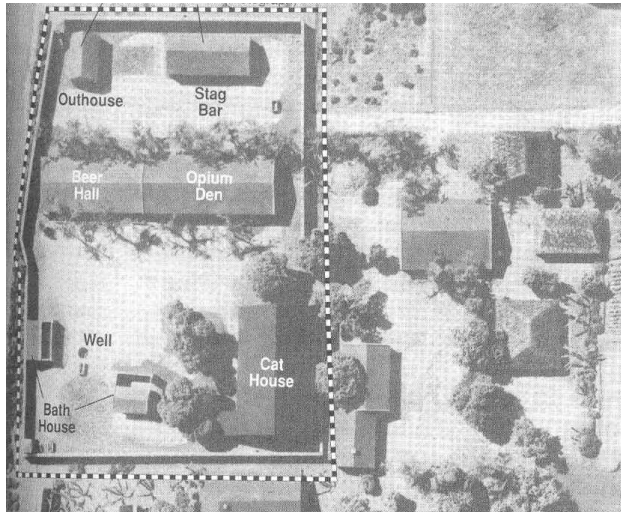


Son Tay—Clarifying the NSA Role November 20



An aerial view of Son Tay, with labeling that reflects the nicknames given the buildings by U.S. prisoners.

One of the more compelling stories of the Vietnam War (1964-1973) was the November 20, 1970, raid on Son Tay, near the North Vietnamese capital of Hanoi. On that day, U.S. Special Forces swooped in via helicopter seeking to free 55 POWs imprisoned there. Although planning and execution of the raid was flawless, the prison cells were empty as, unknown to the Americans, the POWs had been relocated in July to consolidate North Vietnamese POW camps.

Those conspiratorially-minded will argue that the U.S. Intelligence Community—and NSA—actually knew in advance that the camp was empty. Furthermore, the story goes, the North Vietnamese had foreknowledge of the raid — and proof of this came from SIGINT.

The evidence does not back up either of these claims, however. The second claim, published in a 1971 article in the political magazine *Human Events*, alleged that NSA intercepted a message proving that the North had prior knowledge. It is true that NSA did issue a report from October 29, 1970, about a North Vietnamese warning of enemy activity. However, this warning referred to activity along the Ho Chi Minh Trail* specifically, did not mention POWs, and did not mention Son Tay by name. Said another way, there was nothing in this warning that would have raised any red flags; this general warning was almost a month before the raid.

The other claim in the *Washington Post*, made by investigative reporter Jack Anderson in 1982, alleged that the Pentagon knew Son Tay was empty but proceeded anyway because it was important “to impress the North Vietnamese with their own vulnerability.” Anderson’s source was two Air Force personnel

from the 6990 Security Squadron, which was collecting SIGINT on RC-135 flights for the series of reconnaissance missions known as Combat Apple. According to the two, POWs at Son Tay were transported to a new location by aircraft, a development to which NSA was privy. As with the first claim, there are problems with the story. We now know that the Son Tay prisoners only traveled ten miles to their new home. Why would aircraft be employed for such a short distance? Indeed, the POWs traveled those ten miles by truck, the more sensible choice.

So what was the NSA involvement in the raid planning? NSA analysis actually was decisive in convincing the planners to proceed. Working with the Joint Contingency Task Group, NSA helped plot ingress and egress routes that could not be detected by the North Vietnamese air defense system. In addition, SIGINT revealed the location of North Vietnamese MiG aircraft and their pilots, and that none of them would be in a position to respond in a timely way to the American raid.

Yet, it is hard to call the mission, flawless in execution though it was, a success since its goal was not accomplished. For now, this appears to be a case of a successful operation where the patient died.

*The Communists first began using the Ho Chi Minh Trail in 1959 to send supplies to the south. Named after the North Vietnamese revolutionary leader, the trail ran from North Vietnam into South Vietnam via Laos.

Sources: *The History of Traffic Analysis: World War I-Vietnam*, Don Borrmann, Bill Kvetkas, Charles Brown, Michael Flatley and Bob Hunt, CCH publication, 2013.