

Nov. 29, 1970

The Washington Post

Location of key points in Sontay POW camp raid.

The Sontay Story

Action Heavier, Scope Greater Than First Accounts Indicated

The following article was written by William Chapman from reports by Marilyn Berger, Michael Getler, Murrey Marder and Chalmers M. Roberts.

In a sense, it resembled much of the total American military effort in Vietnam—a remarkably daring escapade filled with personal valor, but in the end fruitless and frustrating.

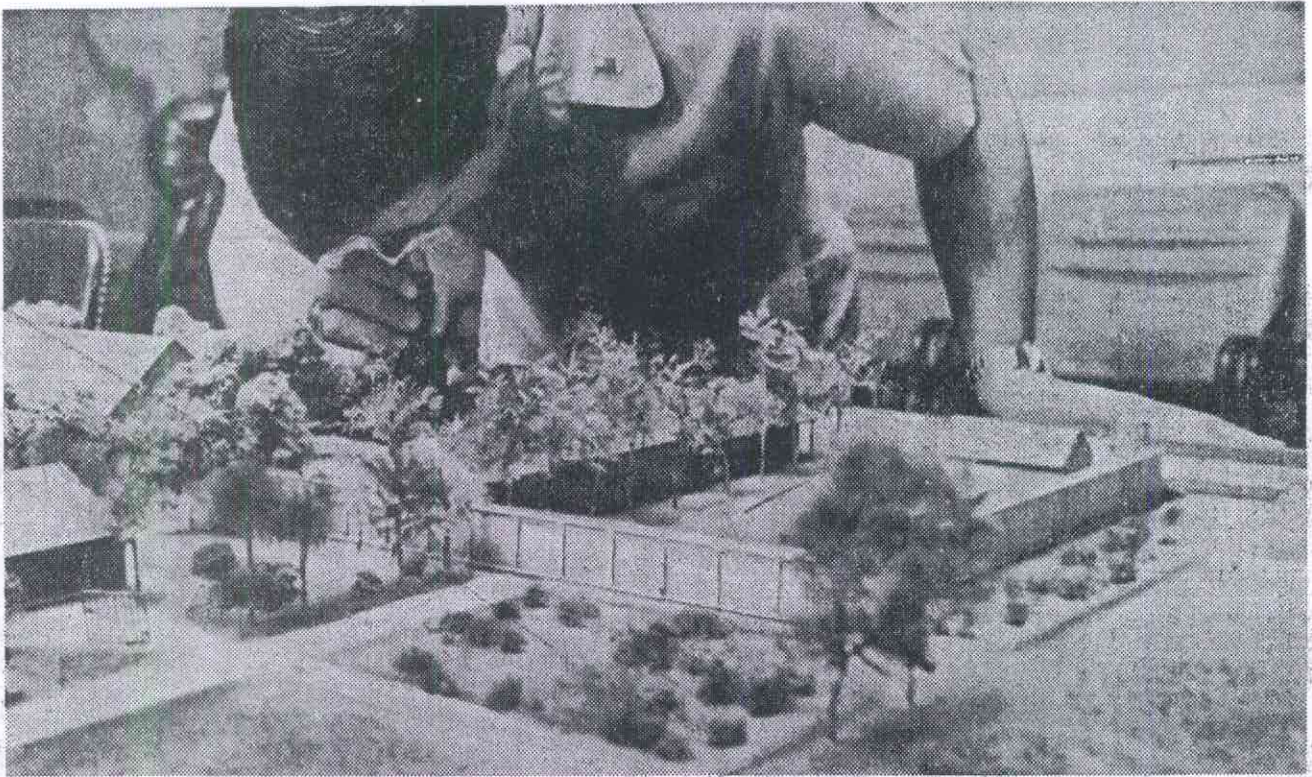
For more than two hours in moonlight on Nov. 21, an improbable armada of helicopters and old prop-driven planes droned along a circuitous route from Thailand bases, through Laos, to a small North Vietnamese compound at Sontay, only 23 miles west of Hanoi. Their mission: To rescue a group of American prisoners of war believed held there.

