

# Excerpts From Transcript

Following are excerpts from the transcript of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's open hearing in Washington yesterday on the rescue mission in North Vietnam as recorded by The New York Times through the facilities of A.B.C. News. Among those questioning Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird were Senators J. W. Fulbright, Frank Church and Claiborne Pell, Democrats, and George Aiken, Republican.

MR. FULBRIGHT. I don't like to say it was all a bad idea simply because it failed, but it did fail. There was something wrong with the intelligence.

MR. LAIRD. This was not a failure, Mr. Chairman, and I would . . .

Q. Well it was a failure . . .

A. This mission was carried on by a group of men that performed the mission with 100 per cent excellence.

Q. The men performed perfectly, but whoever directed it didn't, I mean.

A. These men knew full well the chance that there might not be P.O.W.'s present.

Q. I'm not complaining about the men, but those men responsible for it.

A. I would like to tell you, Mr. Chairman, that we have made tremendous progress as far as intelligence is concerned . . .

Q. You mean since Friday?

A. . . . But we have not been able to develop a camera that sees through the roofs of buildings. We had the intelligence in this mission was excellent.

But let me give you the intelligence rundown, as far as the location of troops were concerned, the location of buildings, the makeup of the camp, where the SAM missiles were located, where the anti-aircraft was located, where the radar blanks were in the radar screen so that we could make penetration without detection.

**"What Difference Does It Make?"**

Q. But, Mr. Secretary, I don't think this is relevant. There weren't any prisoners there, so what difference does it make?

A. There were prisoners there, Mr. Chairman, and we knew full well. What we have done here has shown all of these prisoners in North Vietnam that America does care.

Q. Was there any doubt that America cares about them?

A. Yes, I think there was a doubt. I'm sure that you've had an opportunity, as I have, to talk to the wives, mothers. I've talked to almost every wife. I've talked to these nine prisoners, I spent time with some of them that have returned. And there is a question in their minds as to whether America is showing . . .

Q. Well, there's no justification for it, I must say . . .

MR. GORE. You said you had had reports that six men had died in prison. This is to be regretted. When did you receive these reports?

A. Those reports were received earlier this month, Senator Gore. Since that time we have had further reports within this last week of—these have not been confirmed, of course, but these reports have come through channels that have had contact in Hanoi.

Q. Did your recommendation to the President for the making of this raid follow or precede these reports?

A. It followed the reports as far as the execution of this particular mission is concerned.

Q. When did you first recommend the mission to the President?

A. As far as the contingency planning was concerned, the contingency planning took place throughout the year, but as far as giving the go-ahead to construct a training site for this mission, that did not take place until some time in August. There was no order to execute the mission until the final order was given on Friday.

Q.—What I'm trying to get at, if you will assist me, is some explanation of the error in intelligence. This is a grave and a dangerous mission, executed with valor and bravery on the part of our soldiers at great risk to themselves. Surely it should not have been undertaken unless intelligence indicated clearly that the prisoners were there, whether it should have been done then.

A.—I would be pleased to have an opportunity to discuss that because I believe that the intelligence as far as the operation is concerned was the best intelligence we possibly could have.

First, we looked over all of the suspected P.O.W. camps, and these are suspected camps because the North Vietnamese are in violation of the Geneva Convention, which requires that all P.O.W. camps be designated. We had certain suspected areas where camps could possibly be located. We have, of course, photographic means of identifying these areas. We looked over all of the suspected P.O.W. areas and we found that of all the areas in North Vietnam this was the only camp which there were areas surrounding the camp that made it pos-

# of Senate Committee Hearing on .



The New York Times (by Mike Lien)

**LAIRD QUESTIONED BY SENATORS:** Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird, at center facing camera, at Foreign Relations Committee hearing on U.S. raid near Hanoi. At right is J. W. Fulbright of Arkansas, committee chairman.

sible for us to make a landing outside the camp for our ground forces—for our special-mission ground forces.

It also gave us the opportunity to make a landing with the initial assault force inside the camp itself.

Now the difficulty as far as our intelligence was that there is no camera that has ever been constructed that can go through the roof of these buildings. Our intelligence was accurate as to the location of every building. Everything was exactly as had been told.

#### 'The Risk Was Worth It'

Q. Except the prisoners were not there.

A. Senator Gore, I felt the risk was worth it and I recommended this mission, and I take the responsibility, but I cannot fault the intelligence that was supplied to us.

Q. My time has been used. Let me just state this if I may in conclusion. What I was trying to get at, Mr. Secretary, was not to be critical but to try to ascertain the time element rightly or wrongly. I had been advised that the mission had been in the planning stage for more than a month and that some of our, shall I say, allies in Saigon had given us away. I hope that is. . . .

A. I guarantee you the security was held on this mission. I will give you the date that I gave the approval as far as planning was concerned, and this was planning purposes only, because these men were trained after the planning date, the ap-

proval of planning was given on 11th day of August and the training started on the 20th day of August and they made 150 actual drops into the area.

We constructed this camp, we set this camp up and we took it down so that it couldn't be photographed by anyone, and these landings were made at night and these men were away from their families, there was no security break.

One of the first questions I asked Colonel Simons when he came to my office after flying all night yesterday morning for breakfast was: Was there any compromise as far as security, and he said, "If you could have seen that first guard who I saw just five feet away, you'd know there was no compromise as far as security was concerned, because he couldn't understand what was going on." And I'm sure that the security of these men was not compromised.

#### 'Where Are They Now?'

MR. AIKEN. Mr. Secretary, I think we're all generally agreed we cannot quit Southeast Asia or Indochina until all of the Americans which are held as prisoners or hostages by the North are accounted for and released. Now you undertook to rescue some of them by sending the helicopters to this camp where they were supposed to be. The prisoners were missing when you got there. Where are they now?

