

Laird Admits

No Evidence In POW Raid

Examiner News Services

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Melvin Laird conceded today that no aerial reconnaissance photographs ever showed American prisoners on the grounds of the Son Tay prison compound, where commandos made an unsuccessful raid Saturday.

"These men knew full well there was a chance there would be no one in the camp," Laird told a hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. But, he said, "I felt the risk was worth it."

He said the intelligence indicating American prisoners were being held at Son Tay came only from the photographs.

Laird, denying a breakdown in intelligence, said only a "camera that can see through the roofs of buildings" could have warned U.S. officials that the raid near Hanoi would be fruitless. He said the United States has no ground intelligence network in North Vietnam.

Answering charges by some Senators that the raid had revealed an intelligence failure and might have jeopardized the lives of American captives, Laird said he "could not ignore the fact that our men were dying in captivity."

Secret Training

Accordingly, he said, he recommended to President Nixon early Friday morning that Army Green Beret and Air Force volunteers carry out the rescue mission for which they had been secretly training since Aug. 20.

The United States had access, he said, to "the best intelligence we could possibly have had."

He said the North Vietnamese let prisoners out for exercise only as a "special treat," sometimes only on holidays.

Earlier, Laird declined to

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at the Capitol, said the Pentagon knows of various other suspected POW camps in

North Vietnam but most are in populated areas where a surprise landing and rescue mission would be most difficult to attempt.

Laird said the raid "caught the North Vietnamese completely by surprise."

"Their entire air defense system was caught completely off guard," he told reporters at the Capitol.

The Defense Secretary, flanked by an Air Force lieutenant general carrying map cases, said the would-be rescuers found conditions in the raided camp very crude and said, "They confirm our worst suspicions . . ."

"This mission clearly has shown, I think, that the United States — that the people of this country — do care about our prisoners of war."

Laird first disclosed the raid yesterday. Also, a Pentagon source said the United States is keeping its options open on the possibility of more raids to free prisoners.

Laird was at the Capitol to give a report to the Senate Armed Services Committee, headed by Sen. John Stennis (D-Miss.).

Stennis termed the operation "a brilliant military maneuver — the getting in, the getting out, the planning, the exactness of time. It was an amazing performance."

Source of Figures

"It was a distinct achievement, in every way except of course that our men could not be rescued due to the fact that the camp was moved."

A spokesman told newsmen the Pentagon had been made aware in the past month by "unofficial channels" of between six and 17 possible American deaths in North Vietnamese prison camps.

The figures are believed to have come from an anti-war group in New York with ties to the North Vietnamese government.

The Pentagon spokesman said no details were given and it wasn't known whether

these were recent deaths or if they occurred some time ago.

Meanwhile, Presidential press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler told reporters: "We intend to pursue through every avenue the release of the prisoners of war."

Immediately, it was asked whether the commando act would bring retaliation by North Vietnam.

The White House answered:

"The United States would hold the leaders of North Vietnam personally responsible" for any reprisals taken against U.S. prisoners as a result of the unsuccessful rescue effort.

Describing the operation, Laird said the raiders hit the camp at 2 a.m., about the same time some 250 U.S. planes were striking missile, anti-aircraft and supply targets in North Vietnam's southern panhandle below the 19th parallel.

Navy planes dropped lighting flares off the North Vietnamese coast above the parallel as a diversionary tactic to draw attention from the commando force.

Although the "protective reaction" air strikes to the south may have helped confuse the North Vietnamese, Laird emphasized they were not intended as a cover for the rescue operation.

The raiders, according to accounts given by Laird and Pentagon sources, apparently went undetected by flying in under enemy radar, and drew fire only when they were over the camp. They were aided by an almost moonless night.

The first helicopter intentionally crash-landed inside the prison compound and the raiders, including some Army Green Berets, destroyed the guard tower.

Other helicopters followed. Every building was searched and the locks broken on the detention cells, but no prisoners were found. Enemy resistance was light.