

Sontay: Shots, Shouts, Sinking Feeling

12/10/70
By George C. Wilson
Washington Post Staff Writer

FT. BRAGG, N.C., Dec. 9

— The Army sergeant lay on his belly at the helicopter door, too busy firing his M-16 rifle down into the Sontay prison compound to worry about what would happen when he hit the ground.

The camp, just outside Hanoi, looked eerie to M.Sgt. Thomas J. Kemmer, 39, as the helicopter — flying low to keep below radar beams — neared the wall of the prison compound. A partial moon and

flares dropped from aircraft above Kemmer's lead helicopter lit up Sontay.

The helicopter skimmed over the cement wall and landed hard, smack on top of a radish patch in the middle of the compound. From that second on, every American's life there depended on how quickly and how precisely Kemmer and the others executed their rehearsed assault.

A SAM anti-aircraft missile, which had whooshed wildly past the helicopter on the way in, told the rescue

party that they had surprised the North Vietnamese at Sontay. And a helicopter gunship, piloted by Air Force Maj. Frederic M. Donohue, had taken care of two of three gun towers on the Sontay prison wall by blasting away at them from an altitude of only 40 feet.

Kemmer jumped out of the helicopter. Like the other troopers with him, the sergeant wore no helmet or flak jacket. "They slow you down," Kemmer, father of four children, said in an interview here today.

Kemmer raced across the Sontay compound to his assigned position — a spot near the six-foot-wide gate in the center of the camp's east wall. The assignments were so exact that one trooper, disturbed that he could not find the tree marking his position, looked around in the half-light of the flares until he found the freshly sawed stump. It matched the location of the tree in the training version of Sontay that had been built at Eglin AFB in Florida.

See SONTAY, A15, Col. 1

SONTAY, From A1

"We're Americans; stay low; we'll secure the guards," Kemmer shouted into the building near the east gate where Americans were believed imprisoned. Nobody answered.

"I just got the feeling it was empty," Kemmer said.

He did not have time at this point to do more than shout through the windows barred with bamboo and iron. His other job was to make sure the North Viet-

namese did not reinforce the walled compound by storming through the partly open gate from their barracks outside the wall.

"I could see through the gate because a haystack outside of it was burning," Kemmer said. A soldier—illuminated by the fire so well that Kemmer could see his web belt—ran past the opening along the outside of the wall.

The sergeant held his fire. He feared the man might be

an American trooper out of position. Then another soldier only partly dressed, ran past. Kemmer fired, low and sure.

A grenade, evidently thrown into the compound from outside the wall, exploded in the northeast corner of the prison compound. Kemmer heard "my element leader" yell: "They're coming down the wall."

Still prone near the gate, Kemmer swung his rifle

away from the opening and trained it on the corner where the grenade had exploded. Five figures came out of a dark spot toward him.

They kept close to the wall as they ran for the east gate. Kemmer fired again. All five fell.

He figured the North Vietnamese had come out of the prison building, empty of Americans. There were bunks for nine guards inside.

In the barracks area outside the east gate, other men were doing their assigned jobs with the same efficiency. One of them was Green Beret Sgt. Keith R. Medenski—who at 21 had never been in combat before but had volunteered for the rescue mission anyhow.

"They were shooting at us from the windows and doors of the buildings," Medenski said. "Rounds were ricocheting all over the place, including our own."

Asked how all the shooting resulted in only one American slightly wounded, Medenski just shook his head and said: "Miraculous. We can't figure out why."

Medenski saw SAM anti-aircraft missiles going off near the camp, evidently from a site forming part of the anti-aircraft defense for the North Vietnamese capital of Hanoi. Sontay is 23 miles west of Hanoi.

"It looks like a fireball," Medenski said of the SAMs

going off. The young sergeant figures "at least 20" North Vietnamese were killed outside the wall. "We didn't stop to search."

The rescue force stuck to their rehearsed plan, not taking time out to count bodies or to capture prisoners. The troopers were ordered to pounce on the guards inside the compound in minutes, preferably seconds, before they could harm the Americans believed imprisoned at Sontay.