At the scene, the action was heavy—far heavier than initial U.S. statements suggested. Near Sontay, west of Hanoi, attack planes and gunships blasted enemy troop positions and antiaircraft sites, strafed a bridge, dropped clustered antipersonnel bomblets, exploded dummy bombs to confuse ground troops. East of Hanoi, carrier-based Navy planes dropped decoy flares, feinted toward the mainland, and fired some Shrike air-to-ground missiles at enemy radar installations. At Sontay, about 50 U.S. soldiers scampered through the compound, killing an estimated 25 North Vietnamese troops, cutting locks on doors and finding—no one.

All the action—the entire, splendidly coordinated escapade—was undertaken, it turned out, without any sure knowledge that American prisoners would be found—and amid some doubts that they would be. It was conceived by the military and endorsed by Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird and President Nixon.

Only the top State Department officials knew about it and the normal mechanisms of American foreign and military policy were bypassed, presumably to preserve maximum secrecy.

See RAIDS, A12, Col. 3



Associated Press

A model of North Vietnam's Sontay prisoner of war camp is studied by an officer at Eglin Air Force Base, Fla. Scale of the model is about one inch for ten feet. The officer is using a periscope to peer inside the walls of the camp.

RAIDS, From A1

Only gradually have the details of the Sontay rescue raid trickled out and even as they came they raised more questions than there were answers. Why take the risk when the gain admittedly seemed dubious? Did the raid and the subsequent air attacks south of the 19th parallel presage an enlargement of the war in Vietnam? Did American officials willfully risk collapse of the Paris peace talks or did they hope the raids might revive them? And given the zig-zag character of U.S. revelations was the administration's credibility gap widened?

What follows is an attempt by Washington Post reporters to piece together the essential elements of the Sontay story — the planning, its execution, and its possible meaning.

Discussed in August

It was in mid-August that the rescue mission came to the level of White House at-

tention. Mr. Nixon discussed the operation on Nov. 18 with Laird, Secretary of State William P. Rogers, Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Henry A. Kissinger, the President's national security adviser.

Even at that time, according to reliable sources, Moorer was advising that there was no certainty the prisoners would be found at Sontay. It was said that reconnaissance planes could not fly continuously over the compound without alerting the enemy. And as Laird was later to lament, reconnaissance cameras cannot see through roofs.

Defense officials say there was hard evidence that Sontay had been used for American prisoners, but would not divulge when the last hard piece of intelligence of their presence had been gathered.

As one assented "Sontay is not like Stalag-17," an open compound. "There weren't hundreds of guys roaming around the yard. They are inside small cells rotting. What you normally see

from the air are guards."

But it is obvious that the latest intelligence used in the mission was at least several weeks old, since Air Force Brig. Gen. Leroy J. Manor, the man in over-all charge of organizing the raid, has estimated the camp was vacant that long. Other sources said it might have been vacant for several months.

Others More Optimistic

Military planners, however, were said to be more optimistic than Moorer and Laird about finding the POWs in their cells and extremely confident they could be brought to safety without serious mishap.

But there was no disposition by Laird or Moorer to call off the raid if there was a chance of saving POWs, if the raid could be pulled off without surrendering another 50 to 100 men to the prison camps, and if the entire episode did not resemble an invasion of North Vietnam.

Any lingering doubts were dissolved, it was reported, by Presided Nixon's own

conviction that—successful or not—the raid would demonstrate to all U.S. prisoners they had not been forgotten and that they would take heart from news of the event.

Laird particularly was moved to make the attempt, he said, by reports (whose nature is still undisclosed) that American POWs were dying in the camps.

The final, and probably unnecessary, authorization came in unusual form on the Thursday preceding the Saturday raids. At a National Security Council meeting called to discuss other matters, Mr. Nixon slipped Laird a note. It said that the rescue mission had his whole hearted support regardless of the outcome. There would be no second-guessing. On Friday, informed that the weather

conditions were satisfactory, Mr. Nixon gave the final "go" signal.

Throughout these pre-raid planning sessions, much of the normal foreign policy apparatus was kept in the dark. At the State Department, only Rogers and Under Secretary for Political Affairs U. Alexis Johnson were informed from the outset.

