

Why Was Son Tay POW Camp Abandoned?

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Merle Pribbenow, a friend of STRA, who has been providing me with his translations of Vietnamese military history that make references to the POW Camp at Son Tay, sent me a few pages of his most recent find on why the American prisoners of war were transferred to another camp. *The History of the Army Security Department, People's Army of Vietnam (1950-2000)*, authored by Senior Colonel Truong Quoc Vuong and Colonel Nguyen Duy Tuong, presents perhaps the most logical explanation in the following passage:

In order to counter any rescue efforts and to ensure the safety of the American airmen, we had to keep secret the locations and the number of airmen we had captured, and we had to keep any and all information about the airmen secret to prevent American intelligence from collecting information about their situation. The security agency implemented a counter-espionage plan, censored their letters and inspected their possessions and the things they used in their daily lives in order to uncover any plans to provide intelligence information, and it also implemented measures to prevent the airmen from communicating with one another inside the camps by the use of coded signals. The security agency also helped the General Political Department and the Ministry of Defense develop a system of regulations and procedures for handling international delegations and foreigners from peace and humanitarian groups who were allowed to have contact with the airmen we had captured and to check and monitor all those contacts.

The effort to guard against possible enemy airborne raids aimed at rescuing the airmen demanded that we keep the location of the various detention facilities absolutely secret and that we select locations for these facilities that would make it difficult for the enemy to carry out any such plan.

Acting on a recommendation made by the Army Security Department, the Ministry of Defense issued regulations to prevent any unauthorized personnel from finding out about how the American airmen were handled and from making contact with the American airmen. The regulations specified that the captured airmen were to be dispersed to many different locations rather than being concentrated in one location, and that the locations where they were detained should be changed constantly. Whenever we arranged for the airmen to have contacts with visiting delegations of international guests, we would arranged for these contacts to occur at a location outside the detention camp to guard against enemy intelligence-gathering activities.

As we constantly closely followed the situation and the enemy's activities, in early 1970 we detected a number of indications that the U.S. was developing a plan to rescue a number of captured American airmen. Greater attention was immediately focused on the

work of ensuring the security and safety of the detention camps. After inspecting the situation, we learned that a number of the detention camps were not truly secure; one of these camps was the one near Son Tay City. The Security Department recommended that the airmen being held there should be move to another location that was more secure. The Department's recommendation was approved by higher authority.

Just as we had predicted, on the night of 20 November 1970 the U.S. launched a surprise airborne raid aimed at rescuing airmen being held prisoner in the detention camp near Son Tay City. But the enemy was "too late." Their plan failed; they failed to "steal" even one of the captured airmen, because all of the airmen held at this camp had been moved to another location six months earlier. The enemy raid was a lesson that alerted those agencies and units responsible for administering and detaining this special category of prisoner to the need to constantly maintain a high level of vigilance.

After the enemy raid near Son Tay City, the Army Security Department recommended that the Ministry of Defense build a prison camp for the American airmen at a location in the northern mountain area along the border between Lang Son and Cao Bang provinces. This prison camp was heavily guarded and its security and secrecy were preserved until 1973, when the Paris Agreement on ending the war and restoring peace in Vietnam was signed. At that time we moved the prisoners being held in this location back to Hanoi to be returned to the Americans.

This is probably a true account of what happened to the POW Camp at Son Tay. POW rescue is always a possibility in any conflict and those holding captives must be aware of this fact. The North Vietnamese learned the same thing that we did in selecting our rescue site. Son Tay POW Camp was the most vulnerable one. We can question the comment about their 1970 "*indications that the U.S. was developing a plan to rescue a number of captured American airmen*". They do not specify any of them. These might have been only the intensified calls from the POW/MIA families and other concerned agencies to do something about the plight of the POWs. We have not yet uncovered a single verified clue that the North Vietnamese became aware of a plan to raid a POW camp in their homeland.

Their boast about predicting a raid – "*Just as we had predicted, on the night of 20 November 1970...*" is just that. Had they anticipated a raid on their most vulnerable camp, they would have prepared for it by setting a trap for the raiders. We know that this did not happen.

<http://www.quansu.vn.net/index.php?topic=3826.0>

"History of the Army Security Department, People's Army of Vietnam (1950-2000)"
[Lịch sử Cục Bảo vệ - An ninh Quân đội nhân dân Việt Nam (1950 – 2000)]
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