

Text of Pentagon News Conference on

Following is a transcript of Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird's news conference in Washington yesterday, as recorded by The New York Times through the facilities of A.B.C. News:

I want to give you now the details of the only operation that took place north of the 19th Parallel this past weekend.

Some months ago, in the face of the continued and adamant refusal of the other side either to abide by the provisions of the Geneva Convention or to participate in meaningful negotiations on the exchange of prisoners of war, I had prepared, with the approval of the President, contingency plans for a possible search-and-rescue effort of as many of our prisoners as possible.

A special task force of volunteers from the Army and the Air Force was assembled to train for this mission.

'Highest Order of Dedication'

I cannot give you the details of their training except to say that it was meticulous, suggestive, often around-the-clock and represented the highest order of dedication and professionalism. Recognizing that we would be forced to operate on necessarily limited intelligence and recognizing also the hazards of the mission, the President, on my recommendation, gave approval for the operation early morning of Friday, Nov. 20.

A key factor in the final decision to launch this far mission, this search-and-rescue mission, was the new information we received this month that some of our men were dying in prisoner-of-war camps. My recommendation was based on the same motivation that has prompted our steadfast readiness to mount the numerous search-and-rescue attempts in enemy territory whenever there is a possibility of us saving American lives.

This policy has the President's strong and unqualified support. It should be a source of great pride to all Americans if there are military men who volunteer for such search-and-rescue missions.

On Friday, Nov. 20, shortly after 2 P.M., Eastern standard time, which was about 2 A.M. in North Vietnam. A small rescue team successfully landed by helicopter at a reported prisoner-of-war compound at Sontay, approximately 20 nautical miles west of Hanoi.

The operation was under the over-all command of two distinguished officers whom I would like to introduce to you at this time. They are Brig. Gen. Leroy J. Manor, United States Air Force, who was in over-all command of the operation, and Col. Arthur D. Simonds, United States Army, who led the team in the search-and-rescue attempt. They arrived in Washington early this morning.

Camp Recently Vacated

Operating in darkness, Colonel Simonds and his men landed, entered and searched the compound where the prisoners of war reportedly were being held. Regrettably, the rescue team discovered that the camp had recently been vacated.

No prisoners were located. The fire team, according to its well-rehearsed plan, searched every building, broke the locks on doors of rooms which had been used as detention cells. They successfully returned to safety without suffering a single serious casualty.

One rescue helicopter which made a controlled crash landing in the compound was destroyed intentionally, pre-

cisely according to the plan prior to the evacuation of the rescue teams.

Before General Manor and Colonel Simonds answer your questions, bearing in mind the need at all times to maintain security, I want to conclude my statement by stating my belief that if there had been prisoners in the compound at Sontay, they would be free men today.

Message of Tribute

I also would like to read to you the message I asked the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to send to General Manor and Colonel Simonds and to their men. The message is as follows:

"The President has asked that I express to you, to Colonel Simonds and to the officers and men of your command, his deepest appreciation for the gallant humanitarian effort which you have made. The daring and courageous performance which marked this hazardous mission was inspirational. He is proud of the magnificent example of skill, courage and devotion so valiantly demonstrated by you and by your men.

"The Secretary of Defense and I share fully the Commander in Chief's sentiments. We commend the high sense of duty which your long weeks of training and your dedication exemplify. There are no tributes greater than the willingness to sacrifice one's life for others. You and your men have earned that tribute."

This was the cable sent to these men and to this fire team.

Gentlemen, we shall continue to make every effort to free our prisoners of war. I'll be glad to respond to questions, either the General, or Colonel Simonds.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 24, 1970

U.S. Rescue Mission

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Into North Vietnam

Questions and Answers

Q. Mr. Secretary, is this the first time that American forces have been used in North Vietnam, or has this happened in the past?

A. This has happened in the past. We have carried on fire missions in North Vietnam quite regularly. This is not the first time a fire mission has been conducted in North Vietnam.

Q. Is there any indication, Mr. Secretary, that the surprise element was compromised in Saigon or in some way?

A. I would like to have Colonel Simonds reply to that question. He was there on the ground, and I believe that he is better qualified.

A. No, sir, there were no indications at all. We caught them completely by surprise.

Q. Colonel, could you tell us how many men were in the mission and how they were transported to Hanoi?

A. No, I cannot tell you either how many men — it was a small, mixed joint helicopter-borne force. That's all I can tell you.