A. Mr. Chairman, the prisoners, and I have talked to the returning — we've had

very few prisoners return. We've only had nine since this war is going on. Most of these prisoners were taken from 1965 to 1968, when we were going north. They're mostly airmen from the Air Force, the Marine Corps and the Navy. These prisoners are moved quite regularly.

It's been the policy, we think, in these suspected prisoner compounds to move the men rather regularly and keep them as close to the heavily dense populated areas as possible. Some of the prisoners have been moved three and four times.

I cannot tell you exactly which of the suspected prisoner-of-war camps these prisoners were in—are in at the present time. We know that this was a prisoner-of-war camp. We have confirmed that on the basis of all of our intelligence. About every bit of information was correct on this P.O.W. camp, but I cannot, Senator Aiken, report to you where and in which camp, which of the suspected camps, these men are now detained.

Q. But you intend to continue your efforts until they are all rescued?

A. I intend to recommend, and that's my mission as Secretary of Defense, every possible avenue of approach that can be taken to see that these prisoners are free men.

Q. What possible avenues are there?

A. Well, of course, we felt that the exchange—the exchange of 35,000 in the South for some 3,000 in the North was a fair and honorable

proposition. That was rejected. I certainly will look at every possible avenue to see that these men are free men.

Mr. Church. Mr. Secretary, you've said that there is no camera that will shoot through the top of a building. But we have been undertaking aerial-reconnaissance flights over North Vietnam, and no doubt we've been taking aerial photographs of the courtyard, and you must have had evidence to suggest the American prisoners of war were there before you ordered the rescue mission. What kind of evidence did you have that suggested they were there to justify the risk of the mission?

A. We had the evidence of the construction, as I think you can see by this picture, of the model of the compound which was used in our training exercises.

Q. Did you have aerial photographs that showed our prisoners of war outside in the grounds at any time?

A. No, that is not something that you look for in a P.O.W. camp, Senator Church, because when we talked to some of the P.O.W.'s returning, the question of exercise was one that was given to them as a real treat, and sometimes it was only for holidays.

Q. You had no such photographs, then, of prisoners there?

A. No such photographs were available.

Q. Did you have other intelligence information suggesting that the prisoners were there?

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# P.O.W. Rescue Effort

A. We had very good intelligence information that this suspected P.O.W. camp had in fact had prisoners in it. Now that's all I care to say.

Q. And you anticipated, no doubt, that you'd find them when you ordered the mission?

A. We anticipated that we might find them. We felt that the possibilities were good. And I felt confident that this group of men could get in and free those prisoners and return to safety. I felt confident that they could get in and, even if there were not prisoners of war, they could get out and return to safety.

Q. Was there any evidence that the prisoners had been evacuated just before the mission, or within a day or two?

A. No, there was no evidence of that. As a matter of fact, it's very difficult to tell because this is very crude construction in these cells. The bars on the windows are heavy boarded bars, their ground construction and the floors and so forth are rather primitive, and it's difficult on the basis of the visits that were made up by this search-and-rescue team in each of these cells to give any final fixed date.

When this question was asked by me, it was felt that—by General Manor and Colonel Simons—they both estimated that they had been out of there for over two weeks. But this is a very difficult thing for them to estimate.

As they stated in answering questions to the press in the Pentagon yesterday, because of the crude kind of construction and the smallness of the cells that were used.

## Accord on Reconnaissance

Q. Are you familiar, Mr. Secretary, with any understanding which permits the United States to fly reconnaissance missions over Vietnam?

A. Yes, I am.

Q. Is that understanding in writing?

A. No, it is not.

Q. What was the nature of that unwritten understanding?

A. The understanding—first I should point out that I was not a member of the Administration that took part in these negotiations and I have only the statements of those individuals that did take part in these negotiations to halt the bombing, as well as the President of the United States, the Secretary of State and the chief negotiators which were involved.

But, the understandings were of three major areas:

first, that unarmed reconnaissance missions would continue to be flown in the North. Secondly, that the D.M.Z. would not be used as a major infiltration route; thirdly, that the enemy, the North Vietnamese, would not shell major population centers.

And, of course, the implied over-all understanding was that the South Vietnamese would come to the conference table and take part in the negotiations. And that that United States would not bomb to the North. Now this was known to the other side, it was known to us. The enemy knows full well what these understandings are and every person that was involved in our Government in a major negotiating role certainly is thoroughly familiar with that.

MR. PELL. You mentioned earlier that there were six dead that had been reported to you. Are those the six that were on Carol Weiss's list or is that another six?

A. These did not come through and were confirmed in the list which she also supplied to the department. There is another list in addition to that six, however, that has recently been made available.

Q. A separate list, with separate names on them?

A. Yes.

Q. What do you think, Mr. Secretary, is the reason the North Vietnamese have for not giving us the names of the known dead, which is what's causing so much heartache and upset and sadness to the families of the prisoners of war. It would be very easy for them to do it. What is their reason, in your view?

A. I have a difficult time explaining that action. I cannot explain their reluctance to treat these prisoners under the Geneva Convention. I cannot explain why they are not interested in the return of the prisoners held in the South—their own people. I cannot explain why they will not tell the wives, the mothers, the fathers of these men whether they are living or dead.

Q. One concern I have about this raid is that it may have a net effect on the prisoners' lives of a deleterious nature. And that now they will be moved around more quickly and guarded more closely. Do you think this will happen as a result of the raid?

A. I would assume that they might be guarded more closely. One would assume that that would be a result. The difficulty, of course, conducting this kind of operation is the location of the other suspected camps.

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