

The Sontay Raid: How It Developed

By Michael Getler

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In August, when the plan to rescue American prisoners of war from a camp on the outskirts of Hanoi moved into high gear, the first vital decision facing the Joint Chiefs of Staff was to find a man to lead the raid.

Recommendations by the Army's most experienced combat commanders produced a long list of names. But, according to one official, "for this mission no one came close to 'Bull' Simons. He was way out in front on almost everyone's list."

Last Saturday morning, Hanoi time, a big camouflaged Air Force helicopter sliced through the pre-dawn darkness at tree-top level and crash-landed 52-year-old "Bull" Simons and the vanguard of about 50 hand-picked Army rangers, Green Berets and Air Force para-rescue specialists into the center of the prison compound at Sontay.

By Monday afternoon, Simons, along with Air Force Brig. Gen. Leroy J. Manor, the man in over-all charge of organizing the raid, were in Washington, facing the lights and clatter of a press conference. Their once top-secret mission had been revealed moments earlier by Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird, who was under pressure to explain the full extent of American raids on North Vietnam that weekend.

It had been only about three months since the two officers and their still anonymous squad of raiders had begun intensive training for their mission, much of the training at Eglin Air Force base on Florida's Gulf coast.

Eglin was an ideal location. The base is the biggest Air Force facility in the country, and within its 800 square miles can be found jungle terrain more like Vietnam than any other place in the U.S.

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It is at Eglin that the Air Force four years ago had built mock SAM missile sites and Vietnamese villages where U.S. pilots could develop new bombing and SAM evasion tactics, and where new bombs were tested to see if they could get through the high, thick jungle canopy without exploding before they hit the ground.

It was also within the expansive privacy of Eglin, according to informed sources, that the Air Force, using reconnaissance photos of the prison camp at Sontay, built a replica of the POW compound in August for Manor, Simons and their men to rehearse the forthcoming raid. "By the time they landed," one Army officer says, "they knew whether to turn left or right."

At 49, New York-born Gen. Manor is the commander of the Special Operations Force at Eglin, a euphemism for a collection of unconventional warfare teams that specialize in everything from psychological warfare, to defoliation, to the training of

foreign officers and special infiltration teams.

Under his belt are 345 combat missions in World War II and Vietnam, and three years as the Air Force's top briefing officer in the Pentagon on all aspects of the war in Southeast Asia.

Most important in Manor's background for the Sontay mission, say fellow officers, was his knack for intensive and precision training.

Manor moved with the special "Joint Contingency Tack Group Ivory Coast" set up for the Sontay operation to South Vietnam and is believed to have set up headquarters in the northern sector of the country.

A break in the monsoon weather in the Hanoi area set the plan in motion in the pre-dawn darkness of Nov. 20.

The force under Manor's control, Pentagon sources report, included several helicopters, believed to be the Air Force's HH-53 which can fly at 210 m.p.h. and can be refueled in flight. Some of these carried Simons and his men, others would have carried out the prisoners, about 70 of whom were believed to be in the camp. A small group of Air Force fighters escorted the choppers, while off shore Navy carrier airplanes dropped flares and feinted towards

mainland targets in an apparently successful attempt to surprise and divert North Vietnamese air defenses.

Hovering over the POW site was at least one helicopter which could have been used to relay emergency communications from Simons back to Manor.

On the ground, Simons, who led a Ranger battalion in the Pacific during the dog days of World War II, and his men worked their way through the compound cells with acetylene torches, saws and lock breakers.