Another high State Department official normally involved with such affairs said he had known nothing about the raid. "I was not in on the planning," he said. "I didn't know it was being considered or planned. I just wasn't involved."

Neither the National Security Council nor the Washington Special Action Group, both of which might be expected to play a role, were called in. On Capitol Hill, Sen. John Stennis (D-Miss.), chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee and a staunch administration ally on Vietnam tactics, said he hid not know about the raid in advance. Whether he should have been told, he said, was up to President Nixon.

By the time Mr. Nixon's final decision was given, the carefully selected volunteer force of Rangers, Green Berets, and Air Force rescue experts had undergone extensive training, most of it at Eglin Air Force Base, Fla.

Attack Practical

In Eglin's 800 square

miles along the Florida gulf coast, in terrain very reminiscent of Vietnam's, the men practiced more than 100 simulated attacks in a mock-up compound. It was only a week before the actual raid that the rescue crew arrived in South Vietnam, sources recalled.

To manage the raid, Laird turned to two experienced officers. Gen. Manor, an expert on Southeast Asia with 345 combat missions, is known as a stickler for tough, precision training and planning.

Picked to lead the mission was Col. Arthur D. (Bull) Simons, who had led a Ranger company in the Pacific during World War II and is an acknowledged specialist in small-unit tactics for the Army.

In Vietnam, the activities around Sontay and over Laos and the Gulf of Tonkin were commanded by Gen. Manor. He and his staff reportedly operated from a base in the northern part of South Vietnam, probably in the mountains which afford good communications to the north.

The raid itself began shortly before midnight, Hanoi time, Friday, Nov. 20. From two airbases in northeast Thailand—Udorn and Nakhon Phanom—six to eight big Air Force HH-53 helicopters and fewer than 10 A-1 Skyraider attack planes and transports redesigned as gunships began wending their way at tree-top level toward Sontay, 400 miles to the east.

Used in Rescues

A rugged, single-engine plane, the A-1 has been in use for almost 25 years. It can fly for long hours at very low level and deliver heavy loads of machine gun fire, rockets and bombs. It is frequently used for search and rescue missions to ward off enemy soldiers while helicopters pick up downed pilots.

Aboard some of the helicopters were Col. Simons and the rescue team. The HH-53s can carry 40 men at about 200 m.p.h. They are armed with three machine guns and can be refueled in flight. Pentagon sources said the helicopters were refueled over Laos enroute to Sontay.

Accompanying the assault

force as air cover were a handful of Air Force F-105s than the helicopter and prop planes, picking their way through holes in the North Vietnamese air defense radar coverage that U.S. intelligence had mapped out.

U.S. officials maintain that the landing at Sontay was tactically perfect, carried out with complete surprise.

In the first combat action of the mission, the attack planes and gunships broke away from the choppers and swooped down on enemy troop positions and anti-aircraft sites outside the camp. They also strafed a small bridge crossing a stream to the west of the compound. The raids, according to reliable sources, were all around the camp and within about two miles of the compound.

Dummy Bombs Exploded

The planes dropped anti-personnel bombs to discourage enemy troops based on the other side of the stream from coming across to the prisoner compound. They exploded dummy "noisemaker" bombs near the troop positions but in the opposite direction of the camp. An official claimed this created "total enemy confusion," causing troops to come out of the barracks and head in the wrong direction.

Moments before the raids, Navy planes from aircraft carriers in the Tonkin Gulf began dropping flares and feinting toward the mainland to divert North Vietnamese air defenses into thinking that an attack was coming from the coast.

Defense officials said about 35 enemy SAM missiles were indiscriminately fired at the Navy planes and some at planes over Sontay to the west. No U.S. planes were hit, they said. The first fire drawn by the landing team came only one minute before the lead helicopter, carrying some of the raiders sliced into the 90-foot yard inside the compound.

The Pentagon also now acknowledges that "something less than a dozen" Shrike anti-radar missiles were also fired by Navy pilots in the diversionary raids to the east, near the port of Hai-phong and by Air Force pilots inland. They insist that

no actual bombing raid was undertaken by the Navy pilots. When electronic devices inside their cockpits warn of a SAM missile radar locked on to their plane pilots are free to fire a Shrike in self-defense.

