

Vietnam Incident

Author's Story of POW Camp Raid

Washington

U.S. commandos raided a North Vietnam prisoner-of-war camp in 1970 despite reports it was empty, and killed 100 to 200 Russian or Chinese soldiers in a battle that erupted when many raiders hit the wrong target, according to the author of a new book.

Benjamin Schemmer, author of a forthcoming book titled "The Raid," said Defense Secretary Melvin Laird and other officials received intelligence reports that Son Tay camp was empty but authorized the raid anyway because aerial photos suggested someone might still be there. The raid occurred on Nov. 21, 1970.

Schemmer, who said he interviewed men who took part in the raid, as well as POWs and intelligence sources, said none of the volunteer commandos knew the camp might be empty and, in any event, most of them were landed by helicopter at a heavily guarded antiaircraft training school 600 yards away.

"The largest part of the raiding force landed there by mistake and killed 100 to 200 Russian or Chinese troops," Schemmer said.

He said the commandos, in the heat of the battle, could not tell positively whether their opponents were Russians or Chinese.

Laird announced the raid in a Nov. 23, 1970, news conference, saying there had been no serious U.S. casualties and that President Nixon approved the attack as a means of saving U.S. prisoners.

According to Schemmer, 56 Green Beret volunteers flew in by helicopter from Thailand.

He said they expected to encounter North Vietnamese guards at Son Tay but not the well armed foreigners at the neighboring school, and that a battle ensued when most of the party landed there.

Neither Laird nor any other U.S. official mentioned any engagement with Soviet or Chinese troops and no official has admitted publicly there was advance information the camp was empty.

Son Tay had held 60 to 70 Americans as one of North Vietnam's scattered, cramped prison compounds, but Schemmer said the prisoners had been removed July 14 because of flooding.

He said U.S. intelligence photos "showed the camp to be increasingly inactive and empty."

About 18 hours before the raid, he said — after Laird had sent a message giving the go-ahead — U.S. intelligence got from a carefully cultivated North Vietnamese source the information that Son Tay was empty.

Laird was told, Schemmer said, but chose to launch the raid anyway because infrared sensors on an SR-71 reconnaissance plane "flying at above 80,000 feet and over three times the speed of sound showed that someone was back in the prison."

Schemmer said many returned prisoners supported the view that the raid would have been worthwhile anyway because it was a tremendous morale booster for captured Americans.

After the raid, Schemmer said, the prisoners were collected from scattered camps where poor conditions existed and housed on the island compound that came to be known as the Hanoi Hilton.

For the first time, he said, they were given the chance to talk to each other and to get minimal medical treatment. The move, he said, meant that some were released from years of solitary confinement.