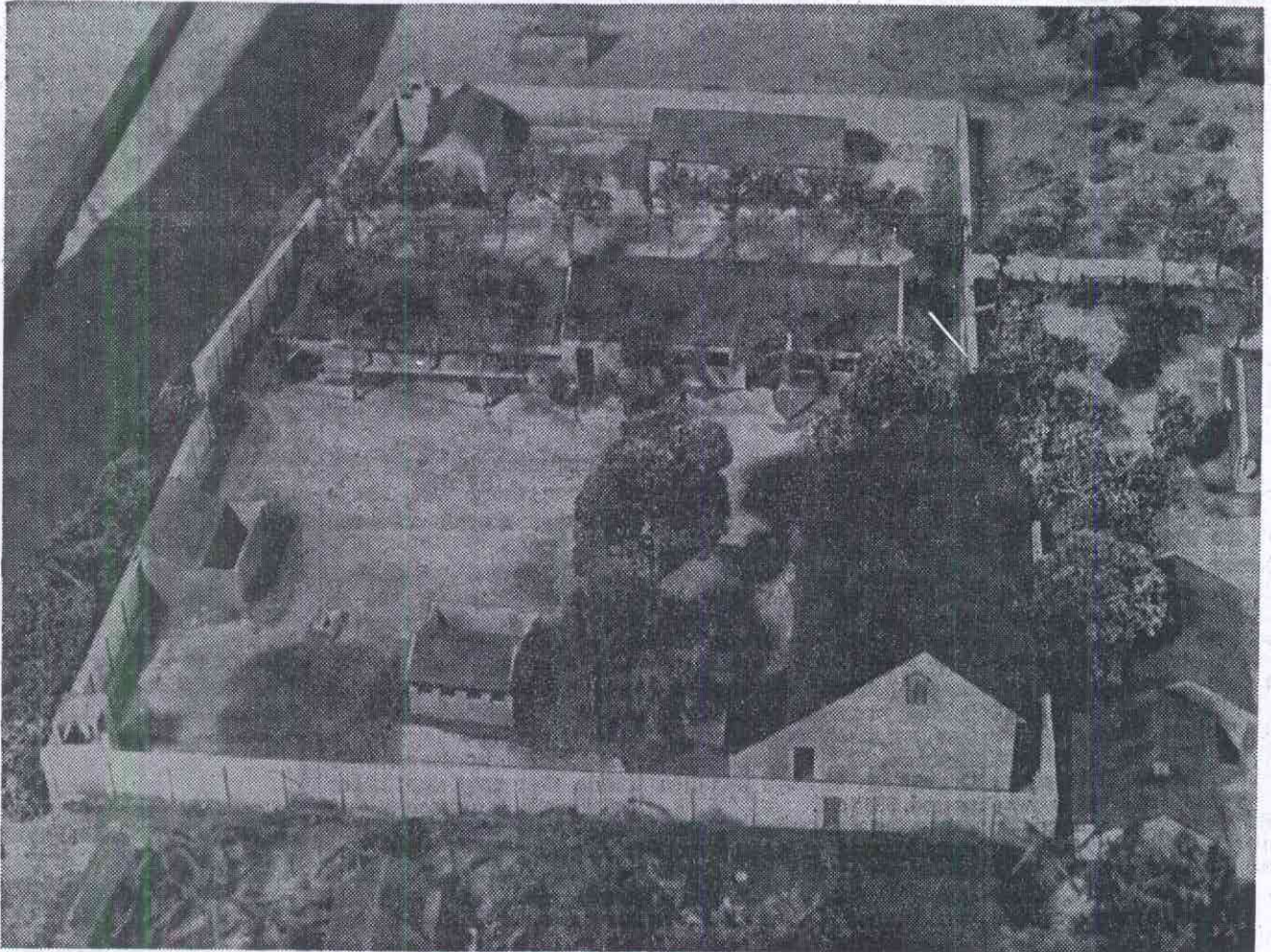
Door by door, they learned that the objective of their dangerous and well-intentioned mission had eluded them.

Not only were there no prisoners, but in a few days a heroic and, from all accounts, perfectly executed, raid would become the center of a political controversy.

It would not have been the first time. In March 1945, Gen. George S. Patton sent a tank column to break into an American POW camp in Germany. The camp was liberated, but on the way out the tanks were ambushed, bringing heavy losses plus a barrage of criticism for the famous general.

At the Pentagon press

briefing on Monday, however, Simons and Manor were not the target of any criticism. Simons, actually, looks too tough even to be pressed on questions he does not want to answer. But behind that chest full of ribbons is an ex-ROTC student at the University of Missouri with a degree in journalism.



United Press International

Training model of the prisoner-of-war compound at Sontay shows watchtower at lower left. The white open area at left center is the site where the Army-Air Force rescue team landed, only to find that no prisoners were there.