterns so we don't hit any of the friendly troops? These were questions we had to address but we couldn't really answer them, not until we got out and did some training.

Then we started planning them out. How are we going to get in? Remembering, that we are 18 miles from the city limits of Hanoi; we're 800 meters from the Red River. We are less than 200 meters from the main highway going up the Red River from Hanoi (*Rte 11A*). We are within 5 miles of 12,000 full-time North Vietnamese troops. We are between two major SAM areas; that area of Hanoi and this area at the head of the steep valleys of the Red River. We are in an area of intense anti-aircraft fire. How are we going to get in? And out? Of course, there were many that said, "Look, we've lost hundreds of aircraft, high-speed aircraft, up there and you guys are out of your blooming minds if you think you can get into this area."



*This composite photograph from a high altitude SR-71 reconnaissance aircraft shows the confluence of the Black and Red Rivers and the area west of Son Tay that was full of military installations. Helicopter and A-1 formations used the same initial point (IP) at a small lake dam west of the Black River. C-130, Cherry Two, dropped off its A-1s at this point. Cherry One dropped off its helicopter escort 3.5 miles out of Son Tay. Son Tay Military School is about half way between the POW camp and the Hoa Lac Airfield. (USAF photo with overprint by John Gargus)*

Q. You sound like you had, by this time, decided on Son Tay.

**NOTE:** *Two Air Force officers who interviewed Lieutenant Colonel Grimes in 1970 were: Colonel Robert L. Gleason and Major Richard B. Clement. Tape transcript does not identify which officer poses questions and makes occasional comments. Consequently, their questions and comments will be preceded by letter "Q". Lieutenant Colonel Grimes' comments will begin with letter "A".*

A. By this time we had not definitely decided on Son Tay. There was another Camp, Ap Lo, which we also considered. We knew there were prisoners at one time at Ap Lo. We also knew that the prisoners were regularly, or perhaps I should say, periodically moved among all these camps. And we had indications that prisoners had not been at Ap Lo because there was construction

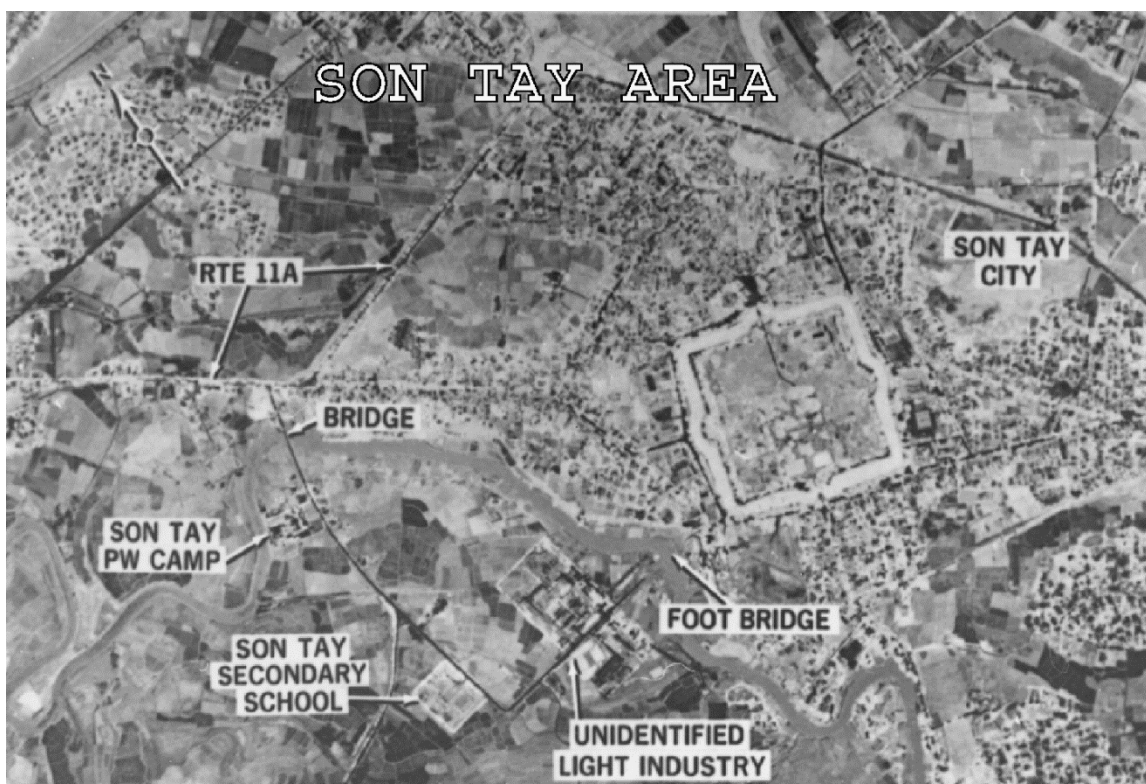


underway that we could see from our intelligence photographs. These were SR-71 photographs. Excellent resolution.

Q. Can you give me a distance from something that's known?

A. There's Son Tay. This is a city of 17,000 people. Let me orient you a little bit better so as we go into all this training you'll have a better feel for certain things. Son Tay prison is right here. Just to the south of the prison is the other illustrated compound that I was telling you about, some 350 meters in this location here (*Son Tay Secondary School*).

Here's an SR-71 photo of prison compound, the road going to the south, the compound that we spoke of some 350 meters to the south, there's the large two-story building in the center, and then this area of light manufacturing and military facilities. Here is a footbridge going across the Song Con River directly into the town of Son Tay.



(USAF photograph with overlay by the Joint Contingency Task Group)

Q. That's the Red River just above Son Tay?

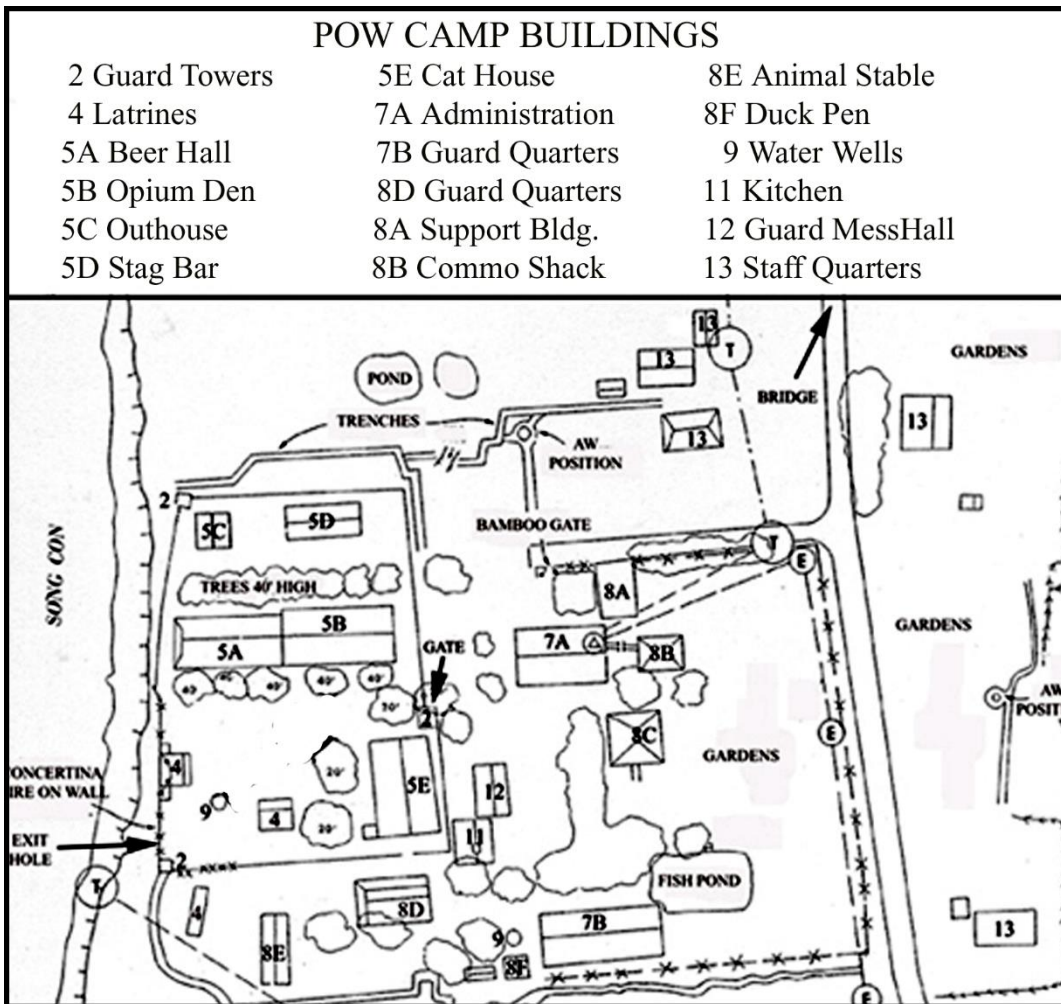
A. This is the Red River. This is the Song Con River here which more or less parallels Red River for quite a long distance and eventually empties into it quite some distance away from where we are. This is a road, pressed limestone, that went straight south. This is a military compound here and also a light manufacturing. Across the Song Con River here was a bridge going into Son Tay

City. Here was a local, sort of youth defense corps company located within the citadel here. A bridge crossed the Song Con River right here. This is the main highway (*RT 11A*), state highway, running up the Red River directly out of Hanoi. It is one of the main transportation arteries in the country. Immediately to the south southwest of this, a distance as the crow flies, some 3 1/2 kilometers is the Son Tay Military School. Son Tay Military School is a school where drivers are trained for use on the trail and also anti-aircraft teams are trained there. A permanent cadre of 1500 to 2,000 and a variable student load can run several thousand at the time. We had numerous other military installations through the area as you can see by the circles here. So, we had a large concentration of military just across the river. But our main concern had to be the Son Tay Military School. Several thousand people were there, the great abundance of trucks that existed there and the anti-aircraft that was there at the Son Tay Military School.

We, of course, were concerned with these two military compounds immediately to the south of us, 350 meters and about 600 meters respectively, and with the civil defense corps within the Citadel. It was only 800 meters from the corps in the Citadel to our prison compound. Very, very close quarters. We were concerned too that across the bridge might come some help from the local area militia.

**NOTE:** *To get a clear idea of how the compound buildings looked like, refer to the sketch of the camp and the photograph of the model Barbara on page 10.*

Take a close look at the compound here. Inside the walls were the prisoners. We knew that this long building here was the prisoner building (*5A and 5B*). This building (*5C*), we felt, would be a max security building here in the extreme corner. The guard tower (*2*), which is immediately adjacent to it, was probably one of the features that would make it a max security building. Wash area and latrines (*4*) are here. Another guard tower (*2*) is in the other corner, which is the southwest corner. This building (*5E*) was of unusual construction and could easily accommodate a second floor. We did not know for sure what its function was – whether it was a prison building or a troop building or interrogation center. This building here (*7B*) was considered to be, and was, the main troop billeting area. This was where the food was prepared, kitchen (*11*). This area here, is for washing and bathing (*4*), latrine facilities for the North Vietnamese guard troops. This was the headquarters building of the compound (*7A*). This building (*8B*) had the communications for the compound and the power generating facility. This was NCO quarters located here in this particular building (*8D*). And here is the house where the Commandant and his family lived (*in SW corner #13*). These walls were eight feet high from the inside and the level of the ground was lower on the outside; 10 to 12 feet high on the outside. Walls were of heavy masonry construction. It was not just a single cinderblock type wall.



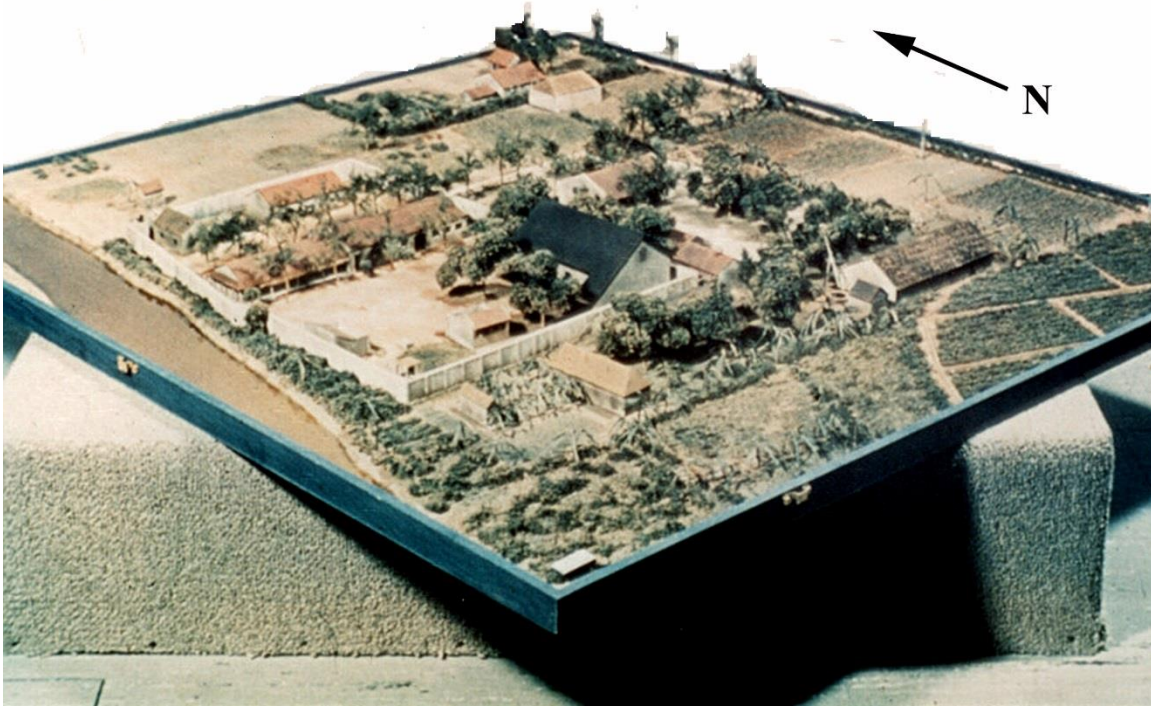
*(Joint Contingency Task Group sketch adjusted by John Gargus)*

Q. What was that picture taken from?

A. This was our model. Quite an excellent model. Extremely realistic. The troops studied it in intimate detail and when they got to the compound they simply knew where they were. Everything went just like it was supposed to.

The rescue force that was proposed in the planning stages was considered from several angles. First, we felt that if the whole force launched from any single location it could give an intelligence tip to anyone who was a bit more astute than the average. So the force would have to be launched from a number of various locations.

## BARBARA



*This is the table top model of the Son Tay POW compound constructed by the Central Intelligence Agency's specialists. The raiders nicknamed it "Barbara" and used this name because, for security reasons, it was forbidden to use the words Son Tay in any communication. Its main focus was to show everything as seen from the ground level. A special viewing device placed anywhere on the inside would give a man the view he would have standing on that spot. Location of tree trunks was precise for the on site orientation of the ground troops, but the tree canopies on the inside of the compound were not to scale. Consequently, the open courtyard, though precise in size, appears to be much larger. (USAF, Joint Contingency Task Group, photograph)*

In the feasibility study we concluded that we could get into this compound. We concluded that we could launch from bases in Thailand and that we could fly in a manner so as not to be detected by the enemy's early warning system. That we could fly with aircraft low enough and slow enough, nestling right down close to the ground and not be detected. And we would not be in any great danger from the anti-aircraft defenses in the area. The aircraft that were considered necessary were the helicopters. Helicopters that could fly formation with a C-130 lead. The helicopter force had to navigate very precisely to the location where we wished to be. We needed aerial protection for the helicopters and the ground troops. This protection would come from the A-1s. A-1s that could fly this long while carrying heavy, mixed ordnance loads, and stay as long as they had to in order to give us very tight, very precise and very accurate ordnance wherever we needed it. We couldn't have done this of course with any of our fast movers.

We're talking about a force that had to be capable of delivering ordnance within 50 meters of our own friendly positions at night time. There just wasn't really any other choice except to launch this operation at night time. We needed some light, but we didn't want much. The only light we really wanted was just enough to enable the helicopters to find their target and help them to land successfully. We felt that we needed some moon light. We wanted an east moon but we didn't want it full. It would give too much of a silhouette. We wanted an east moon so that the force, as we came in, would not be silhouetted, that anyone looking from the east at the approaching force simply couldn't see it. We wanted an east moon also so that we could pick up watery reflections from water bodies, but we didn't want it very high in the sky because if it was too high we wouldn't pick up these reflections from water bodies long enough to let us make any adjustments before we were right on top of them. So, it was decided that we ought to have something around a quarter moon. It had to be perfect in order for us to get the east moon after midnight. We wanted to go after midnight to catch the minimum preparedness period and we wanted the moon to be in the sky between 15 and 45 degrees above the horizon.

We also needed a period during which we would have favorable weather with good visibility to permit us to pick up these targets. Certainly no fog that would obscure our low areas and we couldn't afford to have much of any cloud covering. We couldn't really take more than scattering clouds below five thousand feet. So the time of year that seemed to offer the best opportunity for such a night was September, October, and November. This was in June. Our moonlight window was dictated first and it included a period of roughly from about 18th to 25th October or from about the 18th to 25th of November that we would have to launch this mission. This does happen to be, however, a period of fairly high typhoon activity peaking out in September. As it did turn out we had more typhoons here in this decade, occurring in a 60 day period in October and November, the period of our mission.

Q. Launched from locations in Thailand?

A. There was a long debate in the initial stages as to whether or not a diversion should be used. There was every indication that it was a good idea. But before it was accepted there were some considerable questions about it. Would a diversion just stir up the enemy and get him awake? So, if you have the diversion too soon before the raid it will not work. You just alert the enemy and have him all riled up, manning his weapons, ready to handle them. Nevertheless, a diversion was used and we'll talk about this later on. Generating the largest night-time launch in this war, with support by diversionary activities, was debated considerably.

Also, in the planning stages we debated whether or not we should take any prisoners. As we get more into this – now we're still talking feasibility study -- I'll explain why we did not take prisoners.

On the 7th of July, the feasibility study group briefed the Joint Chiefs with the conclusion that Son Tay could be successfully raided. That it was preferable to go after Son Tay because we had more complete intelligence on it than on Ap Lo. Intelligence indicated refurbishing -- maintenance and repair work -- that probably had resulted in the prisoners being moved from Ap Lo.

We also considered a simultaneous raid on both places. But unfortunately, and I guess this is sort of a sad commentary, we simply didn't have enough A-1s or helicopters in the US Air Force to successfully pull off two of these operations simultaneously. That was a significant factor even if we had wanted to pull a raid on Ap Lo. We could not have pulled a simultaneous raid. Someone suggested then that if we did not find anyone at Son Tay we could pick up and come to Ap Lo. Well this tactically begins to be pretty ragged. You step in, take your risk, take a chance on heavy casualties and then try and reconstitute for another raid. This idea didn't appeal to anyone. It could have resulted in disaster, certainly if we had tried something like that.

Q. Did we have hard intelligence on Ap Lo and Son Tay? The reason I ask, we had submitted an AFXPDO on Ap Lo in '67 and it was turned down. It went up to General McConnell, he was briefed. He turned it down and sent it back to us with a note that "I'm afraid this will cause injury or death to some POWs." We sent the same report over to MACV in '68.

A. Yes.

Q. And MACV would forward it but we didn't have any real hard intelligence on Ap Lo being currently activated as you mentioned. What did you have on Son Tay?

A. We had good hard intelligence for Son Tay. Two men, who had been captured in South Vietnam, were stationed at Son Tay in previous years. One of them had worked at the prison. Good intelligence. So, when we took the other information which we had: photos and a prisoner accounts, it all stacked up just right.

Q. Well, what was your time element? What was your closest hard information you had? Six months, a month?

A. We had hard information in July. Now considering the time span it took to get hard information, that was the most recent. We didn't have anything significant beyond July but this is just in the normal course of events. There was no reason based on hard information in July to assume that it was not continued on in the next batch and when I talk about hard information in July, this information came into us the last month before the raid so we felt very good. There was some information that led us to realize the possibility that some or all the prisoners were moved, or might be moved, but then this was followed up with hard information at a later date that told us that we could continue on. We had every reason to suspect the prisoners would probably be there, knowing, however, that there was a chance they would not be there at that location. Photography information throughout didn't indicate that there was any change in the pattern of activity at Son Tay.

Q. I'm familiar with this plan you sent up on Ap Lo because we read it, studied it, and of course there were many similarities and things that we used. Ours was just a concept. We didn't get too far into it.



A. But you brought up a very significant consideration. Throughout our study they said, "How are you going to protect the prisoners? How are you going to keep them from being killed?" We felt that the phenomenal shock impact of landing a helicopter inside the compound in itself would keep the prisoners from being killed. Because all our actions that would follow would be actions to insure that we cleared out anything that could harm the prisoners from inside those walls and then go on to the release of the prisoners. And we felt that if we had the element of surprise we could successfully pull off the raid on Son Tay.

That if we had the element of surprise which of course presupposes that we have complete security. We felt that if we did not have security, if there was a leak, then it would be absolute disaster. The prisoners would be removed if there was a leak and a trap would be set. We studied the paranoia of the North Vietnamese toward outsiders and particularly toward westerners. There was no chance we would have avoided a massacre of Americans if they could possibly have pulled it off. Regardless of the cost to them, they would have pulled off a massacre.

The training areas were considered in this original study. With the heavy preponderance of TAC experienced people on the air staff there was a strong pressure involved in the air staff that we train out of Las Vegas.

The only trouble is that, as we argued our case, if we were to train out there, we'd be taking A-1s, HH-3s, Hueys, HH-53s, and black C-130s into areas where these aircraft are totally foreign and are not ordinarily operated. And we would be taking them also into an area where the climatic conditions are drastically different than those we would be operating in. There our base altitudes are considerably different than those where we would operate; where air densities are also totally different. We would have to transfer our whole maintenance and support base. This would mean several hundred people being transferred out. We thought that the probability of risk of compromise was so great that we just simply couldn't see doing this anywhere else except at Eglin where we've got our A-1 support ready. You don't have to transfer or create curiosity in one single mechanic down there because he's just turning those wrenches on the same airplane in the same place that he always does. And the same thing was true with the helicopters. Plus, if we had taken the helicopter forces and crews that we needed we would have to completely shut down the Rescue and Recovery Training Center at Eglin and extended some tours in Southeast Asia. There would have been all sorts of vibrations if we had attempted to train this force outside of Eglin. We are too thin on airframes and people to where we can just charge off and create our own little environment anymore.

