

How Son Tay POW's Planned Reunion

By Dick Alexander

The idea for a San Francisco meeting of American commandos and the Son Tay prisoners they attempted to rescue was born in the austerity of a North Vietnamese prison camp.

"We talked about it a lot," said Navy Cmdr. Render Crayton, "hoping some day we would be able to get together."

That "some day" is this Friday when the former Son Tay POWs and the joint Green Beret-Air Force raiding party greet each other for the first time for a two-day celebration.

Crayton, senior ranking American officer at Son Tay, the North Vietnamese prison camp abandoned before the commandos arrived, said he and several other officers were talking about places to hold the rendezvous and "San Francisco seemed to be the most popular."

The conversation took place in the Hanoi Hilton camp with these pilot-officers, Crayton said by telephone from his home in La Jolla:

Marine Corps Maj. Howard Dunn of Jacksonville, Fla.; Air Force Maj. Ben Pollard, Colorado Springs; Navy Cmdr. Doug Clouer of San Diego, among others.

Crayton will arrive Thursday evening with his wife at the Fairmont Hotel, headquarters for the historic meetings.

"The purpose for this weekend," he said, "is for us who were the prisoners to honor the raiders. I would like to see the emphasis placed on the raiders themselves, who risked their lives to come and get us."

Crayton revealed that the Son Tay camp had been abandoned four months before the abortive raid Nov. 21, 1970, at the camp located some 23 miles west of Hanoi.

"We heard about it later by a man who had been shot down and captured after the raid," the commander said. "It gave everybody a tremendous morale boost. We were pleased to know people had not forgotten us and were willing to risk their lives to come and rescue us."

How to Get Tickets

Tickets for the Friday luncheon honoring the former Son Tay prisoners of war and the Green Beret-Air Force commandos went on sale today in the San Francisco Hilton Hotel lobby.

The 12:30 luncheon, open to the public in the Hilton's Continental Ballroom, will feature actor John Wayne, Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy.

The \$10 tickets are also available at the second floor offices of the Chamber of Commerce, 400 Montgomery St., and may be obtained at the door on Friday.

Mayor Alioto's office has proclaimed the Friday and Saturday events as "Son Tay Days" and urges full public support for the Friday noon ticker tape parade through the financial district and for the luncheon.

Other Friday events include a dinner for the honored guests at the Fairmont Hotel, highlighting Red Skelton, Clint Eastwood and the Andrews Sisters, and a midnight show in the hotel's Venetian Room, hosted by hotelman Ben Swig.

On Saturday, the ex-POWs and the special raider team that attempted to rescue them from a North Vietnam prison camp in November, 1970, will get together for their first private talks. Meantime, their wives and other guests will go shopping or on a tour of The City and Sausalito, hosted by Gray Lines.

At 5 p.m. Saturday the entire party of some 275 persons will go on a sunset cruise on the bay, courtesy of the Red & White Fleet of Harbor Tours.

Asked whether the Son Tay prisoners had any indication an attempt to rescue them was in the offing, Crayton replied:

"We knew nothing about it — but we had a lot of hope. We knew we were in a spot that would lend itself to a rescue — figured we had more of a chance being out in the country there than if we had been in Hanoi. But it

was a long way for a helicopter to fly and we didn't think it could happen."

Did your North Vietnamese captors move you because they had information there might be a raid?

No Way of Knowing

"I really have no way of knowing that. We had been moved on a lot of occasions and there just didn't seem to be any rhyme or reason for the moves."

Most of the POWs were in Son Tay for a period of two years, and the morale was "very good," although prisoners were paired off in small cells.

Torture, Crayton said, was mostly before 1969 and consisted of making the prisoners sit on stools for periods up to 20 days.

"If you got off a stool, they would restrain you by putting you in leg irons and tying your irons to the stool.

"On several occasions prisoners were beaten and some were placed in solitary. But after 1969 the general treatment of our prisoners improved. Most of us were given the privilege of seeing other American prisoners and we were able to get outside."