

## Intelligence Failure Denied

# Laird Says Raid 'Worth the Risk'

## How U.S. Planned Operation

United Press

Washington

Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird, denying there was an intelligence breakdown, said yesterday only a "camera that can see through the roofs of buildings" could have warned United States officials that the weekend raid for American prisoners near Hanoi would be fruitless.

Nevertheless, Laird told a nationally televised hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the "risk was worth it."

To relatives of American prisoners of war, he said, "This shows we care."

### RETALIATION

Laird conceded that American captives in North Vietnam might be "guarded more closely" now, as a result of the commando raid. But if the Communists attempt to retaliate, "it would be our duty to recommend strong counter-measures."

Despite a year of careful planning and a month of secret nighttime practice landings in a mockup of the Son Tay prison camp 23 miles from Hanoi, Laird said, the

best available intelligence could not make it certain the mission would be a complete success.

"These men knew full well there was a chance there would be no one in the camps," he said.

### RISK

But, he added, "I felt the risk was worth it" to try to bring some Americans out of captivity. "The risk they go through each day is a major risk," he said.

"We could not ignore the fact that our men were dying in captivity."

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 August 20.

The U.S. had access, he said, to "the best intelligence we could possibly have had," although none of its aerial photographs ever showed American prisoners on the grounds of the Son Tay compound.

He said the North Vietnamese let prisoners out for exercise only as a "special

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treat," sometimes only on holidays.

Laird insisted that "security was not compromised in any way" that would have warned the North Viet-

namese of the raid in advance. "There was no detection of the raid until one minute before landing," he said.

Other Administration officials said yesterday that the raiding party had hoped to rescue from Son Tay between 30 and 40 of the 458 Americans who Laird said were captive in North Vietnam.

The commandos who landed there estimated that Son Tay had been vacant for about two weeks, Laird said.

There is no idea where the captives formerly there are being held today, he said, noting that the North Vietnamese relocate prisoners "quite regularly."

### INTELLIGENCE

However, he said, "We had very good intelligence that they had been in this camp" and that "we anticipated we might find them" at Son Tay. "I cannot fault the intelligence supplied to us," he said.

Laird said a full-scale model of the Son Tay compound was constructed in South Vietnam for nighttime practice landings by the rescue team volunteers, who he said came from Fort Bragg, N.C., and Eglin Air Force Base, Fla.

For security reasons, the practice compound was dismantled every day and set up again at night so the Communists could not foil the plan by photographing it from the air, he said.

"We looked over all of the suspected POW camps," Laird said, "and of all the areas this was the only camp where there was an area surrounding it where it was possible for us to make a landing."

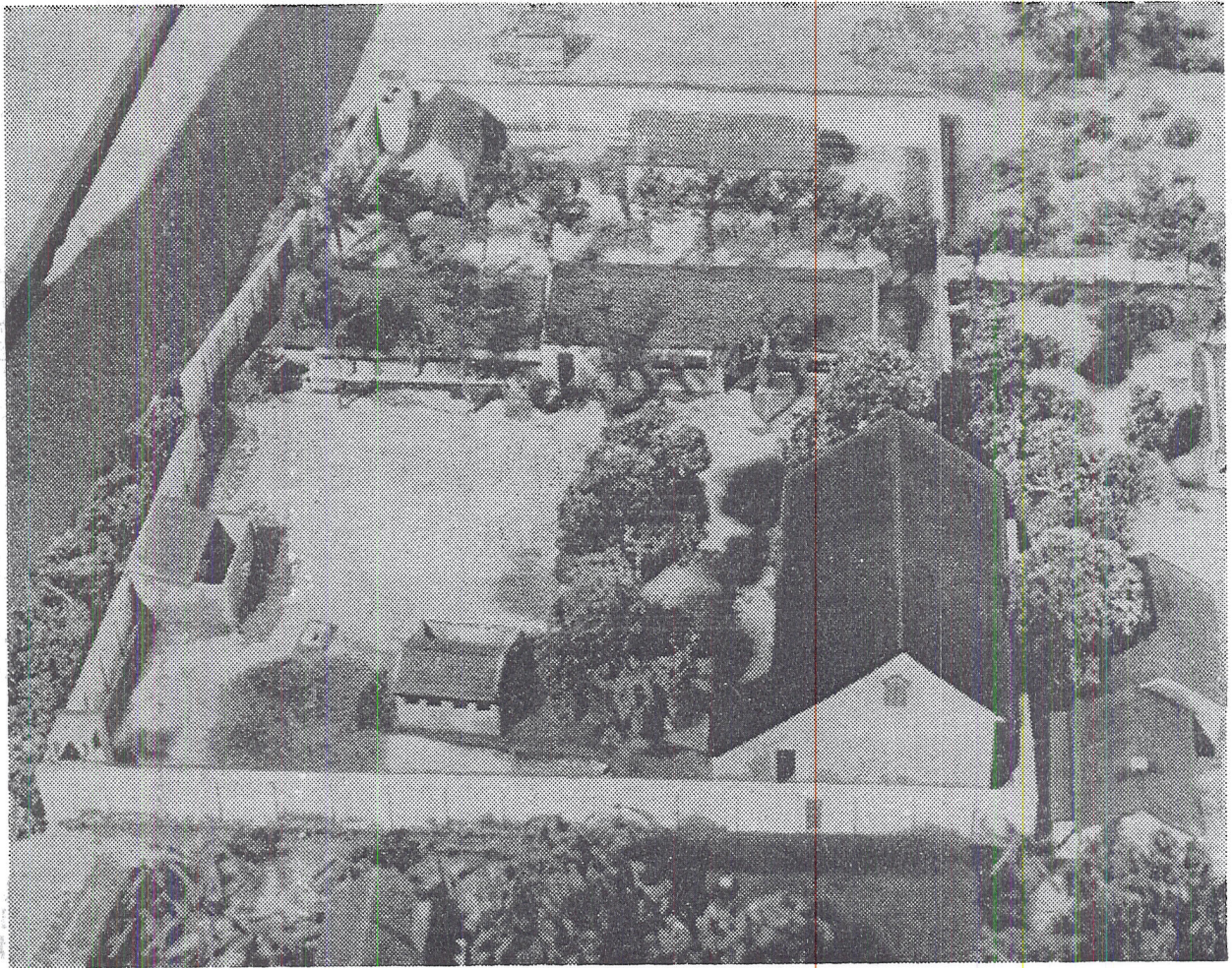
### DANGER

Asked whether the raid might have jeopardized the lives of the estimated 1500 U.S. servicemen held captive or listed as missing in North Vietnam, Laird said that the "lives of our servicemen held in captivity is in danger every day."

Lacking assurances of inspection of prison camps by an impartial organization, he said, "We can never be certain of the safety and well-being of our men."

Laird was asked whether similar rescue raids were planned for the future. "I intend to recommend," he replied, "every possible avenue or approach necessary for these prisoners to be free men."

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UPI Telephoto

The Defense Department released this photo of a model of the prison camp at Son Tay