We also felt quite certain that, given some reasonable priority on this project, we could pull it off with the security that was necessary. We would put the Special Forces troops into isolation. Once they came on board of the project, they were there and they wouldn't leave. They didn't even leave the immediate training area. The aircrews, we couldn't do quite the same thing with them because they had to operate back and forth and in and out of their ordinary bases. So, we left them where they were and put the real fear of God into them about the probability of a compromise.

On the 7th, when, Admiral Moorer, who had just taken over on the first of July as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, got his first working acquaintance with our proposal. General Wheeler, in his last few days, gave us excellent support before he retired. The questions certainly were there. Do you feel that you can achieve the shock impact that parallels the effect of surprise so that these prisoners won't be hurt? We felt absolutely we could achieve this.

Q. Did anyone bring up the question of whether or not there would be reprisals?

A. The early July presentation before the Joint Chiefs gave us the opportunity to lay our plans. The Chairman said, "OK, I want you to work up a detailed operation plan. As soon as you finish it, I want a training plan to be built up for that operation plan and then in early August I want you to brief Secretary Laird and have this ops plan and training plan in shape." OK. So, we had the approval in July to write the training plan and the operations plan to support it. Then we would brief Secretary Laird. So, an extremely detailed ops plan was written with everybody playing the devil's advocate all the time.

We couldn't afford any slipups. Every mental concept that came up was torn to shreds by everyone else. But then we would gradually hammer it out. It became a challenge for everyone in the project. If you could find a flaw, you brought it out. And as we hammered out the ops plan, we met daily, on very good terms, worked very long hours and worked and revised, worked and revised. This was when Dick Meadows came on board as one of the planners.

The prime ground plan was conceived by Dick Meadows and Jim Morris. A fellow named Sy Morris was our prime logistician. This was a particularly worthy area because when you go about breaking people out of prison camps you're talking about items of hardware that are not normally within the standard table of allowances of any unit. We brought on board an intel officer named Jack Knops. Capt. Jacobs, a first rate photo interpreter and Larry Ropka, had been on board all along. The Marine Corps had First Lieutenant Brinson on board, Marine Intelligence. We also had earlier in planning stages a Marine, excuse me, a Navy Lieutenant named Grabowsky who was a SEAL, phenomenally well qualified. Well qualified to the point he had made similar prisoner snatches in South Vietnam by coming up out of rivers. This man offered a great deal to us. Conceptually, he was a real dynamo. Unfortunately, just because of roles and missions, he couldn't participate later on in the operation although he would have been ideal to have led one of the teams. Capt. Campbell, Naval aviator came on board in the plan writing stage when we had by that time about a dozen men that were doing the planning. Also added were Ben Kraljev and Dick Peshkin, a very experienced C-130 types.

Q. Are these men listed in your report?

**NOTE:** *List of Polar Circle planning participants took up two following transcript pages. They were deleted because they showed each individual's service number (same as the Social Security number). Retired Colonel James Morris (mentioned among the principal players in the previous*



*paragraph), who became the leading ground force operations planner in Florida, provided me with the missing list of Polar Circle participants. It is found in Attachment 3.*

Q. Were there any Vietnamese at all?

A. Never.

Q. Not take any interpreters with you?

A. Not at any point was there a non-American involved in this project.

Q. Did that subject come up? Should we have included Vietnamese?

**NOTE:** *First part of the answer is missing. It contained some information that was still secret at the time of the latest declassification in 2001.*

A. Now, on the Vietnamese, since security was still, and always, the paramount consideration. We proposed that we secure a trusted Vietnamese National and give him instructions on what to say, at the last minute, only a few hours before launch. He would accompany so and so, would have a bullhorn at his disposal and give whatever instructions were necessary. We also considered that we could put a tape on the helicopter that landed inside the compound and broadcast instructions to the North Vietnamese like: "We are Americans. We come only to take our men back." And, "Do not fight us. We do not want to fight with you. Lie down on the ground. We only come to take our men back. If you do not fight us we will not harm you". We considered all this, but we thought we'd have to contact a Vietnamese to make this tape and here was a probability for a security leak.

Q. There were no American translators that –

We could have certainly gotten some American translators that could have made a tape. We could have made an adequate tape, but we were deathly afraid of a security leak. Every time you brought whatever individual as a translator into this, he would get a very clear idea, without knowing where, but precisely what we were going to do. We decided against it. We decided against it for some other reasons also. We thought, well, on the one hand it'd be a very distinct propaganda advantage in having such a broadcast. We could bring the tape back to the American people and say: "This is the tape we played." But, on the other hand, we considered that it probably wouldn't do much good because the North Vietnamese were probably going to shoot it out with us regardless of what we said. It would also add some considerable element of confusion and sound that maybe we didn't need. We wanted to be able to control the sound level and if we wanted complete quiet, we didn't want to make a lot of racket. We thought that if we had that speaker up loud enough, in such a close proximity to a lot of other installations on a still night, it could have been heard across the river. Once the people in the surrounding area heard this tape, it would have told them very clearly what was happening. So, why not remove some of the element of confusion, especially

when it would probably not do any good anyway? They are going to fight it out with you as best they can because that's what their orders are and they'd probably get shot if they did anything else. Besides, we preferred a still night and very calm winds.

Q. It sounds like you were planning to generate confusion on the enemy's part all throughout this operation.

A. We wanted the enemy to be very confused as to what we were going to do. The idea of, should we bring a prisoner back, an enemy prisoner, or two, was discussed at very great length by the planning group.

### **Selection of Personnel for the Raid**

Now, at this particular time, the force leaders have not yet been selected. Bull Simons (*Colonel Arthur D. Simons*) was not yet on board. General Manor (Brigadier General Leroy J. Manor) had not yet been chosen. Although General Blackburn said right from the beginning, that if the Commander of the Joint Contingency Task Force was to be an Air Force brigadier general, he had his man from the Army already picked out. So, Blackburn knew for certain that he was going to use Bull Simons. On the other hand, if the task force commander had been an Army brigadier general with an Air Force as vice commander, I cannot say, but I know who General Blackburn would have selected. If the vice commander was to be an Air Force commander, we put up several names, among them Jim Armand, Harry Aderholt, Bill Thomas, with a leaning toward Jim Armand. OK, because Jim's got fighter experience, we would be having MIGCAPs and WILD WEASELS and diversionary forces. For that Jim's overall experience would have been ideal; not necessarily within the special operations, but also in the knowledge of fighter operations.

Several names in the Air Force were proposed if we had the command. If the Air Force had command of the overall tactical operation, the prime focus was on General Pete Everest who had recently taken over the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service and General Manor who had recently taken over the USAF Special Operations Forces. It narrowed down to those two and General Manor got the nod because he owned the air assets which would be enormously valuable for operating out of Eglin Air Force Base. Plus General Manor had an excellent reputation. Of course so did Everest -- for being a fine commander, not just a manager of resources, but one whale of a good commander. We feel, of course, Manor or Everest, either one in that capacity, would have performed equally well.

So it's still the month of July and Bull Simons has not been notified. He's certainly the man for the Army to have the number two slot and the Air Force the number one slot. We did recommend to the Joint Chiefs that the overall Joint Task Force Commander be an Air Force brigadier general because of the very complex coordination relationships that had to take place across various commands. When we put the plan together we knew we would be taking resources from TAC; get our A-1s and one of our black C-130s. We knew we would be taking heavy resources from MAC for our helicopter forces. We knew we'd have to get one of the C-130s out of USAFE. So, we'd be

taking USAFE resources as well. We'd be operating in PACAF, in PACOM area of control. We would be taking some of our staff resources from the Pentagon and, as in my case, from the Air University. We would be getting people coming back from Southeast Asia so that one pilot and we were flying two pilots in each of our A-1s - the right seat man in each A-1 was a qualified IP current in the theater. So, we needed one A-1 pilot and one helicopter pilot per aircraft from Southeast Asia. Phenomenal coordination was required for this. So, we felt we've got to get the Air Force to head the task force. There was really no argument on this.

Admiral Moorer said, "I agree." And we did it. When we briefed the Joint Chiefs again in August, they gave us a very good reception. They felt we had a good plan. Shortly thereafter, Secretary Laird was briefed. It was very difficult to tell, we didn't know whether we had convinced him or puzzled him. He understood everything we were saying and at the end of the briefing said, "I'll think it over." Approximately two weeks later, he said, "OK, I want you to select and start training a force and in the meantime I will brief, I will inform, the President that we are developing a capability. Then, when we have this capability proven, or disproved, one way or another, I'll talk more with the President."

Before we finished our work in Washington, we, who had been the planners and staff throughout the whole study, proposed to Admiral Moorer that it would be very wise to have the same people who made the study and wrote the plan to conduct the training and run the operation. We did not want to pass this off to other commands. It was a JCS operation from the beginning to the end and we should keep the same people. Then, when we wrapped up the training, certain of the staff people would go to Southeast Asia to start the pre-mission coordination. That is the way it went from there on.

Well, we immediately started collecting the force. We had already flown some test missions with helicopters at different power settings and flying in formation with HC-130s at the Rescue and Training Center to see how we could work out these formation techniques. By then Bull Simons was on board and General Manor was running the task force.

Now came the problems of selecting the people. The Army did it significantly different than the Air Force. The Army just said we've got a little project going, we're looking for volunteers that have been in the theater. Nothing as to the nature of the project was discussed. The men were interviewed separately. The Bull and Doc, Doctor Cataldo (Lieutenant Colonel Joseph R. Cataldo), went all the way with the raiding team. They sat down and interviewed every single one of these men. Well, of these 500, all that was told to them was it's going to be a very rigorous, very demanding and quite a long extensive project. So, about a hundred of these 500 dropped off right there. But the other 400 went and sat through the interviews.

Previously Doc Cataldo had taken the medical records of every single one of these men and went through them. Certain of these men were eliminated on the spot because of physical defects, wounds they had previously received that simply wouldn't permit them to function. Others were eliminated because of certain emotional problems they had shown up with in the past. By the time

the men came in for the individual interviews they weren't even told that the project had a mission. They said the project would be long and involve some casualties. Why do you want to volunteer for it? So, they would tell him why they wanted to volunteer. Of course, they had the complete personnel records and out of that there were 103 first rate fighting troops that were selected to go down to Eglin to train and compete for approximately 50 slots on the raid.

The Air Force did it differently. General Manor approached, called in separately, only those men that he was almost certain would volunteer in the first place. He called them in and said: "We have a project that's highly classified. It is forbidden to tell anyone that you've spoken to me about it. It will involve some risk. It's a good project. I'd like for you to volunteer, if you are interested." And he had 100 percent volunteering. Every man he talked to volunteered. But, again, remember he only talked to those that he was pretty sure would volunteer. The people out at PACAF were a little more in the dark than the Air Force people because the message came out of the Chief of Staff's office requesting that they, the 56th SOWg for example, send us five most experienced A-1 pilots for a special project. There was some considerable irritation at this, you know. They said, well I can't spare these people and a message came back from Colonel Walls, "We can't spare these men." So another message went from the Chief of Staff saying "That wasn't what I said in the message, can you or can you not spare to send them." So, Colonel Walls sent them. He later gave us outstanding support when we got over into the theater. Helicopter pilots from Southeast Asia went much the same way. General Manor had pretty well recruited the helicopter pilots locally at the recommendation of Colonel Britton. Warner A. Britton, was along all the way from the original study group and planning. He was a very, very experienced helicopter man.

Q. Do you have a comment on the comparison for the success between the Army's method of selecting people versus the Air Force method?

A. They both turned up with outstanding people. You take a man like Bull and you put a doctor with him that's got these medical records and Bull's got the man's military record right in front of him and you put him down in a chair and let him talk to the man. I'd have to classify Bull Simons as the most fascinating combination of sensitivity and toughness I've ever seen in my life. He knew. He could take the measure of that man pretty doggone fast. He'd just sit there and talk to him and look at him and he'd come up with some real cracker jacks. They both worked and they both worked exceedingly well.

Now, in General Manor's case, he had a little more because he was the commander. He had a little more intimate knowledge of those men right from his units that he owned.

Bull Simons was the G-4 Supply of the 18th Airborne Corps. He was no longer in Special Forces. Of course, he had known a good number of these people in the past. The Bull selected Dick Meadows. Well Dick was on board I guess about the same time Bull was but he'd worked with him for years in the past very intimately. Bull selected his number two Army troop as Lieutenant Colonel Elliott Sydnor, who had just graduated from the Army War College. Sydnor had been in Laos on WHITE STAR. Sydnor, Simmons, Meadows had all been in WHITE STAR together in

past years. Sydnor is not well known, just because I suppose of the publicity that took place about the raid. Bull Simons was not the ground force commander. He was the joint task force commander on the ground. He was General Manor on the ground. The ground force commander was Lieutenant Colonel Sydnor and he ran the ground operation at Son Tay. He ran the ground operation and he trained it. It was his baby throughout the whole training program.



*Major Keith Grimes, Air Force Liaison Officer, and Lieutenant Colonel "Bud" Sydnor, Army Special Forces Ground Commander, during one night time training session in Florida. (Joint Contingency Task Group, USAF Photograph)*

We had a lot of little problems that would come up in the training. I mentioned to you a while ago, we had extremely experienced NCOs. Our NCOs in the Army averaged 16 years of active duty and with a full third of our NCOs having in excess of 20 years. The Air Force NCOs had roughly the same experience as the Army NCOs. The average Air Force officer on the operation had about, I'd say, 15 or 16 years of active duty. We had a significant number of old World War II types. On four of our six helicopters we had pilots who were World War II veterans. These were not young kids. They were the pros. The Army officers did not have the same experience level as the Air Force. Most of the Air Force officers were majors with a few lieutenant colonels, a few captains, and only one lieutenant in the Air Force. The Army troops had Bull Simons, 52 years old; Bud Sydnor was in his early forties. But beyond that they were mostly 26, 27, 28, and 29 year old

captains in the Army. They were all good men. Men that had good records, that had combat with the kind of credentials that you can work up with. I think, there were four young Army troops that had never been in combat before but they were very solid. They looked good when they came to us and volunteered. They looked good throughout training and the old pros said, well if ever I've seen a guy that can hack a tough job the first time in combat, these guys can. And they all did.

### **Florida -Training and Planning for the Raid**

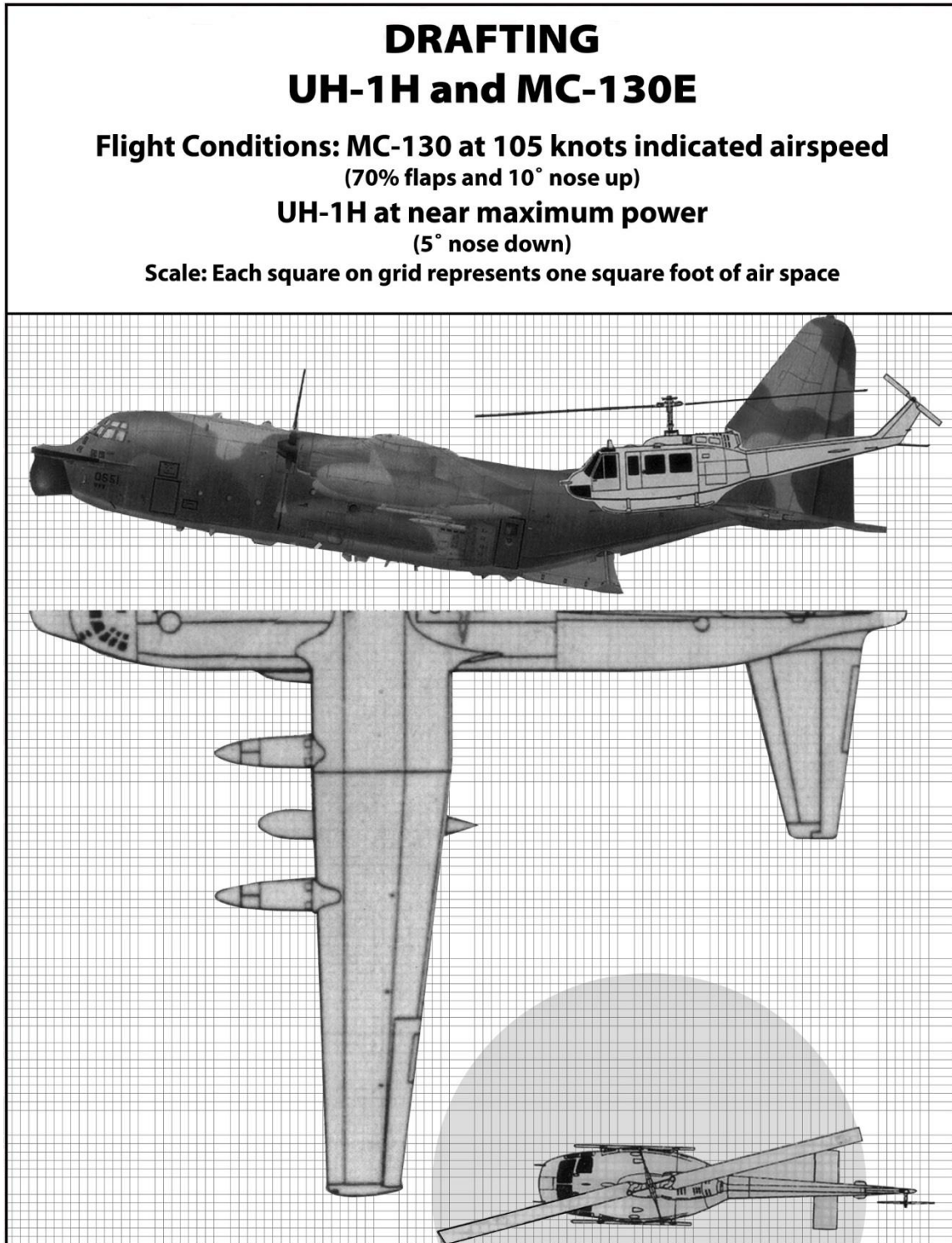
Well, on the third of September the group began assembling at Eglin Field #3 (*Duke Field*). Some buildings were made available to put the troops in. This didn't seem to create any concerns because all sorts of stuff was always happening at Field #3. There were also other Special Forces units working with the Rangers out of the Ranger Camp, so we were just another bunch of guys that had come through the area like so many hundreds have in the past. The training, initially, for the Army was basic. Just to review yourself and bring yourself up to snuff on the basic combat skills. Get your small unit tactics down well; get your communications procedures; just sharpen up in every way.

As far as the Air Force was concerned, we had a lot of things we had to work out. For example, what kind of helicopter can operate in and out of that compound? We asked the Army for the best Huey (*UH-1H*) pilots they could have because originally we were leaning very heavily toward the Huey. Our choice was always between the Huey or the HH-3E and it was a very hard choice to make. In the Huey we knew we had a smaller helicopter. We knew that we could get it in the compound with greater ease and a smaller probability of damage or injury because of the smaller size of the rotor blades. But we also knew that the Huey didn't have air-to-air refueling capability and we would have to stage that Huey out of Laos from a site that may, or may not be, very secure. We also knew that once we got into the air we could get a call to turn around because maybe some big negotiating breakthrough had been made in Paris. Then we would have to land at night in North Vietnam and transfer those troops from the Huey to another helicopter. It didn't bother us because we were going to leave the Huey in any case -- we were also going to leave the HH-3. But with the Huey, there was no doubt that its size was more attractive. There also was the disadvantage in the Huey because Meadows wanted 13 fighting troops inside that compound (*plus Meadows for a total of 14*). Thirteen fully loaded combat troops inside a Huey is a bunch of troops. We didn't know whether or not we could get that sort of endurance out of the Huey.

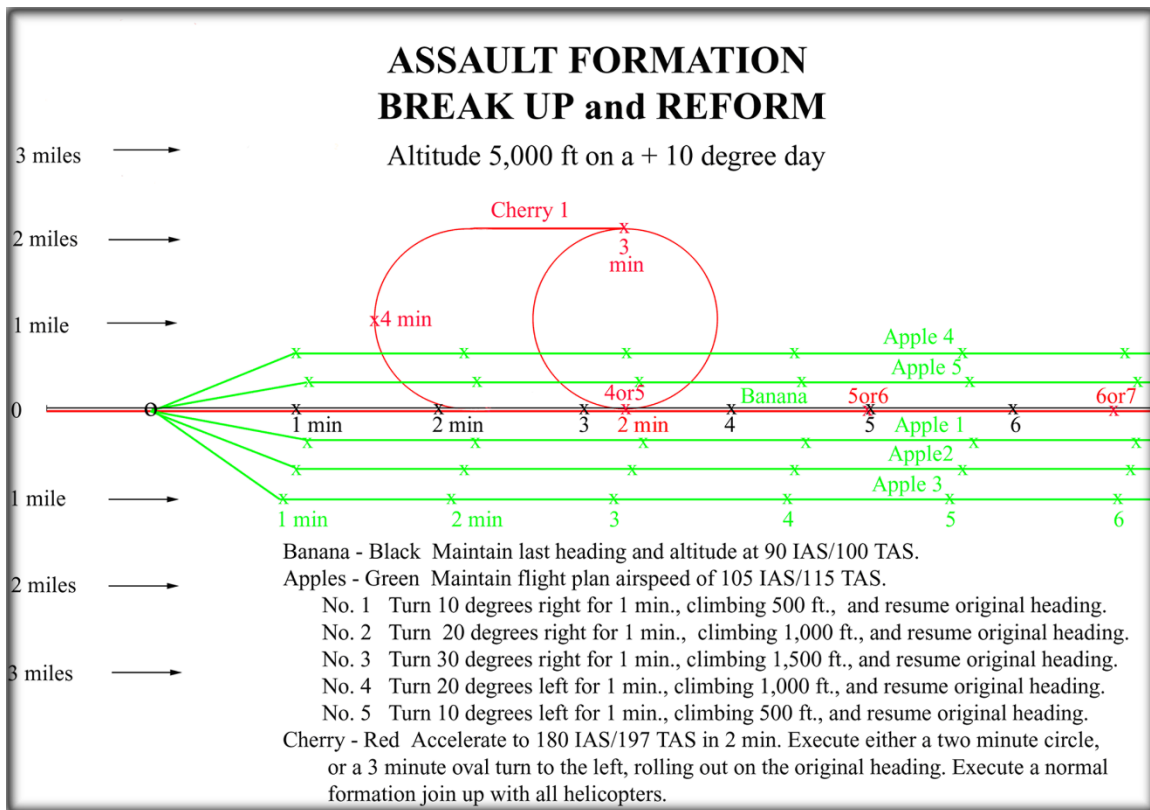
We also had to fly the helicopters in formation with a black C-130. Now that was a neat trick. The stall speed of that C-130 was about 12 knots above the cruise speed of the Huey. It was even above the cruise speed of the HH-3. We started experimenting around and found that we could draft that Huey just behind the wing of the C-130 and pick up 18 knots in drafting, cruising along at 105 knots. Of course, if you'd have to make very slow turns with that C-130 at 105 knots. Drafting position with the Huey and with the HH-3 was not closer than 8 feet nor more than 13 feet from the wing tip. Well, that was really rigorous rough flying when you think you're doing it at night time and if you slide out of the drafting position you immediately drop your airspeed. Of course you go to complete pot in a formation. The formation has to make a long, slow turn, come up



underneath and pick you up again, slipping back into the drafting position. All of this would take about 10 minutes if you slide out of the drafting position. The HH-53s which would carry our larger troop forces had no problems at all flying in formation. They were much more powerful, flying at much higher speeds and they had no difficulty whatever.