Q. Did you receive any enemy fire, any exchange of fire at all?

A. Yes, there was enemy fire.

Q. How many North Vietnamese soldiers were after you?

A. I can't tell you that. It was night. The reason I say there was enemy fire, we got one man who was very slightly wounded by an AK-47. We could tell from the sound of the gun that an AK-47 was firing.

Q. General, could you start from the beginning and just



The New York Times

AT CONFERENCE ON RAID: As Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird told of American operation in North Vietnam, Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, looked at map showing its location. A pointer held by an aide indicates the spot.

tell us right straight through what happened?

A. No, sir, I don't think I can do that. I think I'll have to answer your questions.

Q. Did this mission have a code name?

A. I can't answer that question.

Q. What was the purpose of essentially crashing those helicopters?

A. Our purpose was to get the helicopter in with the troops aboard it safely. We had no idea of bringing it out—it was a confined area. My only consideration—no consideration to the damage to the helicopter as long as it did not damage the people aboard it.

Q. What kind of helicopter was it?

A. I can't answer that.

Q. Did you land right in the prison, sir?

A. Yes.

Q. Was it deployed from an aircraft carrier?

A. I can't answer that.

Q. Did you fire before you landed, sir? Fire as you were flying in, fire from the ground, or fire only when you reached the ground?

A. I think there was a slight amount of ground fire before we came in.

Enemy Fire Received

Mr. LAIRD. Colonel, we might add something to that. It might be well to point out that the mission did receive quite a bit of fire. There were 30 fan missiles fired and some of them were fired at rather low altitude, and I believe that they resulted in considerable damage.

Firing a fan missile at such a low range, the explosion would take place over occupied territory in North Vietnam. There of course were diversionary action taken along the coast in lighting flares by Navy planes to divert the attention of, from this fire mission, but these diversionary actions did draw fire as well as fire upon the helicopters involved. Perhaps, General Manor, you'd comment on that?

A. You know, before I comment on that, Mr. Secretary, I would like to take this opportunity to pay a tribute to the officers and men who were under my command who volunteered to participate on this hazardous operation.

It is perhaps the most élite group of individuals I have had the pleasure to command, the joint contingent task group that performed the mission.

Q. General, could you tell us where did you get your volunteers?

A. We got them from throughout the Army and the Air Force.

Q. General, how many men had you hoped to free by this missions?

A. I can't answer the number that we had hoped that there would be a considerable number, a good percentage of those that we know that the North Vietnamese hold.

Q. Did you have an alternate target that you might have hit?

A. I cannot answer that.

Q. Sir, were there any enemy casualties inflicted?

A. I'd just like to add one thing to the general's statement, and that is that in planning for this operation a prisoner of war, an alleged prisoner of war site was picked that would have given an opportunity to make the necessary landing. As you know, the prisoner-of-war facilities in North Vietnam are not marked in accordance with the Geneva Convention, and there is evidence from time to time that our prisoners of war have been moved. This has happened, of course, in World War II with prisoner-of-war campus and it's not unusual.

What is important about this very mission performed by these outstanding members of the United States Army and the United States Air Force, I think, was that they were able to get into this area and get out without suffering any substantial cas-

ualty at all, and all men were recovered.

Q. Could you tell us, sir, whether the raids conducted below the 19th parallel were planned as a cover for this mission?

A. No, they were not. Those raids followed this particular mission. There were diversionary operations of a very small nature that were used, but there was no ordnance involved as far as North Vietnam was concerned above the 19th parallel and there was diversionary missions which were flown by the United States Navy.

And I want to make that very evident to all of you here that the largest part of the activity—and of course the helicopter was blown up and there was other firing—but the largest part of the activity within North Viet-

nam was that of catching the North Vietnamese air defense completely unaware, and the fact that they were expending antiaircraft fire, and over 30 SAM missiles at this particular time were fired from a very low altitude.

Q. Sir, were there any instances where our forces in this search-and-rescue operation, or the diversionary forces, did any bombing at all or any strafing, and could you give us an indication just what sort of weapons firing there was on our part?

A. The amount of weapons firing involved—and I'll turn the questions over to the commander of the operation as well as to Colonel Simonds—was a very minimum of firing. Of course the tower and other facilities were fired as at the first helicopter was landing inside the compound. Aid it was necessary to protect the safety of the crew that was landing to destroy the guard tower.

