

POW Rescue: It Was Tried Before

SAIGON — (AP) — The daring U.S. commando raid on North Vietnam Saturday was neither the first such raid into North Vietnam nor the first prisoner rescue attempt of the war in Indochina.

But while more than a score of American prisoners have escaped or been released by their Viet Cong or North Vietnamese captors, none of the prisoner rescue attempts is known to have succeeded.

Commando raids in the North have been going on ever since Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky, then commander of South Vietnam's 1st Air Transport Squadron, led so-called "black flights" which parachuted commando teams into North Vietnam in the mid-1950s.

American forces have for several years carried out reconnaissance and commando raids in Laos and Cambodia as well as North Vietnam.

Although Defense Secretary Melvin Laird said in Washington that Saturday's fruitless raid was the first search and rescue mission "conducted in North Vietnam on prisoners of war during this war," sources in South Vietnam said commando teams had previously attempted to locate prisoner of war camps or to free prisoners in North Vietnam.

Many of the raids into North Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia were launched from U.S. Special Forces camps along the South Vietnamese border.

Unmarked, camouflage-painted helicopters could often be seen picking up teams for insertion across the border.

Several South Vietnam Operations

Aircraft crew and commando team members wore unmarked uniforms, carried no dog tags or identification cards, and had so-called "sterile" weapons and equipment — such as the Swedish K submachine gun — supposedly

to enable the United States to deny responsibility if the teams were captured.

Several operations also have been run in South Vietnam specifically to recover American prisoners.

One carried out from Vinh Long, in the Mekong Delta, in mid-1967 was perhaps typical. It involved U.S. Navy Seals — naval counterparts of the Army's Green Berets — and South Vietnamese reconnaissance elements, with a Vietnamese Ranger battalion in reserve.

One flight of helicopters served as a diversion, flying with lights on and dropping flares. Another flight, without lights, inserted the Seal team.

But in the darkness the helicopters landed at the wrong spot, the Seal team got lost, and by the time the prison camp was located it had been abandoned.

Several similar operations have failed either because of faulty intelligence, security leaks, or the sort of simple mistake made in the Vinh Long operation.