

Raid on a P.O.W. Camp: Build-Up—and Letdown

By ROBERT M. SMITH NOV 27 1970
Special to The New York Times

FORT BRAGG, N. C., Nov. 26—"There was a lot of noise, smoke, and firing — and yet it was very quiet. We hollered and yelled at them, and nobody hollered back. All we got back was an echo. It was like hollering in an empty room."

As First Lieut. George W. Petrie tells it, that was the moment of discovery for the American commandos who raided the evacuated prison camp at Sontay, 23 miles from Hanoi, last Saturday. Lieutenant Petrie, a 31-year-old Green Beret officer who has served in the Army since he was 19, was in command of part—"a small portion," he calls it—of the operation whose aim was to rescue prisoners of war.

The lanky lieutenant, from Lenoir, N.C., said: "I figured right away there was something wrong. There were no noises, no American voices... In my own mind, I had pictured them shouting. But all I could hear our guys saying was, 'No one in here, no one in here, no one in here.'"

It was between 2 and 2:30 A.M. when the Americans of Joint Services Task Group

Ivory Coast set down in an open corner of the North Vietnamese compound. Lieutenant Petrie said he had not looked at his watch.

Was he frightened as the helicopter began to come down in enemy territory? "No—well, I mean, I was frightened—but it wasn't the kind of thing you feel. I mean, it's an old trick in Vietnam not to think about that, just that, to think about what you're going to do. I was thinking about the job I had to do on the ground, I was looking for my own specific target area."

When the helicopters landed, and members of the force — mainly Green Berets with some Army Rangers and an Air Force contingent — began to fan out, the lieutenant fired his M-16 rifle, the standard Army weapon.

The Special Forces troops did not wear their Green Berets — "They stand out like red flags," he said. All the troops wore jungle fatigue uniforms. The white soldiers had darkened their faces with camouflage paint.

Lieutenant Petrie said at

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first that he did not know whether he had hit anyone. "There was plenty of good moonlight," he said, "but there were shadows, too."

Pressed whether he thought he had hit a North Vietnamese, he said: "I'm sure I did. But it doesn't matter. We didn't care about that. Whether I hit the guy and that's the reason he quit firing, or whether he just got scared and left doesn't matter. Both have the same effect — he wasn't there to bother us."

"We didn't have time to stop and see if we hit them — or anything else," the lieutenant said. "The key to the whole thing was violent action, surprise. You don't stop to piddle around."

Lieutenant Petrie seemed nervous during the two-hour interview. At one point he said that he felt some of the American reporters in Vietnam distort the events they witness. In addition, he — like the other 50-odd commandos who went on the raid — are under Army orders not to discuss specific military details of the operation. He was careful to confine himself to his feelings and the several atmosphere and several times, when asked questions of fact, referred to a transcript he had of Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird's news conference at the Pentagon Monday.

The raid, the lieutenant said, was perfectly executed. "If there had been 1,000 prisoners in there, we would have brought out 1,000 prisoners."

Element of Surprise Cited

Why were only one or two Americans wounded?

"The North Vietnamese were caught by surprise," the lieutenant said, then added, "What would you do if you were here at Fort Bragg and a Communist force landed by helicopter on a road you were guarding? You wouldn't

shoot back, you'd get the hell out of there. You'd have to gather your forces together. They never had time to get together. They were on their home ground. They never expected an American force to come blooming down on them. The whole thing was a surprise."

He continued:

"When we realized there was no one in the compound, I had the most horrible feeling of my life. A tremendous letdown. When you build yourself up—you think about what it's going to feel like to be a part of bringing out this many people for Thanksgiving, thinking about what their faces will look like on the way back—it was terrible feeling."

"There was no doubt in anybody's mind that, if they were there, we were going to get them out, come hell or high water."

The lieutenant, lounging in an armchair, acknowledged that before the raid, he had not only thought about the possibility that the prisoners might not be there; he had also dreamed about it. "I just forced it out of my mind," he said.

The men had absolute confidence, he said. "We knew we were going to get them out. I'm a pretty good soldier, and the guys with me were pretty good soldiers. If you're going to be a combat infantryman, you have to have total confidence in yourself and the people with you. There's no room for pessimism."

Triple-Check on Camp

The lieutenant said that at Sontay "we took plenty of time to triple-check."

"I made absolutely certain that there were no prisoners in my area, then reported it," he said.

When it was clear that all the American P.O.W.'s had been moved, "We adjusted and completed the mission, and when the commander gave 'wrap it up,' we wrapped it up and got out."

As the helicopters moved out, the lieutenant continued, "there was total dejection, disappointment."

"It hurt everybody bad," he said. "It was drilled into our heads we were doing this for one reason: Our fellow comrades-in-arms were prisoners. We were going to show the North Vietnamese we could do it. It would have been the greatest thing in the world. I thought about President Nixon's going on television and announcing it."

Men Felt Personal Tie

"Every man on that force felt a personal relationship with every man in that prison camp," Lieutenant Petrie said. "We were really doing something for somebody. It was not typical of a military operation. Everyone I've gone on heretofore was to kill and destroy—this was to save."

But, he added, "When a man hangs his life out that far to do something, and the something is not there. . ."

The lieutenant is convinced that the North Vietnamese had not learned of the raid in advance. "There was no security leak," he said. "I guarantee you we would have known about it. . . . They just moved them. Why, I don't know. It could have been any number of reasons."

Like his superiors, Lieutenant Petrie considers the raid a technical success. "No man in that force has any reason to hang his head in shame," he said. "It was a perfectly executed plan. I had the personal satisfaction of doing my job, my men had the satisfaction of doing their job."

Wright's Effort Recalled

As an example of what he meant, the lieutenant cited the actions of T. Sgt. Leroy M. Wright of the Air Force, who received a medal from the President yesterday for his bravery at Sontay.

"That kid broke his foot in several places when the helicopter crashed," Lieutenant Petrie said, his voice rising. "He drove right on. He didn't even indicate his foot had

been broken until we were out of hostile fire."

The lieutenant went on to explain that he and Sergeant Wright had become close friends during the 2½-months of training the men in the raid were given at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida. "I traded him my beret for his flight jacket."

His Wife Disagrees

The lieutenant, who seems confident but not assertive, low-key but taut, takes the risks of being a Green Beret lightly: "There's no risk involved if you know what you're doing." His wife, Katherine, does not agree.

On an earlier tour in Vietnam, Lieutenant Petrie served in a Mike Company—a mobile

strike force consisting of Montagnard mercenaries with Special Forces advisers. To keep his wife from worrying, he told her he was working in a headquarters.

This time, Katherine Petrie did not even know her husband was going to Vietnam. She and the two children received letters from George that bore the return address, "Field Three, Eglin Air Force Base." They said only that he was training.

Colonel Seeks Volunteers

Neither the lieutenant nor any of the other members of the force knew what they were volunteering for.

"They put the word out here," Lieutenant Petrie explained, "that Col. [Arthur D.]

Simons wanted volunteers for training. He is the finest combat commander in the Army. I knew if he was involved it had to be worthwhile."

The lieutenant said he volunteered without knowing what the mission was "because that's my job," and "because it keeps a little excitement in your life."

The training at Eglin, he said, was "very meticulous, very long and very arduous."

"Sometimes it lasted 24 hours at a time," he said, "and there was a lot of PT [physical training]."

Lieutenant Petrie is on a four-day pass now. He spent Thanksgiving with his family in their brick, three-bedroom house in the Fayetteville suburb of Bordeaux.