Composite sketch showing the proximity of an Army Special Forces Huey to a Combat Talon Air Force MC-130 during drafting. (Composite by John Gargus)



This sketch depicts what would happen to the formation if the HH-3 were to drop out of drafting position. The HH-3 would have to continue on its last heading. HH-53s would spread out and the C-130 would speed up and turn around to fly under the HH-3. New drafting formation could be restored in 5 to 7 minutes. (Sketch by John Gargus)

Well, as we trained, we were training for a plan that had one team (*Blueboy Group*), the smallest of our teams, landing inside the compound in an HH-3 or a Huey. Two teams (*Greenleaf and Redwine Groups*) would land just outside the compound in separate HH-53. We were planning to have three assault helicopters. The third helicopter would not have any troops on board upon landing, but would be one of the primaries upon recovering. We found that in training we could put sixty people on board of an HH-53 with the kind of fuel load we'd have with the kind of temperatures and altitude conditions. Now you are really turning on the power to get off with sixty people. We did put, on several occasions, in excess of 55 of our troops, healthy full-sized troops, on board those aircraft. So, we then had one primary HH-3 and three primary HH-53s. Although only two would carry troops in, three were considered to carry troops out. We had two additional HH-53s that would be spares. Combat spares, either replacing a lost bird, or if we had more prisoners than we could handle, to bring the prisoners back. But, by loading to the extent that we could load, we felt that with our three primary helicopters we could certainly handle up to 130



prisoners and our troops that went in because going out we weren't going to take the bolt cutters, cutting torches, and other stuff. These were all going to be donated to the North Vietnamese upon our exit.

We had five aircrews that trained with the HH-53s. There were mixes of Eglin people and Southeast Asia people that had come back for this project. And we had three pilots who trained on the HH-3, only two of which we would use. We had two complete aircrews for the Huey, one Army lieutenant and three warrant officers. The lieutenant and warrant officers, all of whom had been former Special Forces NCOs in their earlier careers. We found in the training for the helicopters that drafting the pilots had to trade off every ten minutes because it was such a physically emotional demanding type of flying. Of course, you were flying every blooming instance. The load that was worked out was 13 troops for the bird inside the compound, 19 troops for our lead HH-53, 23 troops for our second HH-53 and these did not count Bull Simons.

**NOTE:** *Grimes was off on the numbers of raiders in each one of the three helicopters. HH-3, call sign Banana, carried the 14-man Blueboy Assault Group. HH-53, call sign Apple 1, carried the 22-man Greenleaf Support Group, including Bull Simons. HH-53, call sign Apple 2, carried the 20-man Security Group, which included Bud Sydnor.*

Q. The Bull would go in later?

A. The Bull would go in on the lead HH-53, (*Apple 1*), Britton's aircraft, but the ground force commander, Sydnor, would be on the second HH-53, (*Apple 2*). We decided that we would have five A-1s. Our prime element would be two A-1s which would be Jerry Rhein, (*Peach 1*) and Bob Gochnauer (*Peach 2*). They would come in and provide the initial close air support and firepower. There would be two more A-1s with Dick Skeels (*Peach 3*) and Mel Bunn (*Peach 4*). They would be orbiting some miles away, not expending their ordnance until the lead A-1s had gone down to half of their ordnance. Then the others would be called in so that we shouldn't have any aircraft without ordnance. The fifth A-1, Jack Squires (*Peach 5*), would hold all his ordnance and come to the assistance if we really got into trouble. He would also work as the radio relay aircraft. A-1s had two IPs (instructor pilots), IP right seat and IP left seat in the aircraft. The left seaters were the Hurlburt people who had had extensive time in the A-1s. Bob Gochnauer came into this project with better than 3,000 hours of A-1 time. Jerry Rhein came in with better than 2700 hours. And the low-time left seat man had something like 1200 hours of A-1 time. He was the least experienced. This was an extremely high experienced level, but we had to have it. We had to have men that could lay that ordnance down just exactly where we wanted it. There just simply wasn't any room for error. The A-1s were to fly formation with the second black C-130 which would lead them. They were cruising about 45 knots faster than the helicopter formation so they would have a slightly altered route that would put them in the area over the target two minutes after the main force arrived. So they had to work on their formation flying procedure. If anything happened to the lead aircraft, the lead black C-130 with the helicopters, the C-130 with the A-1s was to take over for the helicopters.

Now, to fly at 105 knots you've got to have four engines on that C-130. You can lose an engine and still fly at a higher cruise speed and still maintain a safe flight. So, if the lead C-130 with the helicopters lost an engine then it would have gone through what was called a rotate maneuver. The signals for that, if the lead lost an engine, was, "Rotate, rotate". And if he could continue the mission he'd say, "Can do" which meant the other 130 would slip into his helicopter position, and he'd slip in and go with the A-1s at 45 knots faster, but only on three engines. But if he said, "Rotate, rotate, cannot do," then it meant he had to drop out for good, in which case the A-1s would be on their own. They were to navigate up to the Red River Valley by themselves. Well, they felt that they could do this with considerable success. Maybe by giving them a few minutes leeway in time, they could get into the target area. With the activity they knew would be going on, plus the intense target study that they had done, they could successfully get into the target area without an escort.

A-1s trained, flew hundreds and hundreds of practice sorties. They flew practice sorties under the control of forward air guides (FAGs). Two forward air guides in each one of the small elements that were to form the perimeter. We trained to control A-1 strikes, and they went through hundreds and hundreds of practice strikes in many cases using live ordnance.

Along in September, remember, this was the era of massive hijackings of aircraft, blowing them up and holding hostages. We had a cover story, in fact we had two cover stories on our operations. One was that it was just simply a test project. The other was that it was a project to train to see if we could extract beleaguered Americans held against their will. The troops as they came on board were given this story; which was the second cover story, and it was quite evident in their minds that they were Middle East directed. Secretary Rogers even came along and provided us with an excellent cover story on standby for rescue.

Q. It really is a dark picture isn't it?

A. After the ground training began, we were going to make a prison break of people that were obviously being detained. The troops were not told where this was going to be. It seemed it would be in the Middle East because many, many people from many of the nations at that time were being held by Arab commandos. As it became necessary then very selected individuals were briefed in. For example, very soon after we collected our force we had to brief the chief navigator and the lead navigator as to exactly what we were doing, so they could start this detailed rough planning and then simulate each route in training. Colonel Britton, lead helicopter pilot, had known all along. It was necessary to brief his number two HH-53 man, Jack Allison and it was certainly necessary to brief the aircraft commander on the HH-3, so that he could start training and stuff.

There was some degree of shock that you could see on the faces of all of these individuals, particularly on Major Kalen who was told very precisely where he was going, where he would have to land his helicopter. He would land his helicopter inside the prison walls and then leave it to be blown up. He was just about the color of a good white sheet. You know, you talk all your life to a pilot, take care of that airplane. That airplane, you've got to baby it; you don't do things to it that will injure it. And then, when you tell a man he's going to the outskirts of Hanoi and he's

going to blow up his airplane. It goes against everything he's been taught. Plus, he just simply said, "I just can't see it," he said, "I don't want to land that airplane." The argument opened up, it was never really very opened up, but he wanted to fly the airplane out. He never hesitated at all about the idea of landing the airplane in there. He agreed that it was a good idea. He said, "I want to fly it out. I can land it so carefully that I can fly it out." But that's what we didn't want. While he'd be landing it carefully, he would be losing precious seconds. He was to find that he was going to be only about six meters from the east guard tower and be eyeball to eyeball with the guard and by the time he would land his load of troops in and then haul out again, if there was anything anybody would shoot at, it would be that helicopter trying to get out. That could put him right down on top of the troops he'd just put out and burn the whole compound. And, of course, it would be all over by then.

The commander of the two black C-130 forces, Lieutenant Colonel Blosch, was read in very early.

On the Army side of the ledger, Colonel Simons, Lieutenant Colonel Sydnor, and Captain Meadows were fully briefed. The sergeant major for the operations was fully aware. Sergeant Major Davis understood everything intimately. But there wasn't as much need to read in early the Army officers as there was for the Air Force officers because they were in an isolated combat training environment. It didn't make much difference.

We had a 50-man security detachment. When I say security, I mean communications security analysts -- that had been assigned to do nothing else except try to figure out what our force was doing. We had requested this ourselves to insure and enhance our own security. They worked very hard, but the only thing they were ever able to get was that we were training for something in Southeast Asia. It took them a couple of weeks just to get to that point. They did compliment us later on and they said this was the best most secure operation that they had ever participated in.

Training started off very fundamentally, very slowly, with walk throughs *within* the compound. Walk throughs in the day time then shifting to individual units walking through and running through at night, gradually polishing up their procedures as they would materialize. For example, when they fired at this window they had another team that was passing through such and such an area. So the whole sequence of events had to be worked out. We would put it together and air it out. Conflict errors dropped out, polishing up continued.

A great deal of marksmanship training took place. We had well over a half a million rounds of various sorts of ammunition to fire. We wanted the emphasis on training. Well this is where Dick Meadows pressed hard so that we didn't do any of this shooting from the hip, John Wayne style. It was all aimed fire. We could fire fast, but we had to aim that rifle. You don't just hose down something. You aim that weapon every time you fire it. Just get to the point where you aim it fast. This and some other factors proved the difference between the firing of the North Vietnamese -- which was very significant -- and our fire. We simply hit everything we aimed at and the North Vietnamese didn't.

Demolitions were tested. We built bridges similar to the bridge we felt we would have to destroy over the Song Con. We built cinder block walls and tested different types of demolitions and bundles of prime cord used to blast holes in these. We threw a lot of hand grenades and fired and fired. We engaged in small unit tactics, simple land navigation. There was always the possibility that we might find ourselves high in the mountains of Laos where we could have one of several choices. We would stay with the helicopter or cut out and fight our way to a new area.

Physical conditioning was intense. Every morning at five o'clock, or five fifteen we had a two to three mile run with the troops preceded by good, vigorous professional calisthenics. Now, Capt. Meadows, because his team was the team primarily responsible for getting the prisoners out, wanted his men to be in even better shape. So, he used to have a three to five mile run each evening in addition to the morning three mile run that the troops would make. As you might suspect there was quite a bit of grumbling because of the intensity of the training. A few people dropped off in the process just because their attitudes fundamentally weren't amenable to carrying on this mission. Because of the rigorous and demanding physical requirements some of the men who had previous combat wounds simply showed up that their bone structure couldn't carry them anymore.

Q. So there was further elimination here. Yes? I believe you said earlier when you eliminated a man after he had been to Eglin and gotten in the program you kept him around did you not?

A. He didn't leave. We had to have certain support functions. We had people that were handling and caring for the weapons performing in the capacity of armors. We had people who were maintaining the radios because, remember these are the basic Special Forces skills, weapons, demolitions, communications, intelligence and medicine. Those were their basic skills and everybody in Special Forces was also, to be fully qualified, was trained in three of those five areas. So that you had a lot of people that could perform good and of course communications was extremely critical. You had people that could perform good weapon maintenance and those weapons were fired a lot.

And, we had pieces of equipment that needed to be designed. We had to design and fabricate bags to carry our special 30 round magazines. We had to fabricate bags to carry our bolt cutters and our torches. This was pretty well handled by me. We had to constantly repair the equipment we had because we were using very, very realistic training procedures.

We had accidents. People doing things to themselves in training so our medics kept themselves gainfully employed. We didn't have any point at which we said, "OK, this man is going to be a medic on the operation, this man is going to be a communicator. Sergeant Carlson, whom I mentioned to you earlier, who did such a good job with the M-79, he was in communications. One of our crack shots, Sergeant Keel, was used in the capacity of forward air guide because he was so very, very good at this. He was a primary medic. We had a unique set of requirements that had to be trained for.

The planning people underwent what was, I think, one of the most fascinating periods in the training, certainly one of the most rewarding. We screened records, worked up a great big huge matrix and in that matrix were about 50 different things. Have you ever done this and this and this and this? And it was everything from have you ever welded to have you ever controlled air strikes. Is photography your hobby; because we needed some photography work done. And so we selected on the basis who should be the FAG, who should be a medic, who should be a machine gunner on the fighting team and worked this out from this great big matrix. We had some of the sharpest NCOs there for the forward air guides and began training them in the standard air strike control procedures. These guys were far better qualified when they finished up controlling hundreds of air strikes than just about any Air Force FAG ever is because he simply doesn't have that degree, that degree of training. I would have stacked them up with the best of the Air Force FAGs. They, each one of them, had what we called our photo-map grid. This was the big chart. We had a big chart and a little chart.



*Chart used by the pilots and the Special Forces FAGs on the ground covered a much larger area. Map photo was reduced to show only the immediate area of Son Tay. (USAF JCTG photo cropped by John Gargus)*

The mock compound that we built was made out of 2x4s and target cloth. When we first told Secretary Laird that we were going to build the mock compound, he was concerned with the possibility that a Soviet Satellite could maybe pick this up. So we got all the Soviet satellite transit



schedules over the area and made a point of not leaving anything up that could be discernable in any manner. We took some photos ourselves from some U-10s of the compound and it was impossible, to detect a discernable pattern. This was because we did a lot of earth scraping and we erected other structures that we'd practice on in the area right close to the site. It was even hard for our people when they first looked at the photos to identify what they were seeing. So we felt that there was no chance at all of compromise here because the stretched target cloth revealed nothing. They didn't even show up from a U-10 photo. And later on then we would construct some towers up on the other side what was the Song Con River. We scraped out the roads in there but then we also scraped some other roads that didn't have anything to do with the real area. We put up other structures which were practice structures or targets that we would fire against with the A-1s. They weren't in the right relationship. But everybody knew what was really there and what wasn't in the right relationship. So they just sort of turned, twisted out of their brain all these other things.



*Cloth walls representing the structures of the Son Tay POW camp at Eglin's C-2 Range. (USAF photograph)*

We didn't seem to have any problems with the mock up. We even painted on the target cloth. We painted the windows in black. We actually built frame doors. We would put barriers and steel mesh across these doors so that the troops would have to break into them in order to get the prisoners out. We would put silhouettes, target silhouettes inside the guard towers, so that when helicopters would pass over they would fire into these silhouettes. Initially, we went through these dry.

Then we began live firing. We had to get special considerations. When we proposed this to the Joint Chiefs, we said that several things had to take place before we could make it work. First, we've got to have control only at the highest level. We can't go below the Joint Chief's level. We

can't do this by trying to negotiate with CONART, negotiate with TAC, negotiate separately. We're doing it at TALC, we're going to just come down and state our requirements. So this was granted. We said also that to practice our tactics, both aerial and ground tactics, we had to be relieved from normal safety requirements. We had to fire live. We had to see and hear how it sounded with the gunfire, and how difficult it would be to coordinate when we got there. Little things like this showed up. For example, we got relieved from the ordinary restrictions on aircraft pull-out altitudes for the ranges at Eglin because we knew we were going to have to have some low pull-out altitudes. We knew we were going to need a lot of low-angle firing, maybe from 2 or 300 feet high and when you are doing this how well can you hear on the radio. Well, we came to find out you flat can't hear a blooming thing when you've got a couple of A-1s working right on the deck right in front of you, and I mean rolling in from 300 feet in a low angle dive and pulling out 50 to 75 feet above the ground. You can't hear a bloody thing. So we had to get the earphones for our little headsets, particularly the FAGs that were working in the area. We gradually started our live firing by units through the compound and throwing grenades.

We continued to put polish on the mission. We flew several full mission route profiles but we also flew abbreviated profiles more often. Our normal routine was three rehearsals in the day time, three rehearsals at night time and these were basically 30 minute flying missions to go out some distance, line up, pick your IPs (initial points) and then go through, from the IP in, go through a very realistic mission. Three in the day time, three at night. It was pretty much a dull affair at least by the time we had trained for about three weeks. Our operation by then was still basically the way we had planned it. The C-130 would leave the helicopters shortly after the IP, the lead C-130 would begin to climb up to an altitude of 1500 feet to drop flares 30 seconds before the lead helicopter. He's climbing out and accelerating, accelerating beyond the speed of the helicopters, dropping flares 30 seconds before the lead helicopter is due to pass over the compound firing immediately. Actually, when I say pass over the compound firing, in September we still had not evolved the concepts of using the mini guns against the guard towers. You remember that one gun tower, I said, was very close to what we felt was the maximum security building? It was only six feet away.

Q. Whew!

A. And we had to take that guard tower out. The plan for the first month of the training through September and the first half of October was that the troops in the HH-3 would take that guard tower out. The HH-3 at that time was planning to be on the ground 30 seconds after the flares were lit. He would fly over the walls, the troops would fire from it. The HH-3 was armed with an M-60 machine gun in the left window with the troops firing out of the windows with their M-16s, firing into the guard towers beneath the light of the flares that would be dropped from the C-130. As I mentioned earlier, we only wanted enough light long enough for the helicopters to get down. We didn't need any light to conduct our operations on the ground. We conducted these in full moon. We also conducted them with no moon and stars. We conducted them with complete overcast conditions. And after you've trained this long and you knew where everything was if you had just the dimmest light level you can carry it off. Along about mid-October, we were very concerned

that the guards still could have a chance against the HH-3 or the Huey, the bird going into the compound, because it would be a shootout. We felt it would be very worthwhile if we could actually fly a helicopter over to take out these guard towers, take them out with one of the HH-53s, the one that wasn't carrying troops in. And even then, from that same HH-53, fire down into the buildings where the main troop quarters were.

There was some great speculation about this. General Manor originally felt that the miniguns on an HH-53 were area weapons. They are not accurate fire weapons and Bull Simons claimed that they were machine guns just like any other machine gun. You aim it accurately and you get accurate fire. The Air Force has never considered the minigun to be a precision fire weapon. So, Major Donahue felt he'd like a crack at it. He felt that at least we could find out whether or not you could perform very accurate fire. So, we went to another range. We put us up some towers. We put us up some silhouettes and we put up some target cloth six feet away to represent the maximum security building. By flying over at the virtual hover of 15 to 18 knots right on the tops of the trees, and the trees in the compound were 40 feet high, we put thousands upon thousands of rounds into those silhouettes and never put a hole in the target cloth. So, we felt by golly, we can do it. So, one of the last changes we made was to have Donohue precede the rest of the helicopter forces with a firing pass. We felt this firing pass would guarantee that the helicopter landing in the compound would have no reasonable chance of taking any hits and it would also, before any airplane landed, would have poured a lot of fire into the main troop barracks. Because you have a helicopter there, you had a lead HH-53 thirty yards from the main troop barracks eyeball to eyeball with it. First, it was tested and it worked. Originally it didn't work because we found that at night time as you fired that minigun that ball of fire completely destroyed your nighttime vision and you couldn't see a blooming thing. So, we went over to the A-37s and got one of those six-board flash suppressors off an A-37. We put it on a minigun on the helicopter and it worked beautifully. It worked beautifully. The gunner said he never lost his night vision. So this whole thing of precise fire was brand new to the Air Force. With that doggone minigun they could fire as accurately as anybody could with any machinegun.

**NOTE:** *See the 200 meter grid map shown on page 28.*

Now for our firings. This is our large size grid. We drew this with letters across the top and numbers down the side. Each one of our FAGs had this grid, which was the big grid and also had the little grid. The big grid had 400 meter grid squares and the little grid had a 200 meter grid squares. The ground force commander, Colonel Sydnor, had each one of these and of course Bull Simons had them also. The A-1 pilot in each aircraft had each one of these grids. We were simply going to try and identify any threat that would come so that the A-1s, who had rehearsed over and over and over again could immediately identify the threat. And then the ground force commander could assess just how much of a threat this was versus what he knew was going on on the ground. For example; this was the Son Tay Military School right here (C-9). We were worried about those trucks. If they came up this road through this village and this village and this village here. The trucks had to be stopped before they turned on this straight-a-way which put them only one curve



away from driving right down our throats. They had to be stopped. This straight-a-way put them a little bit less than one klick away from the compound.

The A-1s were to take up an orbit that would bring them essentially like this. They orbited at 3,000 to 3500 feet. The A-1s did not want to pass any further south than here because of the aircraft guns here. Now, if you put yourself up, realizing that these are 400 meter grids you're seeing it at an angle of about 35 degrees down into the school so you are not very far away from it when you consider this scale. But the A-1s would make every effort possible to keep trucks from turning this last corner here. The trucks, we felt that it would take probably a minimum of 15 minutes from the time the initial raid force got on the ground before there could be any organized response at all. Now, if they came with lights on, it would still take them, at least eight minutes to make it up to where they could do us harm. If they came with lights off, it would take them 15 minutes. By that time we felt we would pretty well have the operation sewed up.

When an A-1 would spot trucks he would simply say, "We've got trucks at Charlie Niner moving north." All right, the ground force commander knows he's got trucks. The A-1s could not strike without the permission from the ground force commander until the roll-up phase of the operation. This is because if the ground force commander had a threat that was coming up right out here he could let those trucks go for the time being because he's got to get those birds right on the threat. So, they had no strike authority except when given approval by the ground force commander.