Keep it quick and simple; that was the guideline for the operation.

One of the few unexpected developments during the Nov. 21 raid was the advance of a North Vietnamese truck convoy toward the village of Sontay. But Sgt. 1st Class Tyrone Adderly, who had devised a sight made of luminous tape for his grenade launcher so he could fire it accurately at

night, knocked out the lead truck with the first shot.

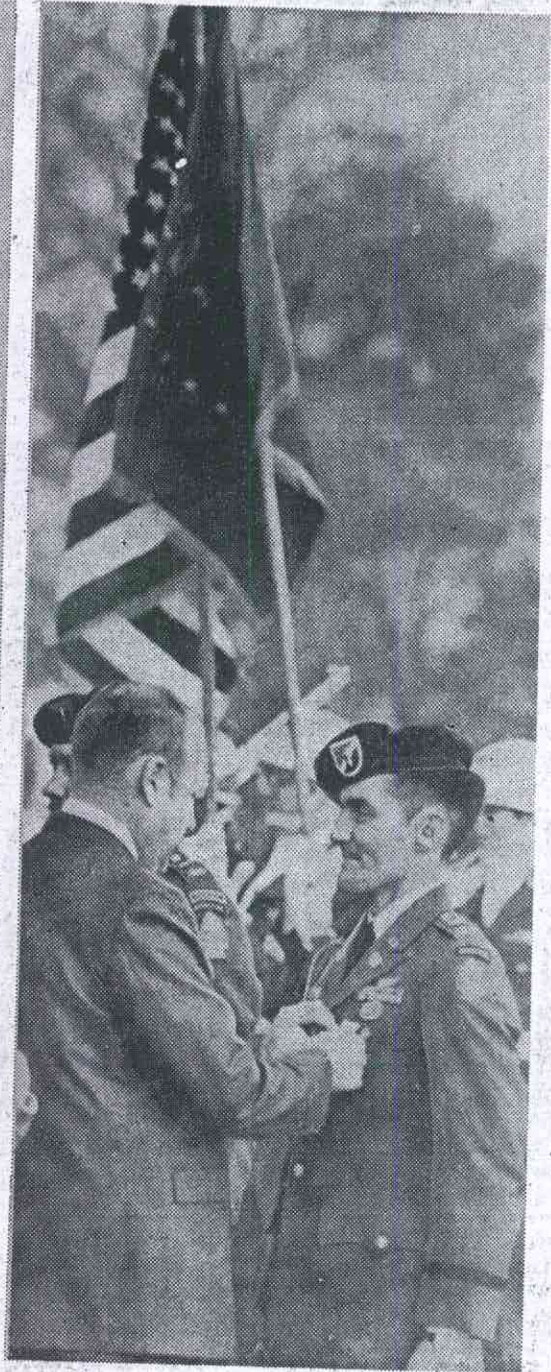
Rifle fire came from the convoy. But it could not move. The truck Adderly blew up with the grenade blocked the way.

Air Force Brig. Gen. LeRoy J. Manor, commander of the mission, which was dubbed Ivory Coast, said the column might have been a reinforcement for Sontay, but he was not sure.

Kemmer and Medenski were among 84 officers and men who received Silver Stars for their gallantry in the Sontay raid. Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird pinned the medals on the men, mostly Green Berets, in a ceremony here.

He also pinned on four Distinguished Service Crosses, four Air Force Crosses and four Distinguished Flying Crosses.

Counting four medals presented earlier by President Nixon at a White House ceremony, and another Silver Star awarded at the Citadel today, all 101 Air Force and Army men who participated in the Sontay raid have been decorated. About half that number were actually on the ground at Sontay.



Associated Press

Green Beret Capt. Udo H. Walther and three comrades line up at Ft. Bragg to receive medals from Defense Secre-

tary Laird for Sontay prison rescue attempt. At right Laird pins DFC on CWO John J. Ward. Ninety-six men got medals.