But the amount of ammunition and the amount of ordnance expended was very small as compared with the firing that did take place as far as the North Vietnamese were concerned. But perhaps General Manor. . . .

Q. Could you explain the timing, General, comparing your mission with the retaliatory below the 19th parallel?

Need of Protection Cited

A. As the Secretary mentioned, the two were not necessarily connected. Regarding the question on ordnance, I'm sure that you can realize for an operation of this type we must carry some protection with us to protect the lives of the men who are participating. But the ordnance that we carried was specifically selected for that purpose, with that purpose in mind, to suppress the enemy's capability to inflict casualties on our force.

Q. Did you take any prisoners, temporarily or permanently, on this operation?

A. I can't answer that.

Q. Did you find any graves or other evidence that some of our prisoners had been dying?

A. We found no specific evidence. However, you must remember that this was at night and we weren't searching for that. We were searching for the prisoners themselves so that we could bring them out.

Q. Was there any indication how long they were gone, any indication how long that camp had been abandoned?

A. Several weeks. However, again you must realize that the type of construction in that part of the world will deteriorate rapidly when not used.

Q. How long were you on the ground?

A. Less than an hour.

Q. How many guys did you kill? Did you kill anybody in that ground skirmishing? Did you fire your weapons?

A. I'll call on Colonel Simonds for an answer to that question.

A. Yes, we did fire our weapons.

Q. General, was anything wrong with your intelligence?

A. I should imagine so. Certainly we didn't go around and count bodies or determine if anybody was dead. We fired only when it appeared that it threatened the success of the mission.

Q. Who do you blame for the intelligence failure?

A. I can't answer that question at all. I'm not sure I know what you mean by intelligence failure.

Q. If these people were gone three weeks, it indicates you don't use daily reconnaissance flights of these prisoner-of-war camps.

A. I can't even comment on your question.

'Very Difficult Assignment'

A. I'll comment briefly on that. As you probably are aware, the location of prisoner-of-war camps in the north is indeed a very difficult assignment. The prisoners of war are not exercised on a regular basis, and it is most difficult to identify a prisoner-of-war camp.

The situation was such, however, that we were reasonably confident that this particular location had been used. We were reasonably confident that we could land this force at this location. And the location was indeed a very important factor in determining on Sontay, on the final determination as far as this particular alleged camp was concerned.

Q. Mr. Secretary, how many S.A.R. missions of approximately this scope have there been?

A. This was a larger mission of course than your normally would have when you have one or two pilots down. We have conducted over 30 S.A.R. missions this year and of course last year we conducted more. These troops that carry on the search-and-rescue missions are given indeed very difficult assignments. This search-and-rescue mission, as I said in my statement, was manned by

volunteers from the Air Force and the Army. And all of our S.A.R. missions have been manned by volunteers.

Q. Mr. Secretary, would you clear this up? Is this the first one, though, where they've gone in after prisoners and the ones before have been to go in to get men who have been shot down in flames. Is this the first one of this kind that's ever been run?

A. I would not want to say 'ever been run' because in World War II, those of you who have covered the Pentagon are aware of several of the missions that were conducted at that time. But this is the first S.A.R. mission conducted in North Vietnam on prisoners of war in, during, this war.

Outlook for Retaliation

Q. Do you think the enemy might retaliate against the American P.O.W.'s as a result of this mission?

A. I thought that question over very carefully and very thoroughly by the time that I recommended the mission to the Commander in Chief, our President.

One of the things that influenced me greatly was the recent report of prisoners dying in our prisoner of war compound.

I have spent many hours with the wives and the families, the mothers, the fathers and the children of the prisoners of war. Back in March of 1969, shortly after I became Secretary of Defense, this Administration initiated a program of going public on the prisoner-of-war matter. We have brought this matter up continually in Paris.

The President offered to exchange 35,000 for some 3,000 prisoners of war as far as the other side was concerned.

We have constantly brought this matter up in all of the capitals of the world.

There has been no indication on the part of the other side that they would abide by the Geneva Convention, and, as Secretary of Defense, I felt that I could not stand idly by and not take action and recommend action to demonstrate our concern for these men. And this mission, this daring mission which was conducted by these volunteers of the United States Air Force and the United States Army. I believe they show our dedication to these men and we will do everything that we can in our power to accomplish their early release.