**NOTE:** *Consult the sketch on page 33 to see the original assault plan as well as the grid map on page 28.*

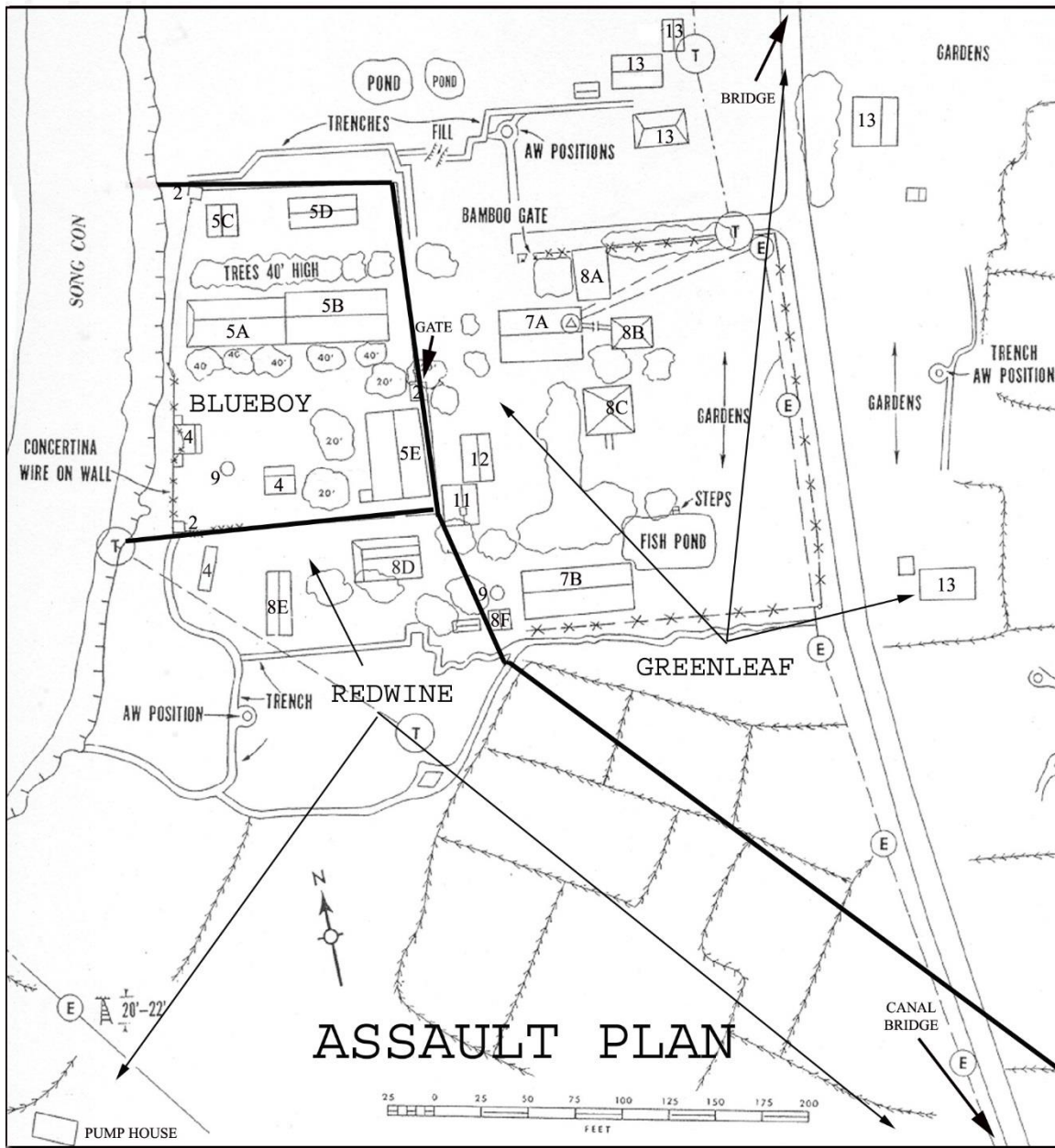
The other threat area of course would have been coming across this bridge and coming down the highway. Now the close-in grid did essentially the same thing except that it just provided a lot more precision measurements. These are 200 meter grid squares; you've got the prison compound here and the other compound in this area. You can see also how you could mistake these two compounds from a distance. The other military compound here.

We had a team (*Redwine Element #1 with MSgt Lupyak*) that would go down here, clear this pump house and then move up into a position here. It was a three man team FAG qualified. This team had an M-60 machine gun, a man with M-79 with 30 rounds and the team leader himself had an M-16. Each team member had a 45. Five man team (*Redwine Element #2 with MSgt Spencer*) would clear the buildings between the air raid trenches and the southern wall of the compound. The same thing was repeated down here. We had a team take up a defensive position at the canal bridge. Three man team (*Redwine Element #3 with Sergeant First Class Blackard*) that would come down, blow this step-down transformer here, which we found out when we blew it, controlled all the electrical power for the north half of the city and of course this area also. Greenleaf demolition team (*Captain Rouse's seven men*) would go to the bridge. It was our largest team because it had demolition men on it. Two men each carrying 30-pound charges to blow up the bridge. Well, this was our perimeter. There was a five man team (*Captain Nelson east of the road*) and a seven man team (*Captain Walther, Greenleaf leader to clear 7B and terrain up to the*

north). These were the men who would control the strikes and it would hold back regardless. And their job was, if they had only a small resistance, to handle it themselves. But anything, anything that was beyond the capacity of these three, five and seven man teams to handle, they could rely on the A-1s. It was the A-1 that strictly would provide the capacity to hold back the north in case any real threat would come along.

Q. Do you?

A. No. I wasn't. We did not want that. We didn't want any more attention brought to the area than we absolutely had to have and we had other diversions going which I will cover in a little bit.



**Blueboy:** *Subdue all guards inside of the walled compound and free the prisoners.*

**Redwine:** *Clear the area between the south wall and the canal. This includes establishing a defensive position at the canal bridge and setting up departure landing zones.*

**Redwine:** *Clear all the buildings east of the POW compound and blow up the Song Con River Bridge.*

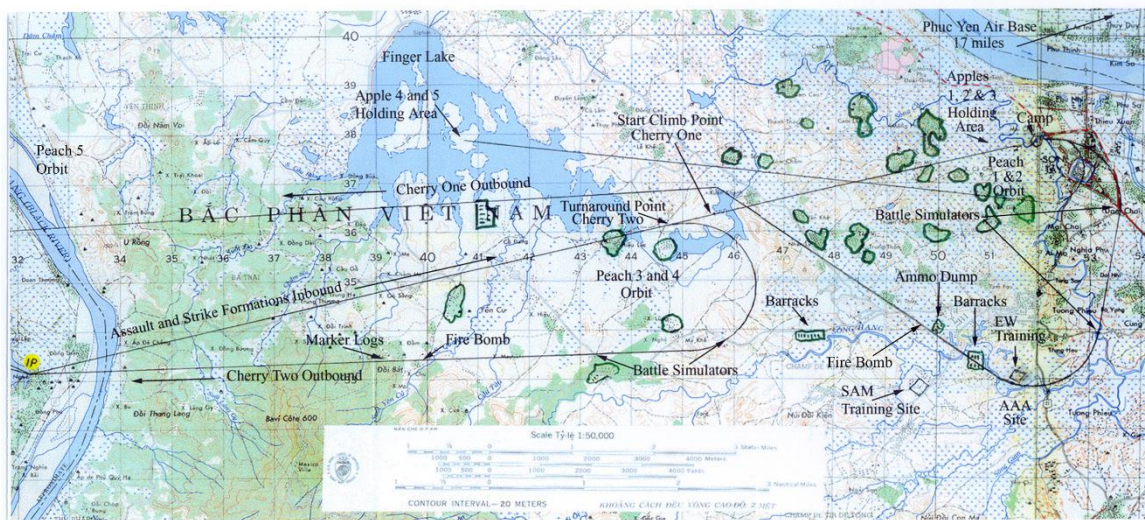
Q. Now here, to get myself straight here, your basic orbit for the A-1s was over Son Tay and into the southwest.

A. That's right, so as not to cross over that military installation, Son Tay Military School. We wanted to keep that road under surveillance because we were very, very much worried about what could come our way. We felt that if there was anything that could come quick enough from any other base to cause a grave threat to the operation, it would come from the Son Tay Military School.

Q. Was there a possibility, or any effort made, to take offensive action against that military school?

A. OK. What we did, and we may as well talk about these diversions because we rehearsed them. The lead C-130 was to pass over the compound and put out flares and then it was to make a turn, it was coming this way, like so,

## OBJECTIVE AREA TRACKS and ORBITS



*This map shows the flight paths flown by the two C-130s. Cherry 1 flew over the camp, dropped flares and turned back to the west, dropping a battle simulator on the road SE of the town, another one over a river bridge, then a napalm fire bomb marker near an ammo dump, before exiting toward Laos. Cherry 2, that provided A-1E escort, turned short of Son Tay and, in places indicated, dropped firefight simulators, napalm fire bomb markers, and railroad log flares. After crossing the inbound IP across the Black River, Cherry 2 orbited within the line of sight of Son Tay, recording radio transmissions and exited into the mountains, following the last aircraft across the*

*river. Areas circled in green represent known military installations. (Computer scan of U. S. Army Corps of Engineers map with airdrop tracks overprint by John Gargus)*

Q. From the west?

**NOTE:** *Consult the above map photograph. Major Grimes' narrative is not clear on which C-130 was dropping what and in which location.*

A. Right, from the west, make a right turn and drop. Now here's the center of Son Tay. Drop some fire fight simulators the same distance on the other side of the citadel as the prison was on this side of the citadel. There's a bridge crossing a river right in here, drop fire fight simulators there. Continue that turn and drop napalm on the ammunition dump at the Son Tay Military School, and then just beyond that drop more log flares.

Q. Southeast of Son Tay?

A. That's right. Napalm on the ammunition dump of the compound, fire fight simulators to the west of the compound and then napalm and log flares even further to the west. These log flares also provided a banking point for the orbit of the second group of A-1s. This put the horns of dilemma. They had to decide which one of these things was the main thing. Well, these fire fight simulators were dropped, and fused and put together. We felt there would be a great flare of activity up at the prison for a few minutes and then it should drop off. And it did. But the fire fight simulators continued to go on so that the enemy would have to guess should we go here, should we go there or should we go here. So, which battle was real? Are they all three real and there was no reason to think that all three were not real; or what's going on right out here in our ammunition dump or on the side of our own compound?

Q. Was that C-130 going to guts it through the anti-aircraft down at the school?

A. He was just going to assume that that anti-aircraft just wouldn't have time to come up. And it didn't have time to come up. He was just going to guts it through and get on out of the area. The other C-130 was to actually take over and provide as a rescue control ship should we needed it. Should we lose the airplane and have to go into any sort of a rescue effort.

Now this was going to happen. All of our helicopters, after they had disgorged their troops were going to move to another landing location where they would be on the ground, engines running, waiting until they were called up. Calling up was done by various means.

We had superb radio communications, superb communications. Each man had his own survival radio which he was wearing with radio clamps on helmet. It had a fox-mike (FM) send and receive capability. There were some troops that had to be on several nets. Each of the three assault groups, the inside the compound group and the groups that secured the area on the outside of the compound on the east, each one had its own internal fox-mike net. In addition, the team leader of each of

these groups was connected to the ground commander's net that was a different net monitored by all of the aircraft. Then the ground commander had his ground commander's net which enabled him to talk to all the team leaders. Next he had his air-ground net which was UHF that he would work. He would work all his normal air-ground communications. Then, in addition to that, there was the FAG net, which was a sole user net.

Everybody was on the primary FM listening to the ground commander's net, but once the first strike was called in by A-1s, all A-1s went to the FAG net and then they only listened. They had the UHF going in addition to their FAG net. Their FAG net was already a two net anyway. They had two receivers so the FAGs had one transmit capability for the FM for the ground commander and a transmit/receive capability for the ground commander net. They had a transmit-received capability on the FAG net. In addition, they all had two survival radios. Two 28-28s and two 43s and so the back-up FAG net was going to be 28-28 in case anyone needed to go to that, which would also function as a back-up emergency ground commander's net and, good Lord, you've never seen communications like this.

Q. What was General Manor doing? Was he in the C-130?

A. Well Secretary Laird wanted an open line with General Manor during this operation so he had to go to Monkey Mountain to keep this open line.

Q. I see.

A. So we had radio relay, UHF relay. We could hear the airborne UHF conversation and then we had Jack Squires in the A-1 who was providing the relay from any of the series of code-words, mandatory code-words that came up.

Q. Was General Manor at Da Nang?

A. That's where he was.

Q. That's where he was?

A. That's right.

Q. Someone told me he had been in one of the choppers.

A. He was at Monkey Mountain near Da Nang.

Q. Were you in one of the helicopters also or were you with Manor?

A. I was with Manor.

Q. Enlarge on yourself.

A. I was with General Manor for two reasons. When Secretary Laird decided he wanted a minute by minute blow, I had the most intimate knowledge of the total operation of anybody involved because I lived in both camps.

Q. Were you on a hot line to the White House or the National Military Command Center?

A. Yes, the hot line to the NMCC. So, there just wasn't any choice although someone else could have handled weather operations at that stage because I had a couple of extremely well-qualified NCOs. The ones we had could have handled that. I asked to go and had gotten the OK to be on the ground and handle all the air liaison functions on the ground. But really these troops were so blooming well trained that they did everything that they could have done with the ground and air operations without my presence.

Q. Did you not take prisoners as a matter of policy or what?

A. We never did get to that did we? It was a matter of policy. In the original feasibility study and planning stages we talked about this very much. Should we take prisoners because it could be an enormous, enormous intelligence factor? What would it have cost us to get this intelligence factor? For one thing we wanted this mission to be clearly understood as having one purpose only. One purpose only. We went there to get our men. We didn't have any other purpose. We went there to get them and we wanted to try to bring them back. Second, to have taken a prisoner would have required at least two and probably three men tasked to do nothing else. Well, we could have done this assuming that all of our helicopters would make it in. But, if we lost one, we would be pressed for people. We did have alternate plans that we would carry out if we had only two of our three primary troop carrying helicopters to carry this out by going into our series of alternate plans. This meant we had to double up. If the Blueboy team that was going inside the walls was shot down or dropped out, then Redwine team would take over its mission. So we had to double up on every bit of equipment that we had. Every man had to be able to perform the mission of one another man on another team. We didn't feel it was worth the effort. In consideration we felt we didn't want anyone to be able to, slam the operation and say, well, you guys didn't really go up there, you went up there to try and collect intelligence. We knew it would have cost us two or three men just to have gotten one prisoner. They could have done nothing else because they could only have concentrated on bringing back that one man. Expecting some casualties, with the possibility of several significant casualties, we didn't feel we could afford that. Plus if you're going to take prisoners there is a restrained effect upon those engaged in combat if they know they have been tasked to take prisoners and we didn't want anything slowing us down that might interfere with the possibility of bringing our men back. Bull Simons was strongly against taking any prisoners. Larry Ropka and I had wanted to. We wanted to take prisoners.

Q. Has anyone thought it up as a matter of policy that even though you had a prisoner of opportunity you could not take him? You could not bring anyone out period as a matter of policy?



A. The troops were told we didn't want to bring any prisoners back. So there was no attempt whatever. There could have been, in several instances, there could have been prisoners brought back.

Q. Did they have any occasions to where they "regret or could have --? Let me put it another way. Could you have used an interpreter on the ground? Was there any occasion where this decision not to take a Vietnamese at the last minute— If you're not taking prisoners there apparently was no need.

A. No one felt that there was any need for one. There was no opportunity to interrogate the guy where our POWs were being held. Assault was a very fast moving action. To give you an idea of the impact on the enemy, I will comment on General Talbott's visit

General Talbott, the Air Force Director of Operations, came to see how we were doing. We had our last rehearsal in November. I believe this was on the 6th of November. We felt the raiders were very good and very smooth by then. Actually we were even better and smoother and more devastating than we felt because, having lived with this every day, we weren't quite as impressed with our paralysis of surprise as the North Vietnamese were.

General Talbott came down at the direction, or request of Admiral Moorer. He told him to take a look and see if we were ready. He was to report the following day. We briefed him. I briefed him for four hours that afternoon. I went into minute details of our plan, on what he was going to see. He felt that he really understood the plan and he certainly did. From the types of questions he asked, there really wasn't anything he didn't understand. I ended up doing the briefing because I was the Air Force liaison with the Army who knew the whole project.

My initial introduction to the Project Ivory Coast was to work up the weather. Any weather requirements, problems and support that was necessary. You know, like we used to do in the old Commandos, you'd start off in one thing and you'd end up doing something very significantly different. So, I had the most intimate knowledge of anybody in the Task Force of the combination ground and air plan. Bud Sydnor was better acquainted with the ground plan than I, but there was no one else that had the acquaintance with the ground plan that I had. I went through every one of these 172 rehearsals and I knew every man's voice on the radio and where every man was to be every second.

Q. You started talking about Talbott and the impact.

A. Oh, yes, General Talbott. So he came down. We felt that this would be the last dress rehearsal we would need. After four hours of very detailed briefing we took him out and I put him up in the east guard tower. The guard tower was in the trees and I said, "OK, Sir, just take what you've heard, but try to momentarily wipe it out of your mind. Now you are a North Vietnamese guard. You are standing in this tower. So, I want you to watch and see what's up. If you look over in this

direction, this is our level of approach. I want you to watch for our force and then tell me when you first identify it, when you first hear it, when you first think you see and hear what you see and hear.”

So, about 45 seconds out he said, "I hear it." You could just barely hear it. It was a completely calm night. He said, "I hear a helicopter." It wasn't like having just one helicopter out there because of the power settings of the droning C-130. It wasn't very discernible, but you could just hear the pat-pat-pat. But then, oh, about 5 seconds later, the C-130, now that he's climbing and accelerating to his altitude, he actually drowns out the still and very low level helicopter sound. Something that if you are a guard you'll strain your ear to hear. Because you know a C-130 is a quiet airplane anyway and then, you're up 40 seconds out from your flare and you're not really sure you can hear what you hear even knowing that you're supposed to hear it. But then by the time you're 30 seconds out you are aware that there is an aircraft but you can no longer hear a helicopter because now the sound of the C-130 which is a roaring sound would not yet awake anyone, but it would attract the attention of somebody who is on guard duty and who'd look at it. And you follow this sound with your eyes. You still haven't seen the C-130 and then two things happen almost simultaneously. Just about the time the C-130 is ready to throw out the first flare, the sound of the helicopter is back again. You are aware that right out there, just somewhere over the walls, is a helicopter. And it is now about, oh, it's within a hundred yards, a 100 meters off the wall. This is the lead helicopter that's going to come across with the miniguns and take out the towers.

And so, your first reaction is... You see the North Vietnamese have some turbo-powered helicopters and you don't really know what's going on. But you hear that helicopter and if there's enough light you see its black hulk. But about the time you see that black hulk there are the flares, that go out and what you are going to do is immediately turn to look up at those flares. By this time your night vision is completely gone and you look back at the helicopter and he's right on the walls, he's on top of you and he's firing and then he just rolls right across you as he does just to your left and he's firing at that guard tower. Now, at the speed he's going, it takes that helicopter, from the time he starts to the time he stops, about 10 seconds. Then 5 to 8 seconds behind him is the HH-3. As soon as this helicopter passes overhead you turn and right over the wall, there, right there, eyeball to eyeball, is the HH-3 and the firing that is taking place from this HH-3.

Of course, we didn't fire live on this run, but General Talbott was watching this. The troops spill out and they go with such speed, such precision. Each man has his specific task. The tower is the first to clear. There are troops who position themselves so that they take the gate under fire. Anyone who tries to go, get into the gate or out of the gates gets taken out. Other troops are going into the buildings. They're shouting inside, "Are there any guards in this building?" You know and they'll expect some American to say "Yeah," and then as they enter the building, if it's clear of the North Vietnamese guards, they say, "We're a raiding force." They have this all down boy and they say it beautifully, "We're a raiding force and we've come here to release you. We will be opening each cell within the next several minutes. Lie down on the floor under your bunks and stay there until we open your cell." And then they go by with a piece of nylon rope that has little loops in it and they say, "We have a life line rope. We want each of you to slip your wrists through it as you get



out of the cell. Go only when we lead you out because we have a sequence of loading." And so they're talking to them all the time.

And as they go through this they're breaking into the cells with the torches and bolt cutters. They're talking to the guy in the cell telling him what to do. As they go through this, in every cell they say, "Get on to the life line, slip your wrists through into the life line, wait until we clear the building. Other buildings are being cleared by other men. You'll see a helicopter inside the compound. Do not get on board that one. That helicopter will stay here and be blown up. Our helicopters will come outside and will load when we call them in." And you know, they're saying this in each cell and the General is watching. He keeps hitting this fence and saying, "It's good, it's good, it's good." But then he rushes over to see what's going on on the outside. And on the outside the buildings are being cleared. On the outside the pathfinders are laying down a landing zone. We had two pathfinders and they could lay out, two landing zones with three lights set upon each one in a minute and 45 seconds.

Q. Are these Air Force types?

A. These are Army types. Two landing zones marked out in a minute and 45 seconds by these two men. At the same time there is the steel tower, power line tower that is being blown so that it will not form any obstruction to the incoming aircraft. The structure is being cleared, the pump house is being cleared. The troops are moving through these positions very fast. They're going through sort of a leap frog operation. Team moves, clears the building, another team holds until all is clear, then he gets the signal, then he passes through and clears this building, holds and so on and so it goes. And the bridge in 8 to 10 minutes is to be blown, if it's to be blown, and all these things are going on simultaneously. General Talbott just kept saying, "It's good, it's really good." And it was terribly swift.

Q. Did the troops have any way of identifying themselves from other random North Vietnamese who may start running around like mad?

A. Well, this is where 172 rehearsals really paid off. Because after a while, every man knew the physical shape, outline, and running style of every other man. The marshalling officer, very fine young captain, named McClam, whose job was to make sure that everybody got on board and got on board in the proper sequence on the proper aircraft. After the first few dozen times he never missed. He never missed because he knew what sequence everyone was to come to him in and he knew every single man and he could tell in the dark that this was Sergeant Lupyak, or this was Sergeant Blackard, or that this was Sergeant Bleacher. He knew that Glenn Rouse's team was to come on next. You just can't beat this; you train over and over and over again. There just wasn't any room for error. Everybody knew everybody else so intimately. Every FAG knew by voice every A-1 pilot. He knew exactly who he was working with. By the same token, every A-1 pilot knew by voice every FAG.