Other Navy F-4 Phantom fighter-bombers were airborne off the east coast of North Vietnam in case enemy Migs rose to challenge the landing force or its Air Force cover planes. Still more fighters were airborne over Laos for the same purpose, but no Migs rose to fight.

Guard Tower Hit

Shortly after 2 a.m., Hanoi time, the vanguard of the commando team slammed into the courtyard at Sontay. A guard tower on the western side of the walled complex had been sprayed with machine gun fire on the way in. Other choppers landed outside the campin blocking positions in case of enemy attack on the ground.

The weather was clear and there was a rising quarter moon. (The moon had been a major planning factor, with planners reportedly demanding a quarter moon, which provides enough light for pilots but leaves the ground relatively dark.)

Simons and his raiders, their faces blackened, dashed from the helicopter and began moving through the search plan they had practiced back in Florida.

The guards were taken by surprise, officials said, and some of them ran away. About 25 were killed. The raiding party carried fast-firing M-16 automatic rifles, submachine guns, and grenade launchers.

Using acetylene torches, flying higher and faster saws, and lock-breakers, Simons and his men broke into dozens of cells in two main prison buildings and one by one discovered that the prize they came for wasn't there.

"There was a lot of noise, smoke and firing — and yet it was very quiet," Green Beret Lt. George W. Petrie told The New York Times. "We hollered and yelled at them and nobody hollered

back. All we got back was an echo. It was like hollering in an empty room."

Within 40 minutes, the men had moved out to waiting helicopters, having intentionally exploded the one that crash-landed inside the compound. Although administration officials and legislators briefed on the mission in closed session last week refused to say if any North Vietnamese were carried out by the raiders, high-level government officials said yesterday that no prisoners were taken.

En route back to Thailand, the helicopters went down to pull out an American pilot who had been shot down while flying one of the fighters being held in reserve to tangle with any Migs.

It was still dark when the Sontay raiding team made it safely back to Thailand. No planes had been hit. One man was wounded slightly by enemy ground fire and another had broken his foot in several places during the crash-landing.

The man who broke his foot reportedly did not mention it until he had completed his task and the hostile fire had ended.

Bombing Attack

About six hours later, in what the administration insists was an entirely separate action, the first wave of some 250 U.S. fighter-bombers and support planes began attacking targets in the southern part of North Vietnam below the 19th parallel. It was said to be in retaliation for the downing of an unarmed U.S. reconnaissance plane on Nov. 13.

Had it not been for those attacks on North Vietnamese missile and anti-aircraft bases, the story of Sontay might not have been told, at least for some time. The intertwining of them — and the administration's way of handling them — also led to a new crisis of credibility as details emerged under pressure in the past week.

After the Hanoi radio declared that widespread areas of North Vietnam, including the section around Hanoi,

had been attacked, Laird said nothing on Saturday about the Sontay raid. He spoke only of "protective reaction" attacks south of the 19th parallel and said they did not occur near Hanoi. He specifically denied any POW camp had been bombed.

On Monday, the deputy assistant secretary of defense for public affairs, Jerry W. Friedheim, repeatedly dodged questions about any attack in the Hanoi area, doggedly sticking to language dealing only with attacks south of the 19th parallel.

Explanations by Laird

By Monday afternoon, Laird explained the Sontay assault for the first time, declaring it was the "only" operation north of the 19th parallel the past weekend. But neither his narrative nor that of the commanders with him suggested the scope of the Sontay raid. He referred to the "small rescue team" but not to the extensive airpower employed for cover or the firing of Shrike missiles, anti-personnel bombs, and dud bombs.

Not until late in the week were the Shrike missiles acknowledged.

It was, ironically, President Nixon himself who virtually forced the admissions. He told soldiers attending a Thanksgiving dinner at the White House that there had been "an air attack on a nearby military base" and that there had been a "simulated bombing raid." It was then announced at the Pentagon that "appropriate ordnance" had been used against military installations in the vicinity of Sontay.

Mr. Nixon also raised the distinct possibility that more such Sontays may be in store. He reportedly told a soldier that the "possibility of more raids should not be overlooked." He promised to "use any means to get the prisoners released," although he said he preferred diplomatic means.