Q. Therefore, where he was—.

A. That's right, precisely where he was. They had rehearsed it more than a hundred times and they knew.

Q. You moved, as you said, in leap frog fashion so there was no chance of cross fire, friendly fire hurting a friendly team.

### **Thailand – Deployment and Theater Coordination**

Now there had been some coordination that had taken place earlier, but it had been mostly at the highest levels. General Manor and Colonel Simons briefed General Abrams and General Clay. Obviously, they had briefed Admiral McCain. Manor briefed General Catton of MAC because he was so intimately involved and a few other high level individuals. At this particular stage of the game, as far as the civilian circles were concerned, the President had been briefed, and briefed in great detail. Henry Kissinger was very intimately aware of the operation. Very shortly before the operation, Secretary Rogers was briefed, but no one below his level in his department had been briefed. The in-theater coordination that took place was pretty complex. Like how do you go into a tightly controlled theater with a force like this, put it together by utilizing facilities and aircraft from several different bases.

Our troops were housed at the agency compound at Takhli. Excellent facility. Good facilities and good security, good briefing aids. Our whole operation would be initially based out of Takhli. Our A-1s that we were to use would come from the NKP (*Nakhon Phanom*). We were to have VHF jammers installed on them by some tech reps that traveled with us and were to be test flown a couple of days prior to the launch by the troops who were with us at Takhli. They flew over to NKP in a C-130, climbed on board the aircraft, no questions asked, took them up and just checked them out to make sure everything was functioning properly, handling properly.

Ordnance loads were given to Colonel Walsh. He didn't know what the purpose of this mission was, but he did give us his support. But, we had it, of course, at the highest levels -- Generals Clay and Hardin and the 7th Air Force Director of Operations. There were three in the 7th Air Force that were read into the operation. And what it boiled down to was that they said, "Well look, you guys have carte blanche. You have the highest priority of anything in the theater at the time and you'll just have to come to us in case anything needs to be done. You're not going to have to sit and argue it out."

Also Larry Ropka had been contacting commanders. He had a letter signed by General Ryan that simply, very simply stated, "I personally authorize Lieutenant Colonel Ropka to represent me on a special mission in Southeast Asia and you will, as the reader of this letter, give him any support, unrestricted, that he requests. You will ask no questions."

This was a pretty good type of letter to have. I wouldn't destroy such a letter. I imagine Larry has got it. So, the feeling was, when we would go around to different bases, we were doing something

important and we did get good support. There were only a couple of instances where, you know, guys just flat wanted to be obstructionists. They would say: "Well, look, I don't know you. You just come waltzing in here and I'm not going to do this." Well in instances like that we would say, "Well Colonel I must send a message to the Chief of Staff," which would usually back the guy off. But there were a couple of cases where even then he wouldn't back off. He'd say, "You just go ahead and if he directs..."

General Talbott was on the other end handling such things and, of course, he would quickly, within minutes, turn around and fire a message back with the Chief of Staff's signature on it saying: "Give this guy whatever he wants."

Coordination in the theater included arranging for tankers to handle the MIGCAP we were going to put up and getting the WILD WEASEL crews set up.

Now, three days from the launch we read in the F-4s that we were to have airborne, two flights of F-4s. We read in five WILD WEASELS. We had to arrange for the C-141 medevac aircraft to land at Udorn, which they ordinarily do, and stand by for further instructions. We would not launch them from the Philippines until after the force had already gotten into the compound so that nothing would appear unusual.

Our A-1s were to launch from Nakhon Phanom. Our C-130s were to launch from Takhli. One of them was to pick up the A-1s from overhead Nakhon Phanom and the other was to pick up a formation of the helicopters launched from Udorn. Our troops would fly up to Udorn in a C-130 (*TAC airlift*), taxi right up to the helicopter ramp in darkness and make the personnel transfer.

We also arranged that the C-141 should pick up our troops in the states at night time where they would board them on the corner of the ramp. They would board at night time and they would schedule themselves so that they would land at night time at Takhli, again under the cover of darkness.

We didn't have a lot of tolerance. One of the birds broke down in Japan, and, because General Catton, was fully aware of what we were doing, it took one very, very quick call to the command post and General Catton. In less than 30 minutes we completely emptied a C-141, which was on a regular night route, going or coming from someplace else, and transferred all our gear. We were airborne in less than 30 minutes from the time ours broke down. And so we drove on in. The troops were put into the agency compound at Takhli. Have you seen that agency compound?

Q. I saw it in '61.

A. It hadn't changed since then. We just taxied right up to the offload ramp, offloaded and went right into their quarters. No one was even aware there was anyone on the base. As far as the Air Force people were concerned, they had a considerable awareness because Takhli was closing down. We had the only blooming airplanes on the base except for the Thai airplanes. So, we built

us up a bit of a story. We were a management survey team that came to decide things like, is it really worth shipping these external tanks back to the States or should we just dispose of them here. We were also making cost studies on closing down the base. This seemed to suffice pretty well.

We had problems because the secure communications had been taken out and that was a beast of a problem. Well, we overcame that and then General Manor was just really, really nervous about people getting on the telephone. He didn't want us to try and talk around our mission. He didn't even want us talking on the telephone. He didn't want his name mentioned or anybody else's name on the telephone. So telephone calls would be something like this: "This is Leroy." Or "This is Bill. I need some help. I need an airplane."

We made a mistake, and this was not the only mistake we made. We should have had a couple of C-130s that we brought over ourselves with our own people that did nothing but haul us around the area. We needed to get our A-1 pilots to NKP to flight test those airplanes. We needed to get the certain highly classified weather information back and forth from Saigon. There were a hundred little things that needed to be done. We'll never go on an operation like this without having at least one of our own airlift C-130s.

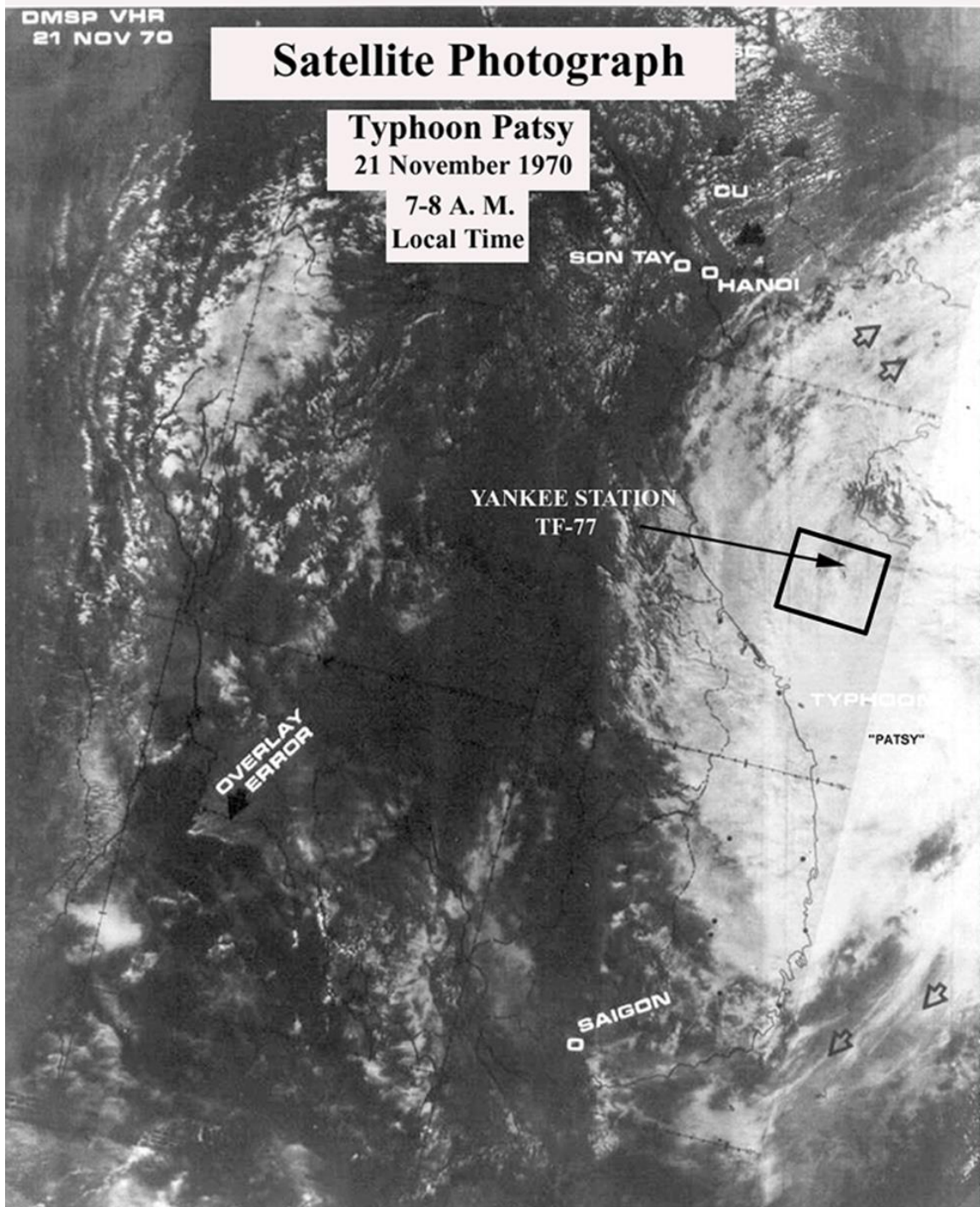
Q. Truly administrative type—

A. Yeah, administrative type. We had two black C-130s. We ended up getting two T-39s out of Saigon and these two T-39s were completely ours the last couple of days. But we had trouble, like our Navy Captain Campbell. We needed to get him out to the carrier, to a flag ship. We needed to get him to the Philippines on a couple of occasions. We actually had people ending up bumming rides in Southeast Asia trying to get from one place to the next. Very, very frustrating situation until we got our own aircraft, and then, of course, there was no problem at all.

But there are so many things that can come up. We had a period of very bad weather when we got into the theater which was mid-November. I came in a week earlier than that. There was a typhoon that was in the process of washing out. The weather was cruddy.

Typhoon Patsy built up east of the Philippines and started bearing straight, smack dab, west. It went across the Philippines with 130 to 145 knot winds and was, aiming right at the DMZ. Just traveling a dead straight westerly course. Patsy was prognosticated to hit the coast of Vietnam with hurricane force winds on the night of the 21<sup>st</sup>, which was the night we had planned for the launch. The weather was really cruddy in North Vietnam from many preceding days because a strong surge of cold air had moved through out of China and had brought a lot of low clouds and drizzle. There was a new front that was moving across Central China, It was coming down toward North Vietnam while we had Patsy coming from the east directly toward the DMZ. It appeared that we'd be in a miserable shape trying to go on the night of the 21<sup>st</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup>. So, on the night of the 19<sup>th</sup>, General Manor and I, and two fine enlisted forecasters that were working with us from Saigon, got our heads together. Manor said, we can't go on the night of the 21<sup>st</sup> and if we don't go tomorrow

night, which was a night ahead of schedule, it'll probably be at least a week before the crud and stuff from this typhoon washes out. The whole theater was already poised just to support us. We were hoping for one thing. With a low coming down from the north and a low coming in from the east we could get an induced ridge. Any time you get two lows you've got to have at least some sort of separating ridge and



*Typhoon Patsy as photographed by a weather satellite from 450 miles. This revealing photo shows the ridge between the two low pressure systems with clear weather along the route flown during the raid and Patsy moving over the Navy in the Gulf of Tonkin. Clearly, launching of the raid on the night of the 21<sup>st</sup> would have been impossible. (USAF photograph, courtesy of Hank Brandli, with overprint by John Gargus)*

such ridge would give us a short clearing for a few hours, permitting us to go on in. We felt that if this induced ridge indeed started building up it would show up on the weather satellite pictures and it would show up in a raising of the cloud base and a lowering of the tops. So, we set up a weather reconnaissance flight with a little tiny detachment that had a weather officer pilot and a few other officers assigned to it. These guys were both F-4 and C-130 qualified and would fly these kind of weather missions.

This was the night of the 19th. General Manor talked with General Blackburn in Washington and requested a 24-hour advance. It was just a little after midnight when we got a call that the President had given the OK to launch this mission a day early. Well by then it was already in the wee early morning hours of the 20th. We had our weather recce set up and if this probe and satellite photos with other data we read from the old weather net in Laos indicated this induced ridge was building, we were going to go. And that's exactly what showed up. Our cloud bases started raising and our tops started lowering. So, we'd have about a 2,000 foot thick cloud deck over Laos and over the north. We could see how on every subsequent satellite passage there was a tongue of clearing air that was just lapping down along the China coast and right into the Red River Valley. We were going to go on it.

Our weather recce pilot landed at Takhli at just about 1600. We had a 1700 briefing of the troops. Of course, they didn't know until now. We had told a few of the selected leaders that it looked like tonight was going to be the night, so we assembled the troops. We made a forecast for a low undercast at just about our flight level. We wanted to fly at 7,000 feet and we were forecasting it at 5,000 to 7,000 feet. It was almost exactly there, which was great because our route was to carry us right by the Chinese COMINT site just off to the east of it, a little bit. We figured that these clouds would persist right up to the last ridge before we broke into the Red River Valley. That's exactly what they did. Two miles after we crossed that last ridge the weather opened up and it was just as clear as a blooming bell. Just crystal -- utter clear.

### **North Vietnam – Son Tay Raid**

So at 1700 we had the final briefing. Of course, we had given briefings for the previous several days as everybody arrived at Takhli. We gave briefings and briefings and briefings over and over and over to make sure everybody was completely clued in. Briefings were mostly for the benefit of the F-4s and the WILD WEASELS who had just come on board. We also had one refueling man who was with us throughout the project because we were going to use in-theater refueling resources. Their task wasn't so heavy. They just had to be in selected corridors at the right time to

give us the gas. And so they were. After the 1700 briefing, the troops had supper and then started assembling their combat gear. The A-1 people who had flown over at about 1330 to NKP.

Q. Are these the same A-1 people that were trained in the States?

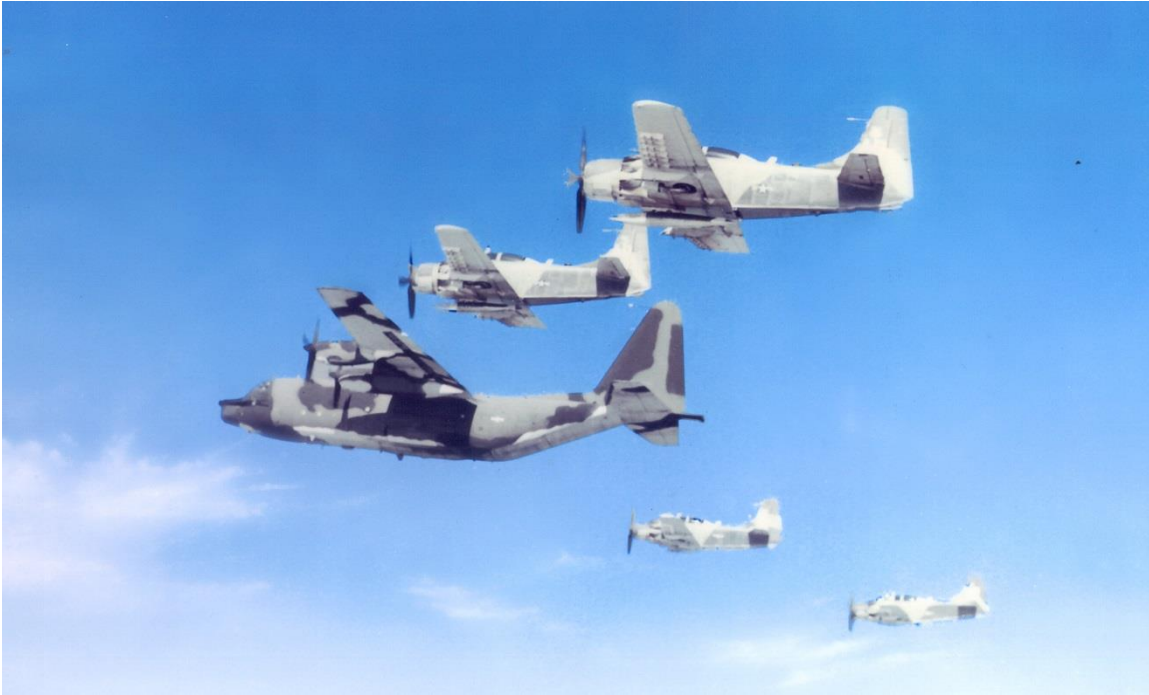
A. That's right. The same A-1 people that were trained in the States. Remember, of those ten A-1 people five of them were currently stationed at Nakhon Phanom. Of course, they were ordered under no circumstances to be seen. The guys that went over and flew the daytime tests in the mission modified A-1s were Hurlburt pilots. All ten went up there in time for planned take-off times. When I say we had planned take-off times, we had some latitudes. We could make adjustments. If we made shifts, we could make ten minute shifts in the timing.

At Udorn we had our helicopters. At this time we had only two HH-3s left in the entire theater. We were so concerned about the criticality of the HH-3s that we carried, we brought one of our Florida configured Hueys all the way over. We had that Huey tuned up perfectly. We brought both of the Army helicopter people all the way to Thailand. In Florida, Huey would fly a mission one night and the next night the HH-3, then the Huey and then the HH-3. So these guys were very well qualified. The Huey was sitting on the ground with engine running when the Air Force helicopter force took off. In case there was an abort of the HH-3 we'd go right to the Huey, load it up and go on. I might add that by stripping everything off that Huey we were able to get 4 hours and 20 minutes of flight out of it with 14 fully loaded troops on board and a 30 minute fuel reserve. We pulled off one of his auxiliary tanks to do that. Our C-130 that was to go with the helicopters was on the ground at Udorn.

**NOTE:** *Grimes made an error at this point in his recollections. Both Combat Talon C-130 (referred to throughout his narrative as black C-130s) were at Takhli. Cherry One, escorting the helicopters, was programmed to take off from Takhli at 2255, fly overhead Udorn and take over the helicopter formation over Laos after the helicopters topped off their fuel tanks from the two HC-130s that took off with them from Udorn. Cherry One took off from Takhli 23 minutes late at 2318 after getting its number 3 engine going. Flying at high speed, Cherry One made up the lost time and took over the helicopter formation on time. This was possible because its original flight time from Takhli to Udorn was planned at slow speed with sufficient loiter time to check out all navigation equipment. The other Combat Talon (Cherry Two) took off from Takhli on time at 2225, flew over Nakhon Phanom and formed up with its escorting A-1s enroute over Laos.*

Our black C-130 that was to go with the A-1s would take off from Takhli. The A-1s were to take off in advance. They would fly a route that wouldn't indicate anything and then come up and slide into a formation with their C-130.





*Daytime photograph of the Strike Formation during training in Florida; A-1E Peaches with Combat Talon Cherry Two in the lead. (USAF photograph)*

The helicopters at Udorn had a bit of a problem. Their takeoff was scheduled to be about the 1130 local time. Just before the C-130 was due to start up he found out he couldn't get the #3 engine turned on. Well this was our most critical C-130 and he couldn't get this engine turned on. He had a 20 minute time slippage because as long as he took off within this 20 minute block we could still make all of our times good.

General Manor, Jim Morris, Army Troop, and I were at Monkey Mountain trying to manage the operation. Larry Ropka and Ben Kraljev were in the backup command post at Udorn. They would have carried on the operation in case something were to happen to us -- if we had crumpled on the way. So, we got this call from Larry that told us they couldn't get the # 3 to turn. General Manor, said, "God, you know, do I send them even before they take off? Do I send men out on an airplane that can't get one engine started on a mission like this, knowing where they are going?" He and I talked this over for about two minutes and I said, "Well, if you don't send them this night, if you scrub the mission this night, then there's no chance for it period. If we don't go tonight, we're not going to go tomorrow night, we're not going to go in a week, maybe more. Can we keep this force secure, can we maintain them in secrecy? Can we keep the war in Southeast Asia peaked, unknowingly, but nevertheless peaked for a week or two weeks just to support us?"



*Daytime partial Assault Formation during training in Florida. Combat Talon Cherry One leads drafting HH-3 Banana and two HH-53 Apples. (USAF photograph)*

And so General Manor told Larry, "Tell them to fly the mission as planned." This meant that they would have to go through that rotate maneuver. They would have to move over the C-130 (*Cherry One*) that was here, en route to Nakhon Phanom, to slip over and pick up the helicopters. And, of course, this C-130 (*Cherry Two*) was already gone, airborne.

And in the meantime that crew chief, the flight engineer, had stripped the cowling back and frantically beat and hammered away on that engine. Finally they were able to get it started and they had them all four turning when they took off.

The rest of the aircraft had taken off, not in formation, they took off just in a series of aircrafts so that we did not create any departure pattern. Helicopters took off and the tanker C-130 slipped up underneath them. In the tower, our man Larry Ropka had gone to the base commander, whipped out his letter and said, "Sir, I'll need you in the tower." And they walked up in the tower where the control room was and then he said, "We have certain aircraft, their engines are turning right now. They must take off on a certain specific schedule. They will take off whether they get the green light or not. They will not light up themselves. They will sit out on the end of the runway and they'll look for a green light from the tower. If they don't get a green light within 30 seconds after they come to a stop at the end of the runway their orders are to take off." So, this seemed to be a good way to run the system.

Anyone who had anything to do with the troops had to be controlled. Like, we had a Thai guard that was guarding the helicopters. He watched the transfer of troops from the C-130 to the helicopter. We just simply had him stay with us, holding him because we couldn't let him go.

We had no incidents en route but at the time the aircraft got about halfway between Bien Tieng and Long Tieng they hit the undercast. This was a 2,000 foot undercast whose tops were right at flight altitude. So we just skimmed right across the tops of the clouds. Everything went very smoothly throughout this entire operation. The weather information we kept getting back told us that things were in good shape. We had figured that the air would be smooth; it was just as smooth as glass.

Q. Going up at 7,000 you say?

A. At 7,000 feet.

Q. Up to a point.

A. Up to a point. The refueling area was here. The helicopters refueled, flying in formation and completely blacked out. They refueled here. Now, until they got to this point, the helicopters were really blind, flying formation with the HC-130s. After this point, they had to be with C-130 anyway. It was necessary that they got into formation with the black C-130. So, after they passed the refueling points, the black C-130 took over and the HC-130s continued to orbit in this area waiting for the return of the helicopters. So, the black C-130 came in, dropped back down on the deck again and then just continued to proceed on. We figured that we'd break out of the clouds right here and within less than two miles after we crossed this point we had broken out of the clouds.

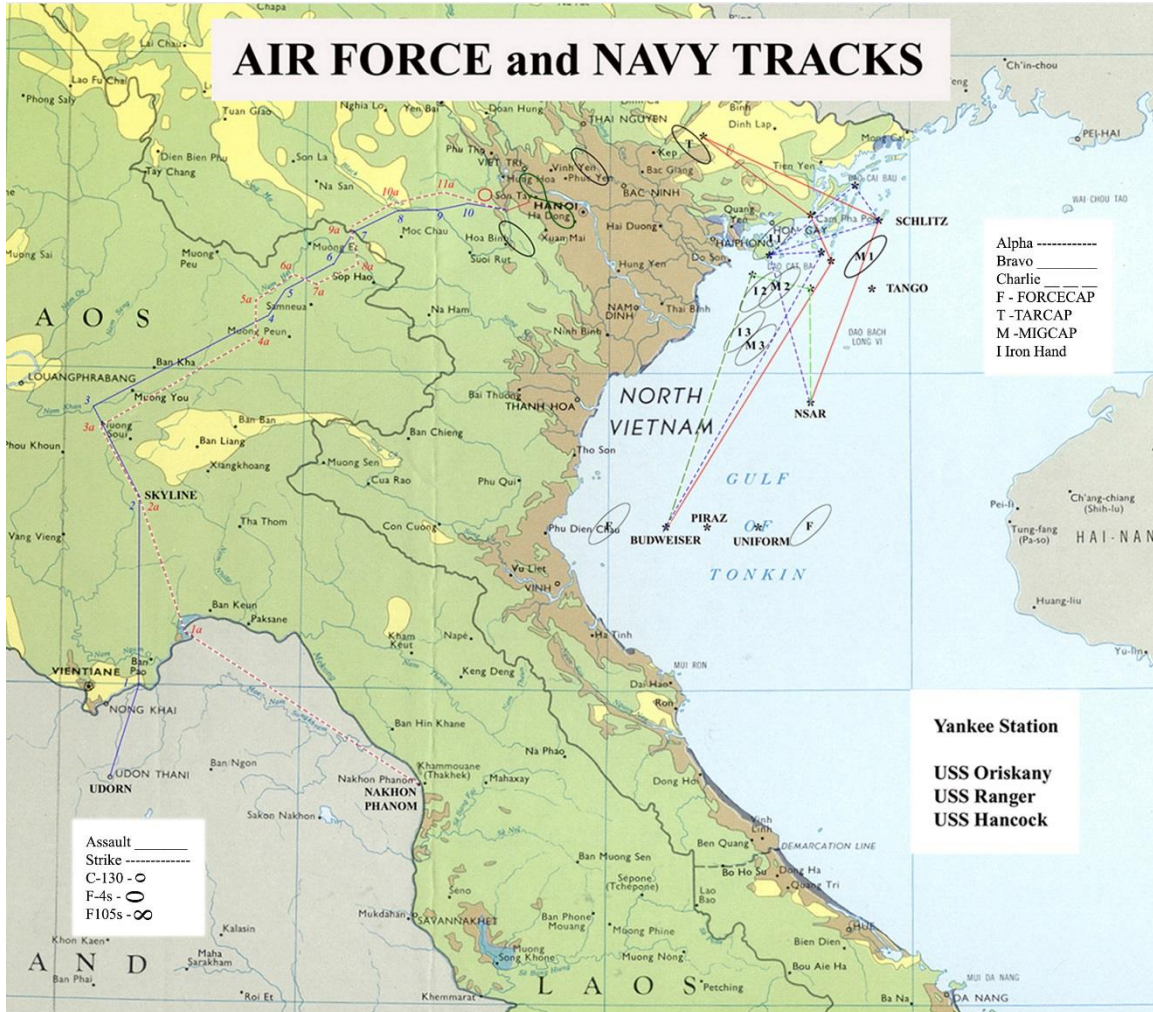
As soon as we broke out of the clouds we could see the lights of Hanoi which was still quite some considerable distance away. We were about 40 miles away from Hanoi. Visibilities were absolutely crystal clear. They were so clear that you had a false sense of closeness. The lights were all, just almost crammed up together. They were so doggone clear. As soon as we crested this ridge, everybody just went into a dive and dove down into the valley and essentially contoured until they hit their IP (initial point). The IP was a lake at the western bank of the Black River. *(See photo on page 6 and map on page 34)*

Let me, now talk about the Navy diversion. We had a series of diversionary operations that were to begin 30 minutes prior to our arrival in the compound. Launches from two different carriers were to come up and would all depart from this point. Carriers were in this vicinity here. We had 60 to 80 aircraft scheduled to launch. 59 got airborne. A-6s and A-7s.

We did have one Chinese MIG that came up from Hainan, obviously he had seen this force, but somebody must have said, "Hey it looks like a trick," and he flew out a little way, but decided to turn back and cut out. He just didn't have the courage.



**NOTE:** I could not find a confirmation for the intrusion of this Chinese MIG. Such event was not detected/reported by either the Navy radars in the Gulf of Tonkin, nor by the Air Force ones at Monkey Mountain in South Vietnam.



*This map shows the flight paths of principal raid participants. Takhli RTAFB is just off the south west side of the map. DaNang's Monkey Mountain is shown in the south east corner. (Computer scan of a Southeast Asia map with overprint by John Gargus)*

This diversion was twofold. One, to get their attention looking eastward; second, to saturate the Chinese/North Vietnamese Cross-border System. Now, at the same time the Navy diversion was beginning, we had just crossed the border into North Vietnam. So, this 30 minute timing was excellent. The diversion itself was a long penetration up into this area here followed up by a series of run-ins that looked like they were going directly, into Hanoi and Haiphong. They had operations that were meant to convince North Vietnamese that we were mining the harbor. (See track Charlie) They actually dropped chaff, so the North Vietnamese could see that we were dropping. We

dropped chaff from these aircraft, moved along in this area. They firmly believed that we had mined the whole area. There were some Navy aircraft firing off Shrike missiles and 18 SAMs were fired at them.

When the helicopters broke out here, this diversion was still going on and they could see the flares hanging in the sky. The Navy actually didn't fire off any live ordnance, but they really stirred up the enemy defenses.

Q. So, IP was the lake. *(See photograph on page 6 and map on page 34)*

A. You can see this lake right here about 12 minutes out from the target.

Q. It's just west of the " Red River again?

A. Well, now here's the Red River. Now this is not the Red River—

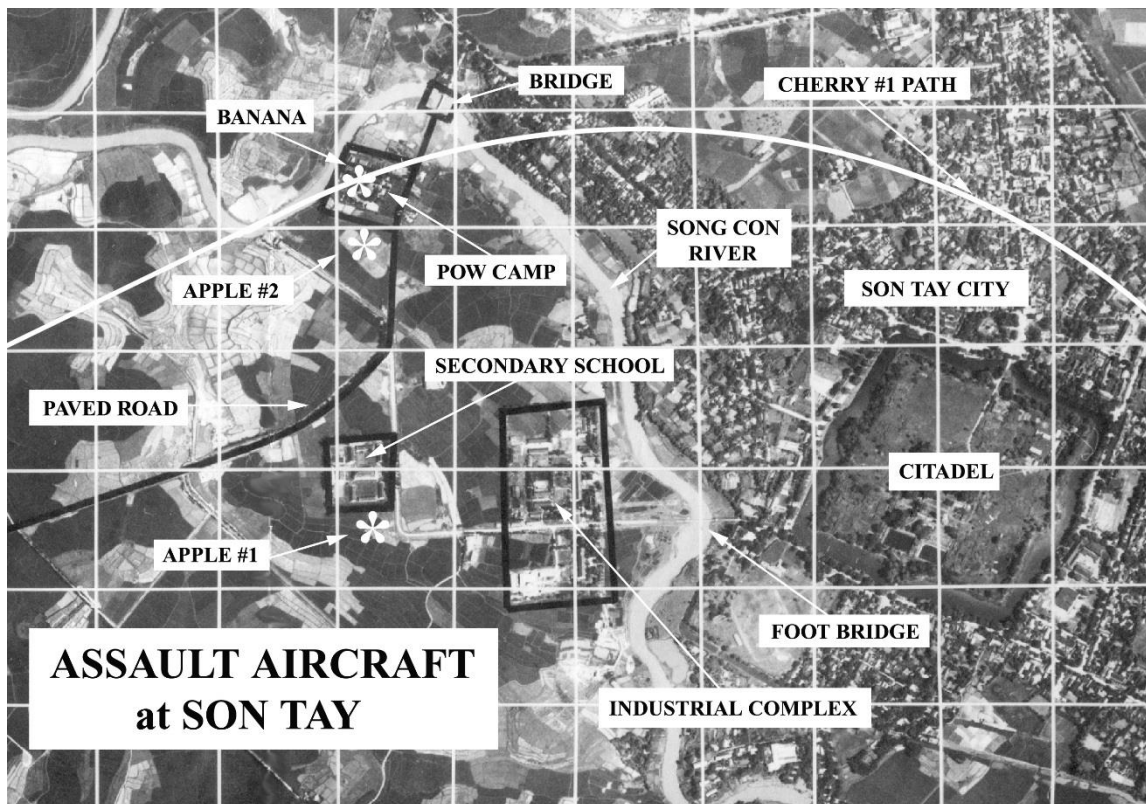
Q. What is this river's name? The river running north.

A. This is the Black River. It joins up with the Red River just off this picture up in the north. At this point our helicopters were two minutes ahead of the A-1s. Helicopters arrived at the IP only 30 seconds behind the originally planned arrival. The IP showed up very well. They passed on to these points here and just continued driving straight on in to the target. Now, four minutes out at about this position here, it was where the split off occurred. *(See the area map on page 34)*

The formation had been flying with the HH-3 tucked in very tight under the left wing and then two HH-53s behind on the same side and three HH-53s on the other. When the C-130 split and started climbing, the HH-3 descended to an altitude of 200 feet. They had contoured and came down from the northwest along the mountains traveling 500 feet from each other. At IP *(helicopter formation IP was 3.5 miles out of Son Tay)* they split off and got down to 200 feet. The third helicopter, the HH-53, which was the firing HH-53, *(Apple Three)* went ahead and accelerated, passing the HH-3. The HH-3 was going to tuck up behind it and they got down very low. This guy *(Apple Three)* was 200, 150 to 200 feet down and he was getting about a half mile lead on the HH-3 that's going into the compound. At the same time our C-130 is continuing to climb. So, you had your number one HH-53 *(Apple One)* back and above the HH-3. Back a little bit, behind our first HH-53 *(Apple One)* is the second HH-53 *(Apple Two)*. Also, climbing with the C-130, though not as fast, were our two spare HH-53s *(Apples Four and Five)*, which were going to work as backups, following the C-130. They were going to work as back up flare birds in case something went wrong and the C-130 could not drop its flares. So, now you've got their PJs *(pararescuemen)* in the back holding the flares ready to throw them out. When the C-130 arrived, and it was smack dab over the compound, it threw the flares out.

Of course, the initial mistake was made in that this compound was approached. There was a slight deviation in their compass direction and they approached this particular one. But this was corrected

very fast. The HH-3 went over, fired on this compound, but the man, the copilot in the HH-3 said: “We’re at the wrong place - 9 o’clock - 400 meters is our target.”



*This photograph shows Cherry One’s airdrop path and the landing locations of the helicopters. (USAF photograph overprinted by the Joint Contingency Task Group and John Gargus)*

The first helicopter to land (*Apple One*) had already started settling down. The second helicopter (*Apple Two*) saw the mistake and called for the alternate Plan Green, just as rehearsed. He called: “Plan Green, Plan Green, Plan Green,” which meant the Greenleaf team had dropped out for one reason or another. So, about 20 seconds before the team landed they went ahead and put into effect the alternate plan with only two helicopters at the POW camp.

Now, two minutes back, our A-1s are here. The first A-1 (*Peach Five*) that's going to be by itself has split off here and he's orbiting. *(See the map on page 34)*

Q. Down here is that lake IP when you say here.

A. That’s right. And he's orbiting back of the IP.

Q. Just west of the Black River?

A. That's right. The second set, pair of A-1s (*Peaches Three and Four*) were orbiting in this area here to marked by the napalm bombs. The two other A-1s, (*Peaches One and Two*) Rhein and Gochnauer were driving right in to be over the target, took up their orbit over the target two minutes after the flares were thrown out. This is exactly what they did. They were there right smack dab on the money.

Our C-130 has turned and his flares weren't 200 yards this way or 200 yards that way. They were dead smack dab over the target. Interestingly, as the flares burned, they landed inside the Citadel where the enemy had his civil defense corps and started a couple of pretty good fires. This was a fortuitous event that kept them hopping. The C-130 turned, put a simulator there.

Q. Southwest of the Song Cong?

A. Southeast, roughly the same distance southeast of the town as the camp was northwest of the town.

**NOTE:** *Map on page 34 shows the tracks of C-130s Cherry One and Cherry Two with types and locations of their air drops. Narrative of Grimes is not very clear about which aircraft dropped each specific diversionary device.*

Still continuing his turn, he put a simulator here, dumped napalm fire bomb near the ammunition dump there, and simulator here. Now remember, there are other military bases. This is Hoa Loc Airfield here. Pretty close. And another simulator here (*dropped by the other C-130, Cherry Two*), more napalm fire bomb markers and some railroad log flares on the side of the Mount Ba Vi in this location here. So that the guys here were trying to figure out what in the heck is going on in this place. And they never really seemed to come to any conclusion. We had anti-aircraft and SAMs here and here in this location. There was no indication at all that anybody in North Vietnam knew that this force was even in the country until after we were on the ground. Completely on the ground before there was any indication. We received no fire; there was no anti-aircraft fire, there were no SAMs that came up. The Western Air Defense Sector never did come up throughout this whole operation. The SAM firing we got was from the East. Now after the C-130 dropped its simulators—

Q. How did the napalm work out there at the Son Tay Military School?

A. Fine. Fine. This was quite a little experiment itself. That C-130 made a pretty good bomber. To my knowledge it has never been done from a C-130 but it did a first rate job. The napalm was dropped with retarded chutes. We didn't want a very big splatter, we wanted it to pool up and continue burning in a nice puddle where you'd get a much longer burning time out of it.

The three primary helicopters (*Apples One through Three*) left the Son Tay camp and sat on the ground right there about a thousand meters away with their rotors idling. This particular point was chosen because it was better than 400 meters from the nearest habitation. It was sort of swampy where they landed. The two reserve helicopters (*Apples Four and Five*) picked landed on this



island in the lake. The pilot of each of the helicopter was given a night vision device. It was essentially a starlight scope, much improved in binocular form. Each of the ground security team leaders had one of these devices also. There was some skepticism when we first started talking about using them for training, but soon all would say: "Man I don't want to be without these things." They could stand on this island here and they could see people coming up, walking to the edge of the lake and look. They could see this with these starlight binoculars. They also saw a convoy of troops or truck convoy that stopped, walked over to the edge of the road and looked. They apparently couldn't figure what was going on, and stood there for a few minutes, got back in their trucks and drove away without firing any shots. There were no shots to anybody's knowledge that were fired at any of these helicopters while they were sitting on the ground. There was only one helicopter that was hit in the entire operation and they don't have any idea where that shot was fired.

Out in the compound, flares went out perfectly. The lead, the gunship HH-53 (*Apple Three*), passed directly over these trees here. Literally scraping the top of the trees, took this guard tower and this guard tower under extremely accurate fire (*structures #2*). Then as soon as this guard tower was afire then the right door gunner took this barracks building under fire (*building 7B*). About 15 to 18 seconds later the HH-3 came in like so, having crabbed this way so he could put his tail, the tail rotor between these two buildings.

Q. Where's the guard house that the first HH-53 (*Apple Three*) took out?

A. This guard house and this max security building (*northwest tower #2 and building 5C*). These were the ones that we were most concerned about. Very close proximity, six feet away. There's the Song Con River here. The helicopter was to land with the rotor blade here and the tail here facing northeast

Q. Facing to the northeast?

A. That's right. So he came in facing the east and had to crab around. You have a guard tower here and they were in these trees. Now, we couldn't really take this one out. This one was of some considerable concern. By putting the helicopter down with the tail down between here, clipping the tail rotor, he couldn't move very far because he had these two cinder block buildings that he was going to slam up against (*#4 latrines*). Well, that is precisely what happened. These trees were just a little bit bigger than we had figured. We figured at best he could have about three feet of clearance to get the rotor blades through the trees plus he was equally as concerned to try to slide his tail rotor in without banging it. So, he went ahead and just drove the helicopter into the trees, clipped off about three feet of rotor blade, which caused a violent lurch, throwing the helicopter up against the building, but then that was it. The helicopter was down. It did cause one injury when this happened. We had large fire bottles inside the helicopter because the crew was to foam the gas tank area, foam any area of the helicopter that might be likely for explosion. Foam the hydraulic system up above so that hydraulic fluid wouldn't catch fire. One of those big bottles broke loose and crushed the foot of Sergeant Wright, the crew chief, the



### ***Actual Assault on Son Tay POW camp***

*HH-3, call sign Banana, landed inside of the POW compound with its 14-man Blueboy Group and was destroyed by an explosive charge after the raiders left the compound through the exit hole in the western wall.*

***Blueboy*** Command Element with Captain Meadows and Sergeants Moore and Dodge cleared the courtyard with the latrines (buildings # 4 and southwest tower #2)

*Blueboy* Element # 1 with Captain McKinney and Sergeants Kittleson, Robbins, and StClair cleared the Beer Hall (5A), northwest tower (#2), Outhouse (5C), and the Stag Bar (5D).

*Blueboy* Element #2 with Captain Jaeger and Sergeants Erickson, Mc Mullin, and Tapley cleared the Cat House (5E).

*Blueboy* Element #3 with First Lieutenant Petrie and Sergeants Kemmer and Wingrove cleared the Opium Den (5B). Petrie cleared and guarded the gate and its guard tower.

***Redwine*** Element # 1 headed by MSgt Spencer cleared the buildings south of the compound wall. Spencer, with Sergeants Murray and Quezada cleared guard quarters (8D) and moved west to the hole in the wall. Quezada remained at the building protecting his element. Sergeants Hill and Young cleared the animal stable (8E) and the outdoor latrine (4) then joined Spencer at the hole in the wall. Photographer Hill entered the compound through the hole to take photographs.

*Redwine* Element #2 headed by MSgt Lupyak with Sergeants Adderly and Martin cleared the main guard barracks (7B) and, moving north, fired at guards moving east of the gate and by the Administration Building (7A).

*Redwine* Element #3 headed by Sergeant First Class Blackard, with Sergeants McGuire and Doss established a defensive position with claymore mines at the canal bridge. They fired a low antitank weapon (LAW) at an approaching truck convoy heading north.

*Redwine* Pathfinders, Sergeants Masten and Strahan cleared the pump house, blew up the electrical power pole and laid out a departure landing zone for the helicopters.

Captain Turner commanded the *Redwine* Group. Under Plan Green he and his radio operator Sergeant Buckler assisted Lupyak's element by clearing the duck pen (8F) and joining him at the kitchen and mess hall (buildings # 11 and 12.)

The Ground Command Element, headed by Lieutenant Colonel Sydnor, established a welcome POW position at letters CP. With him was his radio operator Sergeant Poole, Lieutenant Colonel (Doctor) Cataldo, and Marshalling Officer Captain McClam.

***Greenleaf*** Group landed in the same spot as *Redwine* before them. Captain Walther and his Command Element consisting of Sergeants Jurich, Keel, Lawhon, Nelson, and Suarez, re-cleared building 7B and joined up with Lupyak and Turner at which point a roll back was ordered.

*Greenleaf* Demolition Element, led by Captain Rouse, with Sergeants Bleacher, Carlson, Jakovenko, Medenski, Roe, and Thomas did not advance past the air raid shelter trench. Col Simons, knowing that a roll-back was imminent, held the men back.

*Greenleaf Security Element, led by Captain Nelson, with Sergeants Joplin, Powell, Taapken, and Valentine cleared building 13 before being recalled.*

engineer on the HH-3. The pilot and co-pilot, Maj Zehnder, uh, Lieutenant Colonel Zehnder, was the co-pilot and Major Kalen was the pilot of this aircraft, got out in good shape. Planted on top of the gas tank was a steel box for which we had an explosive charge. We'd light its fuse and nobody could get into the box. They'd have to break this steel box open. So, once we lit the fuse, which of course we didn't light until we moved out of the compound. Then that helicopter was gonna blow.

The first thing done inside of the compound was the clearing of this tower, which Captain Meadows did himself. To help in clearing this building here (5E), he had two of his men down here to make sure there was no door in this building, to make sure no one could get out of this building to this little gate right there.

Q. The eastern portion of the south wall?

A. Yes. Men went here to insure that no one could get outside of this gate. He put a two man team here that would secure the rear of this building. After the team cleared this tower then they began clearing these two buildings in the rear (5C and 5D). At the same time also, Dick Meadows had a two man team that laid primer cord in an arch to blow a hole here. We didn't want to use this gate (*main gate on the east wall*). It would be too close to the fighting. We wanted to come down here in a quiet and protected area and pass the prisoners out through here (*exit hole in the southwest corner of the compound*). These are a series of air raid trenches and ditches. We'd bring them down and hold them right in this area which we felt was much more secure (*CP, where Sydnor established his ground command post*).

**NOTE:** *Original assault plan had Sydnor's command post west of building 8E. Because the assault shifted to Plan Green, Sydnor established his position with doctor and the marshalling officer near the helicopter departure zone.*

Q. Due south of the camp?

A. Right.

Q. Southwest of the camp?

A. Southwest corner of the camp outside. Now Jack Allison, who was the pilot on what should have been the second helicopter, (*Apple Two*) went immediately into the alternate plan. This meant instead of landing here, he landed here.

**NOTE:** *Original plan had Apple Two landing inside of the air raid trench area south of building 8D. Plan Green called for Apple Two to land in Apple One's place south of building 7B. Consequently, both incoming helicopters offloaded their troops in the same place.*

Q. And how did he get the Greenleaf troops back in again?

A. No. The troops were still down at the south compound. Action was now taking place in the main compound. According to Plan Green which meant that Greenleaf team in the lead HH-53 (*Apple One*) had dropped out for one reason or another. So he (*Apple Two*) took over and landed here (*in Apple One's place*) taking this building under fire again (*7B*). Before he landed he also fired on the pump house down here across the way to the south. So, now our Redwine team had the responsibility, at least for the time being, for the entire outside area of the compound.

Q. And they landed to the south-- Just to the southeast of the compound?

A. Yes. I'll show you now what the original plan was. (*See page 33*) The original plan had the HH-3 here. Our lead HH-53 (*Apple One*) was to land here with this Greenleaf team. Greenleaf was responsible for the entire area to the east of the compound, clearing these buildings (*7A and B; 8A, B and C; 11 and 12; and all #13 buildings*), securing positions here and controlling, moving up and holding the bridge. Redwine team which was in the second HH-53 (*Apple Two*) was responsible for clearing these buildings immediately south of the wall (*4 and 8D, E, and F*), clearing the pump house, blowing this steel tower here, and forming up a team along this canal. It was the Redwine Security Element 3 at the junction of this road and this canal. The FAG perimeter security team with its two pathfinders would set up the landing zones. It would take them some minute and 45 seconds to set up both landing zones. Then they would move over to this position and provide security perimeter off to the west and to the south.

Now, we didn't know for sure, even when we took off, whether or not we were going to be landing on dry paddies or freshly flooded ones. At this time of the year the harvest has been accomplished and already many of the paddies in the area had just recently been flooded for the winter farming. Even though we had a photo from an SR-71 mission flown at 10:30 local time that morning, it was still possible from the time that mission was flown until the time we got there that night that they could have flooded those paddies. We normally used the regular combat controller B-5 lights. But we had made up, in consideration of this possibility, some stainless steel rods with a little T-bar welded on the top so that we could tie our lights on to them. We had our directional hoods and we would ram these stainless steel rods down in the ground so that we could land in three foot deep water if the paddies got flooded.

On our assault group we did have some additional men because we had the space. Originally when we thought we may have to use the Huey we kept a smaller group. With HH-3 we took another couple more men since we had more room.

*NOTE: Keith made an error in remembering how many men were in each helicopter, or in each ground raider group, and which group included Simons and Sydnor. HH-3 carried the Blueboy Group with 14 men, commanded by Captain Meadows, and three Air Force crewmembers. The Greenleaf Group flew in Apple One and had 22 men commanded by Captain Walther. Colonel*

*Bull Simons was included in this number. The Redwine Group flew in on Apple Two. It had 20 men, was commanded by Captain Turner and included the ground force commander Lieutenant Colonel Sydnor. Each HH-53, Apple One and Apple Two, had five Air Force crewmembers*

There were nineteen men in the Greenleaf Group and 23 men in the Redwine Group. Bull Simons was with this group. Bud Sydnor, who was the Ground Force Commander, was with the other group. As soon as Bud Sydnor got off the airplane and established contact he was "Wildroot" and as soon as Wildroot came up and opened the net, all of the command of the entire operation was transferred to the Ground Force Commander. Up until that moment the command of the operation was with the Air Force Commander. But, at that instant everything came under the Ground Force Commander.

Q. Who was the Air Force Commander?

A. The Air Force Commander during the entire running was Lieutenant Colonel Blosch and then, once we had the people on the ground, the commander for the Air Force crews, that were now supporting the ground troops, was Major Jerry Rhein. He was an A-1 Peach One. He was considered to be the best judge of the airborne situation at that time. The Ground Force Commander Lieutenant Colonel Sydnor was supposed to take up his position immediately on the east side of this latrine/shower building (4 and 8E). Bull Simons was supposed to be just on the other side of it. They would be on opposite sides of the same building. Enemy mortar round could have gotten both of them. Bull Simons was monitoring the entire operation, so that if anything were to happen to Sydnor, he would have immediately taken over. Bull's task was to be General Manor on the ground. The Bull had a series of code words that he would issue to the General. It was agreed that General Manor would not come up on the comm net unless there was a dire threat to the force.

If the enemy launched a MIG force, we had COLLEGE EYE up supporting our air operation. COLLEGE EYE could detect a MIG threat. This would indicate that the enemy had figured out what we were doing. Then, of course, General Manor would come up and issue a warning.

But as it worked out, Greenleaf ended up 350 meters to the south, fighting it out after a mistaken landing of the lead HH-53 (*AppleOne*). I think we really ought to remember that this HH-53 was keyed on the gunship HH-53 (*Apple Three*) and on the HH-3. They had made a course correction and were already settling down at the Son Tay compound that was only 350 meters to the north. So, at the time the helicopters abandoned their lead C-130 and he slipped into his in trail position, they got out of his sight. To him both compounds looked the same. Building construction was identical and he was trying to avoid these high tension wires that he knew were in the area where he landed. So we had a 23-man group (*correct number for Redwine was 20*) that had to handle the entire outside of the compound.

**NOTE:** *Photograph on page 53 shows where the helicopters ended up. Once Cherry one climbed up to 1500 feet, low flying helicopters were on their own and drifted to the right. Apple Three*

*started a turn toward the emerging compound on the right, but corrected this error, turning left toward the river. HH-3 did not see this correction and lined up for a pass over the wrong compound. Apple One saw the HH-3 approach the compound and then its pilot got busy looking for a landing spot. He landed outside of a building identical to 7B and offloaded his troops. Apple Two pilot saw Apple One land in the wrong place, corrected his flight path back toward Son Tay and called for Plan Green. Note the following similarities: Both compounds are geometrically similar. Both have irrigation canals to the south. Son Tay has a river to the west and the other one has a black top road that at night can be seen as a river. The river and the road parallel each other and make a similar bend.*

What happened then when they got in the compound? (See the sketch on page 56) This building, was heavily shot up (7B). These guard towers were heavily shot up (structures #2). There were no guards in these guard towers when they got there. There were five or six North Vietnamese troops there, five troops were sleeping. They were temporarily quartered in this building (5B) and were probably North Vietnamese civil engineering troops. These men were there to perform maintenance and modification on the cells. There had been some flood damage to the vicinity of that prison in the flooding that had taken place in September and October when the Red River reaches its highest flood stage. I don't know for sure whether or not this damage resulted in this, or the maintenance work was a result of damage or whether or not the maintenance was a result of pressure to improve the conditions for the prisoners. But nevertheless, it was taking place.

Q. How do you know they were civil engineering troops?

A. Well, they were maintenance type troops. In their cells were maintenance tools, water tools, plastering tools, fittings of different sorts for the doors. In the cells also were stored sacks of concrete to use for concrete plaster. This building and this building were completed (5C and 5D). These two were not (5A and 5B). There was work in the process of being done. The cells themselves were sort of shaped like an inverted L. They were very small, very small cells, most were individual cells. There would be sort of a platform out here where the bunk would be. Most of them were individual, solitary cells but in this building, there were some cells that housed multiple prisoners. And it appeared, looking at them, that these cells were the places where they would stick prisoners when they were sick and other prisoners would care for them. But the main bulk was individual single type cells. These occupants that were in here (5A) tried to get out and came around here and they were all killed. They were moving out in a hurry. They didn't know exactly who was where but they were moving out, trying to get out of the gate. At the same time there were some enemy around here (7A) that were running, trying to get inside because they didn't have any idea what was on the inside. So there was something of a jam-up that occurred. They'd just nail the guys whichever way they'd try to go, they would nail them.

This area here (7B) was basically handled by a three man team led by Master Sergeant Lupyak. He and Sergeant Adderly were on his three man team. This building was pretty badly shot up as our Redwine helicopter landed. There were troops that were firing because, remember that other helicopter (Apple Three) also fired at them, so they were stirred up. There were troops that were



firing from this building but were rather quickly subdued. They were firing out in the darkness at the helicopter.

The minigun fire from this plane that had landed was so intense that it had broken through one side of this building (7B) and had hit into the commo shack (8B). Some sparks set the commo shack on fire. They had some generators (8A) and things here so that it probably hit some of the fuel. This building was burning (8C). The team, the three-man team from Redwine, Sgt Lupyak cleared this building (7B).

Q. That's the building directly southeast of the camp? What did you call that building?

A. Well, that's the main troop barracks.

Q. Troop barracks outside of the compound?

A. That's right. And there were six troops dead in their bunks here (7B). They had been killed by the helicopter fire. Bodies were hanging between the bunks and the wall. Now when they got in here this guard was still alive. He had been hit, he was the one that had been firing outside. He had been hit and was cowering in the corner so he was eliminated and Sergeant Lupyak's men completely cleared this building eliminating any particular problem that was there. There had been some troops that had run over into this area that were hiding and when they realized there were attacking troops in this area then they tried to run back here (*courtyard by the 7A, 8B, and 8C*).

Sergeant Lupyak was standing right at the corner of this building at that time and the guy just turned around the corner and was almost eyeball to eyeball with him. Now this is the place, and he swears, he says this man was Chinese. About 5 foot ten and he said he had a good long look at him because he turned the corner of that building and just stopped about three feet away from him and then just started backing up and of course Lupyak nailed him.

**NOTE:** *This incident cannot be attributed to Sergeant Lupyak. It might have been Sergeant Lawhon from the Greenleaf Group at the site of the "Secondary School. Greenleaf troops reported encounters like this and claimed that the men they shot were not North Vietnamese but Orientals of some other nationality. They were taller and did not wear the underclothing worn by the men who occupied the Son Tay camp buildings.*

There was fire from this building here, the commo shack. Sergeant Adderly was also standing here. This guy was firing, poor quality, but Adderly took his M-79 and hit him dead-center in the chest with an M-79 grenade.

There wasn't much activity here in what appeared to be the NCO quarters (8D) at this particular time but there was a lot of firing and it was picking up back in here because by then they had been fully stirred up and there was a heck of a lot of heavy firing. Still, there were only three men here (*from MSgt Spencer's team*) because, remember we had a team down here, our pathfinders who

still had their own task. We were still trying to clear these buildings over here (#11 and #12), so it got to be a pretty doggone tight operation. And we had the team down here clearing the pump house and setting up their security for their position down-here (*pathfinders Sergeants Matson and Strahan*).

All this time these buildings that were being cleared, each of the troops that were going in here had a miner's lamp strapped to him. Some of them had them on their heads, some of them had them strapped on their shoulders so wherever they moved, they had their own light if they so choose. They were proceeding to break into the cells and of course they were finding nothing. They broke into every single cell as they went on.

Well, by that time the fight down at the compound to the South had ended. Lieutenant Colonel Britton picked them up again and landed them at Son Tay. So, Sydnor put out the word that Greenleaf had landed and would be passing through the Redwine positions. Redwine troops had to hold their fire and prepare to link up with Greenleaf. Greenleaf troops came on up and started assuming their regular positions re-clearing this building (7B). At about that time, Sergeant Lawhon caught four men running from this building and with one blast was able to get all-four of them. They apparently had figured the fighting had eased up. They seemed to be running to this building to get their weapons and so he was able to get all four of them.

**NOTE:** *Sergeant Lawhon's encounter must have occurred at the so called "Secondary School" compound where troops, surprised by Apple One's landing, ran out of building of the same construction as the 7B at Son Tay to get weapons from another building across the courtyard. Keith is confusing something that occurred when the Redwine first approached the buildings on the south side of the compound. Four men ran north between the east wall and the kitchen/dining hall, buildings 11 and 12. They were engaged by MSgt Spencer's element and by Lieutenant Petrie at the east gate. At least one of them made it around the northeast corner of the compound. He might have been the one who tossed two grenades over the north wall that failed to explode in the area (5C and 5D) that was being cleared by Sergeants Robbins and St. Clair.*

We went ahead, we started our teams moving up, cleared these buildings and linked up with Blueboy here (*at the east gate*) and started our teams moving on to the bridge, to secure the bridge, take a fighting position and blow the bridge. We had our other Greenleaf team to take up this position here and then move on to clear these buildings.

**NOTE:** *Only three men from Captain Rouse's demolition team penetrated past the Redwine troops on the way to the bridge. They were the ones who did not get the word from Bull Simons to hold their positions. Bull learned about the POW compound being empty upon landing and managed to hold most of Rouse's team back.*

We never completely cleared them. We didn't have to. Our Greenleaf One (*Captain Rouse*) who was to hold the bridge didn't have to move all the way up to it because by that time it was apparent that we had no prisoners and the roll up operation was ordered.

Q. How long did it take Greenleaf to join the other troops in the Son Tay compound?

A. Eight to nine minutes. The initial reaction that I had when the troops found there was nobody in the compound was that good Lord, there's been a trap, there's been a trap and they've moved these guys out. But then, there were several things you could assess. For one thing those prisoners weren't there. There was absolutely no indication that there was a trap. For another thing there was a lot of eyeball to eyeball contact with the North Vietnamese in the process of shooting it out and these were clearly men that had been taken absolutely and totally by surprise. When I say totally by surprise, you had a span of about 40 seconds to assess what was going on, make a plan about what you want to do about it and then get your people organized, get the task underway, or you were out of the race. You had to do that within a space of about 40 seconds. Bull Simons best described the expression on the face of the North Vietnamese as one of total, absolute, paralyzed, dumbfoundedness, and this was what all of the troops expressed.

We did have a night gun sight that we mounted on the weapons and used them in training. Very simple little rig. We had trained with it over and over again. Each one of our troops had one of them. And remember, we had FAGs here, here, here and here. Each of these also had a night starlight binocular. They simply watched everything that went on.

Redwine Three, (*Sergeant First Class Blackard*) down in the southeast corner, a three man team had an encounter with a patrol that came up. The patrol that had organized itself and came up out of the compound that we had hit in the south, it was a small patrol, only a few men. They simply waited, they were on the north side of that irrigation canal, and watched with the night vision device. They watched these guys come right down to them and waited until they were just on point blank range, literally until they came up the other side of the canal.

**NOTE:** *This event did not happen. Backard's element did not report this encounter and my interview with two of its members confirmed that they did not detect any movers coming out of the facility attacked by the Greenleaf Group.*

Q. There were no Americans injured from enemy fire?

A. Oh, yes. We had one. Sergeant Murray was shot by an AK-47 (*at the east window of building 8D*). He was the only injury we sustained. We did have a small jeep convoy of five or six vehicles that started to come out of this military compound here. But Redwine Three (*Sergeant Blackard's element at the canal bridge*) was here, our man put a round right in front of the lead vehicle. It impacted right in front and everybody piled out and went back to the area. Nobody came out there any further. So, this team, the team that stopped the small patrol and stopped the five or six vehicle convoy that came out of that area. We didn't have anything that came up that road from the Son Tay Military School to the south.

Our helicopters were holding here and here (*north of Son Tay and on an island of the Finger Lake – see map on page 34*). This was where our LZs (*landing zones*) were set up. The pump house was there and the tower that we took down was right here in this position here.

Q. Did you actually blow the bridge?

A. No. We didn't have to blow the bridge. We did put a Willie Pete (White Phosphorous bomb) on the west end of this footbridge here. It apparently discouraged any traffic across it.

Q. Who delivered that?

A. That was Rhein and Gochnauer.

Q. The A-1s.

A. The A-1s. That's right. The A-1s delivered that. We had developed a rather fascinating system of marking for our A-1s. We were able, because of this peculiar type of mission, to violate what normally would be considered good procedures and we used tracers to mark the targets.

Army said you will give your position away with, tracers and we said, "Look man, we're here, we're a long way from nowhere and it's more important that we fire tracers to pinpoint a target than to worry about that target pinpointing us. Because if we pinpoint that target then A-1 can take care of it." We also got down to, because of our working relationship we developed close rhythm, where we could mark with HE rounds from our M-79 grenade launcher. We practiced this time and time again. We'd say: "We've got movers 300 meters southeast of my position, I am marking with HE. Mark now!" The pilot would know that he's talking to Redwine Two or Greenleaf One and he'd know exactly where they were. So he'd be looking down in your area and for the mark. You'd just say "Impact!" And as soon as the flash appeared, he'd have it in his eye and roll in to take it out. Tremendous, doggone smooth coordination. We also used the 40 mm White Star Clusters to mark with if they were fairly close in because you can get some momentary illumination from a star clusters. But these A-1s, kept up their reputation. They did put Willie Pete on that little footbridge. They didn't see any trucks, which we were very thankful for.

In the roll up process we had a maneuver that we called "Free Swing". Free Swing was the code word that told the A-1s that we were hauling in our perimeter teams. We would no longer have anybody that could control strikes. So, what we wanted from the A-1s was to fire in specific areas to insure that some two or three guys didn't get out there and didn't slip through the system. So, the A-1s were told that upon the code word Free Swing they should put fire in the area immediately to the south of the canal, and in this area here and fire in this area here so that they would just simply seal off our whole area.

Now the ordnance load on the A-1s was white phosphorous HE bombs, Rockeye cluster bombs and 20mm machine gun rounds. This was the first time anybody (*from the Air Force*) ever dropped

any Rockeyes. This was another one of those little tests and projects we ran. They did great work with Rockeyes. Rockeyes would kill any movers that we would encounter. We had a mix of tracers and 40mm white star clusters to mark their targets.

Now after the troops had been on the ground for about 10 minutes the SAMs started firing, firing from the east. It was random heavy fire, very intense, and that's all it was. Just whooooooosh, firing off. Now the WEASELS were up above by now and were looking down at the SAMs. The SAMs were firing at the WEASELS but also by this time it was apparent to somebody that there was something, something big going on the ground. Some of these missiles were fired just almost like artillery pieces passing directly overhead. And these were missiles that were fired 10 to 12 miles away. They were passing north over our heads and were going off two or three miles to the west and bursting. It was apparently just random firing.

In the intercepts of the North Vietnamese radio communications at that particular time there were strong admonishments coming out from higher up in the echelon saying, "Don't panic! Keep control of yourself," talking to the missile battalion commander. A pretty fair number of missiles were fired. I guess at least a dozen and a half were fired. Just mostly wild erratic firing. The WEASELS fired some Shrikes and felt they had probably shut down a couple of radars.

Q. How long was the team on the ground all told?

A. Well, I got 24 minutes. General Manor got 28. It was no more than 28, it was no less than 24, but that ranks it pretty doggone close.

There were two SAMs that got pretty close to the WEASELS. As matter of fact two of the WEASELS took hits. One of them (*Firebird Three*) burned, probably got some hydraulic fuel and burned about 15 seconds and got it out and got everything under control. Another one (*Firebird Five*) got hit and immediately started losing a lot of fuel. The airplane was completely airworthy so he went on back and almost made it to the tanker before he flamed out. You know, whoosh, started a long downhill glide and both of those guys bailed out just south of the Plain of Jars. They ended up separated from each other by about 2000 feet in elevation and were picked up by our two standby helicopters (*Apples Four and Five*) on their way back to Udorn. Both helicopters had to refuel from an HC-130 tanker and stay in the area to pick up the crewmembers as soon as the sun came up. That was the only aircraft lost in the whole operation. These poor WEASEL guys. You know, we forget but it's been a long time since those guys have been in combat and particularly night combat. Very few WEASEL folks ever got any experience at night time going against those SAMs. It was a different ball game. Judgment factors are totally different at night time versus daytime. They really did a very terrific job for night time.

The choppers were called in. It was decided that since there were no prisoners, they would go ahead and put all the troops on two helicopters rather than spread them out onto three like they had planned. And so Sydnor did just that. He hauled them up on two helicopters. The first team to load

up on the first helicopter was the Blueboy and Redwine. Greenleaf was the last team to go out. They went out in a very orderly fashion just as rehearsed.

Q. Almost had..?

A. Yes, Very orderly fashion. The helicopter sat down on the ground. No trouble. So many of our worries in a project like this are just really completely unfounded because we forget somehow that the enemy has got to figure all of this out. He's got to figure out what we know. And in North Vietnam, if you just plunk a helicopter down and don't do anything, don't fire, just keep the engines running, it seems like it's almost a guarantee that nobody's going to do anything to that helicopter. Because if it's one of theirs and they go shooting it up, man they're going to get crucified. And if it's not hurting anybody, you know, it's highly questionable as to whose it is. So the assumption is that it's one of theirs. When we first proposed that all five helicopters land and just sit on the ground for a half an hour, there were some glances like, you've got to be kidding. You must be out of your gourd.

Q. I bet that was the longest half hour of those guys' lives.

A. It probably was. They said they were very tense during that period. We did pick up ramp gunners for four of the helicopters at Udorn. But the side gunner and ramp gunner on the lead HH-53 (*Apple Three*) and the side gunners on the other HH-53s trained with us all the way long in Florida. This was another place we thought, we'll just economize, save a little money. But, you can't take a guy for two or three days and put him on an operation like that who's going to be on the ground. He can't even fit into the mesh psychologically.

Q. Psychologically?

A. That's right. Psychologically he's not really part of the operation and these guys on the ramp on four of those helicopters were very nervous people. Very nervous because they just didn't have the feel for this operation like everyone else had. On Jack Allison's bird one of the PJs got so nervous he just squeezed off a few rounds on his minigun, which got everybody's attention. They were hollering what's going on. He said, "Sir, I'm awfully sorry about that. I just got a little too nervous." Whereas our other PJs and engineers that had worked with us all along, well, it had now become second nature to them because they had gone through a jillion rehearsals.

When the troops started rolling up, they set the fuse on the HH-3 and came on out.

Q. Did it blow before they left?

A. They were out of the area, but it was Jack Squires in his A-1 who was still orbiting. He was the last one to come out of the area. Jack saw it blow.

Q. Was he, was there a plan if it didn't blow to lay something on it?

A. No.

Q. I was afraid about that one.

A. We had the best demolitionist in the Army who laid that charge and he'd keep assuring Herb Kalen, much to his chagrin. "Sir, don't worry" he said, "I'll do a beautiful job for you. I promise you that helicopter will be properly blown up. It won't feel a thing." Every time, this was because you could just see this tearing Kalen up. He'd actually almost tear up inside because he just wasn't raised that way. You know, dammit, I'm a good pilot and I want to take care of my airplane and you guys are talking about blowing it up. He probably felt better when it was all over. He knew we were right.

The troops looked like something... Literally they were awesome looking. They had jungle fatigues on and had their faces totally camouflaged, blacked-up. They all had goggles, World War II pilot goggles, and you know these were hard to get a hold of.





*Blueboy Two: Captain Thomas W. Jaeger, Sergeant First Class William L. Tapley, Staff Sergeant Charles G. Erickson, and Sergeant First Class Kenneth H. McMullin ready to board their helicopter at Udorn. (USAF Photograph renovated by John Gargus)*

Q. Yes, I imagine.

A. We scratched around and I guess we got just about the last ones of those.

Q. What did you need the goggles for?

A. Because while the helicopter was landing and churning and stirring up a lot of dust we wanted to be able to see. We wanted those extra few seconds. Also, we wanted to put in the amber filters so that you could cut down on a significant amount of that yellow light that was coming from the flares. And it did significantly cut that down with the amber filters. It didn't cut off enough to imperil our vision in that critical period. You know you can get up to about 200 miles per hour with that HH-53 with all the power it's got. The North Vietnamese troops were going to have to look right into that crud that would be blown around and we wanted our troops to be able to go right in there and fire right in the midst of all that. And they did. These North Vietnamese guys were at the windows firing, just blindly, not knowing where they were firing and our troops just simply took cold, calm aims and nailed them. I was going to say this on the great imbalance. How did we kill so many of the North Vietnamese with no loss to ourselves? It was two things really. Extremely accurate aiming and firing by people who had fired a half million rounds of ammunition and these night scopes. The comment you heard time and time again from the troops was: "Sir I just couldn't miss. Everything I shot at I hit. On the other hand the North Vietnamese were totally disorganized, panic stricken, taken by complete surprise and their fire was of a poor quality anyway.

Q. The papers talked about the prison camp being empty for a two week period. Four weeks? What was the actual story on that? How long did they think the prisoners had been out of the compound?

A. I would say the prisoners had been gone something like two to three weeks. People of the press picked up a comment that one of the troops had made. He said that there were some clumps of grass this high. There are always clumps of grass this high in that compound. That simply doesn't have any meaning at all. From the type of work that was being done, you could make a pretty accurate judgment as to how long it would take them to do this type of work. You could also make a pretty accurate judgment as to how long it would be before they would complete it. It appeared that this work could have been completed within the next two weeks. And clearly, you know, this was a prison that they were refurbishing. It was not going to be anything else except a prison with steel doors, blue windows and little flaps in the bottom of the doors. The little individual cells with a sort of concrete reentrance where the bunk was. They had been there not very long before we made this raid and they were clearly coming back. The garrison was right there, which indicated

also that had they been gone for any length of time, they probably would have removed the garrison or at least stripped it down significantly.

Well, I think the best overall assessment was what Bull Simons said. "We did everything a soldier could be expected to do. And we did. No man let us down. Everybody performed magnificently with courage skill and devotion."

You just can't get a better operation. You couldn't really, except with a few minor discrepancies, which were fortunate as they turned out. It was so beautifully and perfectly executed. It was so thoroughly planned and, you know, I keep reminding you that in the Air Force, in our over managed Air Force, it's still the people. If you want something done you go after skilled people that have got courage. We couldn't have done this with the average pilot, average Army troop or the average NCO. But if you really want, if you can choose your people and if you are given license to use a lot of imagination, as we were, then there's almost nothing you can't do with good people. We didn't have any restrictions. Safety was not paramount. Trying to get those men out was paramount. We would take chances because when you're walking into the enemy's heartland, boy, you don't talk about primary safety considerations. You talk about the mission and try your best way to get it done.

Q. You think there will be an effort to do something like this again?

A. I would think that you wouldn't want to duplicate it precisely because the North Vietnamese must have figured out our essential tactics. But I would think that using imagination, and if you've got quite a bit of freedom, you could develop a new set of tactics sometime in the future that would permit you to do it. Now, are they all in Hanoi? I would suspect probably most of them are in Hanoi. Could we get them out of Hanoi? I wouldn't have thought so before the 21st of November, but I feel, as do a fair number of us, although I never would have recommended this to the Joint Chiefs but I feel that on that night we could have gone into downtown Hanoi and pulled them out because the North Vietnamese, after the two years of no bombing had gotten the North Vietnamese defensive system pretty sloppy. They looked bad. They responded poorly. They panicked.

Q. Were there any post strikes or reconnaissance flown over here the next day or the following--

A. Yes. The following day. To see what was happening out there. The following morning there was post strike reconnaissance and it's in Part III of these reports that were written. You can actually see from the recce photographs you can see people standing around. The area near the prison was marked off, and you can see them standing out along the road looking into the compound. You can see the remains of the helicopter. You can even see one of the helicopter blades from the helicopter that was blown up. The blade was laying sort of across one tree top. You can see the buildings that were partially burned.

Q. Any staff cars from Hanoi down there?

A. There were some vehicles. There were some vehicles parked right outside the compound that were not ordinary participants in the compound. Yes, we had a good photo.

The troops, on the way back, most of them just sat down and wept. Of course, there was a lot of avoidance of SAMs that took place and some fairly wild gyrations. The helicopters flew right on the deck and just sort of crawled up the mountainside and slipped over the crests of the mountains. They flew back individually. Then once they got over the crest of the mountains, the MIG warnings were issued by COLLEGE EYE. And although I don't believe from watching everything that was going on that any MIGs got airborne, because I think they simply weren't ready. The North Vietnamese don't have that many qualified night pilots in MIGs and also the SAMs were firing so indiscriminately and so wildly that the MIGs, I just don't think could get airborne. There is no positive indication that any MIGs got airborne but the helicopters were taking no chances. So, their mode of operations was pretty much after they crested the mountain, then they would slide down into this very uniform cloud deck. There was very smooth air and just sort of skim under along in that and poked their heads up about every sixty seconds, look around, pop down and sort of bounce along that way. This seemed to be the way they worked it out pretty well.

**NOTE:** *The COLLEGE EYE, EC-121, did not issue a MIG warning. MIG call was made by Apple Three. Someone on the crew must have mistaken one of our exiting aircraft for a MIG. COMBAT APPLE, EC-135 flying over the Gulf of Tonkin, came in and called "NO MIGS," but all exiting aircraft took appropriate MIG warning precautions on their way into the mountains. Vietnamese military histories published after the war criticized their air defenses for not launching their MIGs that night.*

After the initial point of activity the troops, of course, were just heartbroken. Bitterly disappointed. Most of them just broke down and cried. The A-1 pilots, when they landed, you could see them just slump up against the side of their airplanes big tears running down their faces. We all convened at Udorn for immediate mission debrief and they all arrived at about the same time. I was the one that delivered the news to General Manor because I was handling all the code words.

Q This was over at Monkey Mountain?

A. Yes. That there was nobody in the compound. I, of course, before I even delivered it to him I asked "Confirm," the code word was -----Sierra. I said confirm -----Sierra and did I hear correct -----Sierra. It came back that is affirmative, -----Sierra. ----- Sierra and I turned to General Manor and said, "Sir there's no one, there, there are no prisoners in the compound," and he said, "That can't be," he said, "Check it, reconfirm." I said, "I already have. The code word is - ---- Sierra and there are no prisoners in the compound." He said check it again. You could see the tears running, streaming down his face. I was pretty choked up by that time too. I said I'll check again.

Well by this time the SAMs were flying, the MIG warning had been put up. We think that the MIG warning actually was one of our own F-105s that was evading a bunch of SAMs, because they

were firing in pairs and in some instances in threes. So we do know by a later reconnaissance debriefing that these guys said: "Man I got down on the deck and flew right over you guys. I was just trying to get away from the SAMs and we think that's what COLLEGE EYE picked up and gave us the MIG warning.

As soon as we got on the ground at Udorn, we had a debriefing. Bull Simons came in first. Of course, by then all the commanding elements at Udorn had been awakened and alerted to give us whatever support was necessary, not knowing what support this was. They didn't know what they were doing because when I went down to the command post they were standing around. General Manor and I walked in and about 2 to 3 minutes later Bull Simons came in with his CAR-5 slung around his neck and his face all camouflaged.

You know it was a very awe inspiring sight to these nice clean freshly scrubbed Air Force colonels and a couple of general officers that were there watching this. Then we went on off and immediately started to debrief. As we debriefed, Larry Ropka, was composing the message to send to Admiral Moorer.

Q. You had already passed the code word to the White House, I presume on Monkey Mountain.

A. We, what?

Q. Passed the code words to the White House.

A. Oh, yes, yes. We passed it right on. So then we sent a very lengthy message, quite a few pages, to Admiral Moorer. By then the sun was up, it was midmorning by the time we finished with a thorough debriefing and sent the message.

The Bull and General Manor arranged to depart at 1600 that afternoon. They flew out and debriefed Admiral McCain in Hawaii. Then they went directly on to Washington to brief Secretary Laird. We went on back to Takhli and started to wind down and get everything packed up. We got the Army troops out. They didn't have that much stuff to pack up. Of course, we had airplanes to return, little things like calling up the commander of the HH-3 at Da Nang saying: "Hey, about that HH-3 of yours."

He said, "Well are the people all right?"

So what do you want to say about the HH-3? We said: "Well look, we want you to make out a combat loss on it."

He said: "Are you kidding me? You just told me my people are all okay."

I said: "Oh, yeah they're great but your airplane is not so great."

“It's out of commission?”

“Yeah, temporarily disabled.”

“That's right.”

And we had some debriefs to, make ourselves. It took us about 3 days to get everything packed up and closed down.

### **Aftermath**

We pulled the raid on Saturday morning at two o'clock Hanoi time. It was early afternoon Saturday morning, Friday morning, Friday afternoon, excuse me, in Washington. So we got back on Monday night.

Q. Washington Time?

A. Actually we got back at 3 o'clock in the morning, Tuesday morning, back to Eglin. And General Manor and Bull Simons had, of course, very intimately and thoroughly briefed Secretary Laird. They discussed if we should, since we didn't get any prisoners, keep the lid on the raid or should we not. And both Bull Simons and General Manor very strongly advocated that we did a very good thing. Our purpose and our goals were very straight forward. We didn't need to hang our heads. If we don't tell them (*the American people*) and the press gets a hold of it and starts leaking and piecing together information, they will get the story all screwed up. They will make us look bad when everything we did was very, very good. And they suggested very strongly that, as soon as possible, we tell the American people what was attempted. So, that very night, General Manor and Bull Simons had a press conference and told them of the Son Tay raid. So, when we got on the ground, say, six, eight, ten hours later the word was already out that the raid had taken place. And there were guys that criticized it. Like Ted Kennedy. But, then I remember reading from an editorial statement that said, "There's a junior senator from Massachusetts who displays a quality rare among politicians -- that of consistencies."

Q. I don't think Ted criticized it.

A. Hmmm?

Q. I didn't realize he criticized it.

A. Oh. Yes. He said--

Q. That criticism was on intelligence, on the fact that obviously our intelligence wasn't quite as good as it was supposed to be but I don't think there was criticism on the raid itself.

A. No, he criticized the raid itself.

Q. On what basis?

A. He said it was foolhardy. That it endangered the prisoners. Of course, this is a man that knew nothing of the tactics of the raid. That it endangered the prisoners. That the way to get prisoners back was to negotiate a peace. Of course any time you make prisoner treatment a condition to any other thing that happens to be illegal pertaining to international law. Ted Kennedy doesn't seem to have the background to be aware of that. This editorial I was mentioning, it said that the little brother of the junior senator from Massachusetts seems to be cool to rescues. No, excuse me, the little brother of the President who risked his life to save his crew seems to be cool to rescues in general whether it be from a prison camp in North Vietnam or a lake in Massachusetts. That was all. After that he never made any other comment. Any other comment at all. But he was, initially, in the course of events rather harshly critical of the raid. Well, of course, Fullbright. Fullbright was almost diseased. There were other senators you know that had similar type comments. Fullbright was incensed because he wasn't personally briefed, that he and his committee were not briefed. Can you imagine that? If we were ever to fear a reception party can't you imagine what we would have had to worry if Fullbright would have had this information?

Q. Do you have a feel for the response that the North Vietnamese took after the raid? What actions were taken immediately after and then spread out through the next three or four weeks?

A. Well, the North Vietnamese were convinced, totally and utterly convinced, that they were going to be invaded. That a large scale invasion was going to take place. Remember, we followed up that next day with a series of very selective air strikes. When the sun came up Typhoon Patsy was moving in and that closed us down by mid-afternoon but the Navy and Air Force gave a tremendous pounding and had highly lucrative targets throughout the panhandle.

**NOTE:** *Previously planned air operation called Freedom Bait kicked off after sunrise on 21 November. It was a concentrated Navy and Air Force retaliation strike for the downing of one of our reconnaissance F-4s near the DMZ. Many targets south of the 19<sup>th</sup> parallel were pounded, giving the North Vietnamese the impression that all of this had been coordinated and that they were about to be invaded.*

The North Vietnamese felt that this was a diversion and that was meant to distract their attention from the major invasion that was to take place. They packed up that next day, they got less than five IL-28s, they loaded up the entire central committee the next day, that morning, and flew them to China. Except one of the IL-28s crashed on takeoff, apparently killing all aboard, which was a rather beneficial positive result. They believed, we have fairly good evidence to indicate, that the North Vietnamese were convinced that there was inside collusion that took place; that there were North Vietnamese who contributed to the information and the tactical success of this mission. Because they don't like to admit that they looked so bad and, of course, I mentioned to you earlier, the North Vietnamese can't imagine that we would make that trip just for, just for the sake of

freeing a handful of prisoners. There had to be other reasons so, they would scour the countryside now for months looking for the agents that we obviously had planted. Executions have taken place of people who could not explain their whereabouts during certain periods of time. But what still upsets them the most is they haven't found a single one of these agents that they know must have been planted.

Q. Have they changed their defense posture any?

A. Missile battalion commanders, a significant number have been fired because of the poor showing they came up with. I suspect, and I don't have any positive information, that they did move the prisoners to Hanoi, or if they didn't they've, got heavy contingencies of security personnel around any of the prisons whether they would be in Hanoi or whether in some of the outlying areas.

Q. Do you think our prisoners are aware that we made an attempt to recover them?

A. I think the precautionary actions the North Vietnamese took concerning the prisoners must have tipped them off that something happened. They were now greatly concerned for security measures. They also placed spikes in the ground around some of the prison areas so if they brought them back into Son Tay with the buildings shot up the way they were shot up, unless they completely replastered them, even then, the trees, around those trees, anybody with eyes could see that there was an attempted prison break at this location.

The North Vietnamese lost a lot of face with their own people. It's clearly obvious what happened to the people who live in the area. And you know anybody's who's got a cousin in town or any place else that the rumor has got all around North Vietnamese that a small team of Americans came in and just stomped them and got out again. It was known that other North Vietnamese prisoners who have been taken in South Vietnam could acknowledge knowing that there were American prisoners held at the Son Tay compound. So it's not something that was a great big mystery as to what was going on. I think it is well to remember when you hear some of these criticisms by people who simply aren't privileged in the information of the intelligence system that in a police state if you want to move somebody in secrecy you can do it. You can move several somebodies in secrecy. And if you want to keep a level of activity going just so that there would be no intelligence signs to read, you can certainly do this. You can very, very easily do this in a police state where nobody has a right to do even any curiosity questioning. We had as good an intelligence base on our operation as you could have, short of having someone inside the prison cell with radio that's transmitting information. We knew there was a chance they wouldn't be any. We knew that the men were dying and that more would die. We knew that we had a period of weather during which we had to move and we couldn't move until 8 or 9 months later again. We had to take the chance.

Typist note: I can't pick this portion up.

Q. Looking back over the operation Colonel, are there, if you had to do it again, are there any major or minor changes you would make along the line? Having learned what you have now



learned, the collection of people, keeping of things secret, so forth and so on, you would do just about the same way you had done?

A. I'd do most everything just the same way. I would insist on the highest level control because you just can't generate something like this from the bottom up not within the existing Air Force system of command and control hierarchy. I would hope that we have aircraft and hardware that could do this though three years hence. I don't know how we could launch an operation such as this if we had to have long endurance protective cover that could deliver accurate fire. I would again, as proved right, I would have to have some considerable exclusion from rigid safety considerations, because the tactics that are necessary to train with simply are inherently unsafe in many cases. Not nearly as unsafe as trying to walk into the heart of an enemy's country and not having practiced these.

I would think, without question, that you've got to have your choice of people, your people have got to be handpicked. They've got to be the best. With these things then you can put an operation together. Then I really feel that our experience level on this operation was mandatory. Like I mentioned if we had a problem with personnel it was not having so many well qualified NCOs. Possibly in the future it might run a little bit smoother if you had two or three. If you had, say, three major elements on the ground then you ought to have three super grade NCOs rather than two or three per major element. The opportunity for strong personalities in conflict is greater than if you had some, one strong, very senior NCO and then had strong, but not so senior NCOs on the other team.

As far as the tactics were concerned the quality of people we needed, free with their imagination and the release from overly strenuous safety requirements and the control from the highest levels, I think we went about it the right way. The entire operation, I think, militarily was very doggone successful. The business of rehearsing I don't think can be overstressed.

It isn't just enough that a pilot can fly the airplane well or that a sergeant can communicate with his radio gear well. It's the total picture with thousands upon thousands of little individual actions having to mesh together precisely that can only be polished -- only be polished -- by rehearsal, rehearsal, rehearsal. It's just rehearsal, rehearsal, rehearsal that also gives you this high level of confidence in yourself. The ability to function without having to devote a lot of your energies to rethinking the problem each time. I think that it was this rehearsal, rehearsal, rehearsal which allowed us 20 seconds out to go into an alternate plan. It also gives you ample opportunity for any flaws in your plan to show up that simply wouldn't have come about if you hadn't rehearsed it. I don't know, every man had his job down to perfection.

Q. I trust you would agree to again doing this kind of thing, of practicing and organizing, this kind of a thing in the CONUS rather than tasking 7th Air Force or tasking one of the wings to put this kind of an operation together.

A. Yes. Absolutely. The possibility for a security leak, if you had gone through normal Air Force command channels would have been enormous. It's much easier to collect a task force and then send it off someplace and do something where everybody knows everybody else within that organization. You need an isolation. You need a physical and an emotional, a personality isolation.

I think if you've ever had the opportunity to look at covert operations and super-secret operations you'll realize that almost all of those that were tactically carried off with success, that didn't end up in disasters, were controlled from the highest levels. That whether it's infiltrators into HUK organizations in the Philippines or whether it was some of Churchill's wild commando schemes, many of which were splendid tactical operations. Covert, shock, and surprise operations have got to be just that, covert, surprise, and shock operations. And if you handle them through normal staff organizations using normal staff procedures, particularly if they require things outside the norm, it's almost impossible to keep from blowing your cover.

Q. Anything else we should?

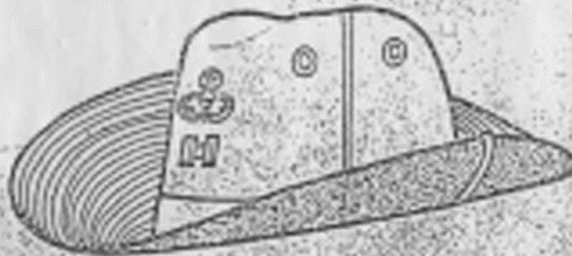
A. No. We think this is as smooth and slick an operation as we are likely ever to see put together, and it was the most daring and smoothest and heartbreaking operation I guess this war had produced. So we can break up now if you want to.

Q. Thank you very much Colonel.

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KEITH R. GRIMES

SPECIAL OPERATIONS  
WEATHERMAN



AN ORAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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Attachment 1

KEITH R. GRIMES  
SPECIAL OPERATIONS  
WEATHERMAN

An Oral Autobiography

Edited By  
Mr. John F. Fuller  
Air Weather Service  
Historian

March 1978

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Attachment 2

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RETURN TO  
HQ, USAFHRC  
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*K239.0512-478*  
*1970*  
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# U.S. AIR FORCE ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

K239.0512-478

10 SEP 1992

LT COL KEITH R. GRIMES



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REVIEW DATE 12/15/00 REVIEWER 60  
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SEA Declassification & Review Team

CLASSIFIED BY: Neil J. [Signature]  
ON: 11 Oct 1992

FULLER: By way of introduction, this interview is being conducted by John Fuller, the Air Weather Service historian, with Lieutenant Colonel Keith R. Grimes, currently serving with Headquarters, Air Weather Service. Today is the nineteenth of April 1974 and the interview is being conducted at Headquarters, Air Weather Service, Scott Air Force Base, Illinois. By way of further introduction, I'd like to say that, in the opinion of this historian, Colonel Grimes has been one of the most controversial figures in Air Weather Service for at least the last fifteen years for reasons which I hope we can now get on tape. And without further introduction could you, for the record, give some of your background. By that I mean, your education, some of your assignments and your dates of rank.

GRIMES: I have a degree in geology from the University of Texas, where I was commissioned in ROTC [Reserve Officers Training Corps]. I did graduate work in geology at the University of Nevada, Mackay School of Mines. Before I completed my master's degree I was called to active duty with the Air Force whereby I attended Penn State and received a degree in meteorology. Some years later while attending the Air Command and Staff College I picked up a master's degree in business administration from George Washington University. I am a Phi Beta Kappa.

~~SECRET NOFORN~~

AFSHRC/HOA  
Maxwell AFB AL 36112

SEA Declassification & Review Team

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DECLASSIFICATION LAW EO 12958  
REVIEW DATE 19 Feb 96 REVIEWER LR2  
REFER TO CIA, State, JCS  
EXEMPTION (S): 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

30 June 1971

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

1. This transcript is a rough draft of the referenced tape recording. It has not been edited to confirm that all words were transcribed correctly.
2. The early termination of Project CORONA HARVEST and the exigencies of the program prevented completion of this transcript. Efforts will be made to finish processing this interview as soon as time and work-load permit.
3. To assure accuracy, do not quote this transcript without referring to the tape.

*Richard B. Clement*  
 RICHARD B. CLEMENT, Major, USAF  
 Chief, Special Collections Section  
 Research Support Branch

THIS LETTER IS UNCLASSIFIED.

RETURN TO HQ, USAF/SHRC MAXWELL AFB, AL 36112	<i>Q.1</i>
	<i>K239.0552-478 1970</i>

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