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TRANSCRIPT OF DEFENSE SECRETARY LAIRD'S NEWS CONFERENCE WASHINGTON, D.C., MONDAY, NOVEMBER 23, 1970

(Secretary Laird) Ladies and gentlemen, I want to give you now the details of the only operation that took place north of the 19th parallel this past weekend.

Some months ago in the face of the continued and adamant refusal of the other side either to abide by the provisions of the Geneva Convention or to participate in meaningful negotiations on the exchange of prisoners of war, I had prepared, with the approval of the President, contingency plans for a possible search and rescue effort of as many of our prisoners as possible.

A special task force of volunteers from the Army and the Air Force was assembled to train for this mission. I cannot give you the details of their training except to say that it was meticulous, intensive, often around the clock and represented the highest order of dedication and professionalism.

Recognizing that we would be forced to operate on necessarily limited intelligence and recognizing also the hazards of the mission, the President on my recommendation gave approval for the operation early morning of Friday, November 20th. A key factor in the final decision to launch this SAR mission, this search and rescue mission, was the new information that we received this month that some of our men were dying in prisoner of war camps.

My recommendation was based on the same motivation that has prompted our steadfast readiness to mount the numerous search and rescue

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AMERICAN EMBASSY-TOKYO

attempts in enemy territory whenever there is the possibility of a saving of American lives.

This policy has the President's strong and unqualified support. It should be a source of great pride of all Americans that there are military men who volunteer for such search and rescue missions.

"You and your men have earned that tribute."

This was the cable sent to these men and to this SAR team.

Gentlemen, we shall continue to make every effort to free our prisoners of war. I shall be glad to respond to questions, either General or Colonel Simons.

(Question) Mr. Secretary, is this the first time that American forces have been used in North Vietnam or has this happened in the past?

(The Secretary) This has happened in the past. We have carried on SAR missions in North Vietnam quite regularly. This is not the first time a SAR mission has been conducted in North Vietnam.

(Question) Is there any indication, Mr. Secretary, that the surprise element was compromised in Saigon or some way?

(The Secretary) I would like to have Colonel Simons reply to that question. He was there on the ground. I believe that he is better qualified.

(Colonel Simons) No sir, there were no indications at all. We caught them completely by surprise.

(Question) Can you tell us how many men were in the mission and how they were transported to Hanoi?

(The Colonel) No, I cannot tell you how many men.

(Question) Can you give us a general idea, sir?

(The Colonel) No. It was a small, mixed joint helicopter force.

(Question) Did you receive any enemy fire, was there any exchange of fire at all?

(The Colonel) Yes, there was enemy fire.

(Question) Approximately how many enemy soldiers were there?

(The Colonel) I can't tell you. It was night. The reason I say there was only fire, we got one man who was slightly wounded by the AK47. We could tell by the sound of the gun that an AK47 was firing.

(Question) Colonel, can you tell us a narrative dispatch right straight through what happened?

(The Colonel) No, sir, I can't do that. I think I will have to answer your questions.

(Question) Did this mission have a code name?

(The Colonel) I can't answer that question.

(Question) What was the purpose of intentionally crashing the helicopter?

(The Colonel) Our purpose was to get the helicopter in with the troops aboard it safely. We had no idea of bringing it out. It was a confined area. There was no consideration to the damage of the helicopter as long as it did not damage the people aboard it.

(Question) What kind of helicopter was it, sir?

(The Colonel) I can't answer that.

(Question) Did you land right in the prison, sir?

(The Colonel) Yes.

(Question) Did you fly from an aircraft carrier?

(The Colonel) I can't answer that.

(Question) Were you fired on while you were flying in or fired only when you reached the ground?

(The Colonel) I think there was a slight amount of ground fire.

(Question) As you were flying in?

(The Colonel) Yes, sir.

(The Secretary) Colonel, may I add something to that. It might be well to point out that the mission did receive quite a bit of fire. There were over 30 SAM missiles fired. Some of them were fired at rather low altitude. I believe that they resulted in considerable damage. Firing a SAM missile at such a low range the explosion would take place over occupied territory in North Vietnam.

There of course were diversionary actions taken along the coast, in lighting flares by Navy planes to divert the attention from this SAR mission. But these diversionary actions did draw fire, as well as fire upon the helicopters involved. Perhaps, General Manor, you'd comment on that.

(General Manor) Before I comment on that, Mr. Secretary, I would like to take this opportunity to pay a tribute to the officers and men who were under my command, who volunteered to participate on this hazardous operation. It is perhaps the most elite group of individuals that I have had the pleasure to command.

(Question) What command is this, General?

(The General) The Joint Contingency Task Group that performed the mission.

(Question) Can you tell us where did you get the volunteers both from the Air Force and the Army?

(The General) We got them from throughout the Army and the Air Force.

(Question) General, how many men did you hope to free by this mission?

(The General) I can't answer the question.

(Question) Can you give us the range?

(The General) We had hoped that there would be a considerable number, a good percentage of those that we know the North Vietnamese hold.

(Question) Did you have an alternate target you might have hit?

(The General) I can't answer that.

(Question) Is this the so-called "Hanoi Hilton"?

(The General) I can't answer that.

(Question) Were there any enemy casualties inflicted?

(The Secretary) I would like to add one thing to the General's statement and that is that in planning for this operation, an alleged prisoner of war facility was picked that would give an opportunity to make the necessary landings. As you know, the prisoner of war facilities in North Vietnam are not marked in accordance with the Geneva Convention, and there is evidence from time to time that our prisoners of war have been moved.

This has happened, of course, in World War II with prisoner of war camps and it's not unusual. The thing that's important about this daring mission performed by these outstanding members of the United States Army and the United States Air Force, I think, was that they were able to get into this area and get out without suffering any substantial casualties at all. All men were recovered.

(Question) Mr. Secretary, can you tell us, sir, whether the raids conducted above the 19th parallel were planned as a cover for this mission?

(The Secretary) No, they were not. Those raids followed this particular mission. There were diversionary operations of a very small nature that were used, but there was no ordnance involved as far as North Vietnam was concerned above the 19th parallel, involved in those diversionary missions which were flown by the United States Navy.

I want to make that very evident to all of you here, that the largest part of the activity -- of course, a helicopter was blown up and there was other firing -- but the largest part of the activity within North Vietnam was that of catching the North Vietnamese air defense completely unaware,

the fact that they were expending antiaircraft fire and over 30 SAM missiles at this particular time, firing some at very low altitudes.

(Question) Sir, were there any instances where our forces in this search and rescue operation or diversionary forces, did any bombing at all or any strafing and could you give us an indication of just what sort of weapons firing there was on our part?

(The Secretary) The amount of weapons firing -- and I'll turn the questions over to the commander of the operation, as well as Colonel Simons -- was a very minimum of firing. Of course, the tower and other facilities were fired at as the first helicopter was landing inside the compound. It was necessary to protect the safety of the crew that was landing to destroy the guard tower, but the amount of ammunition and the amount of ordnance expended was very small as compared with the firing that did take place as far as the North Vietnamese were concerned. Perhaps General Manor --

(Question) Could you explain the timing, General, comparing your mission with the retaliatory below the 19th parallel?

(The General) As the Secretary mentioned, the two were not necessarily connected. Regarding the question of ordnance, I am sure that you can realize for an operation of this type we must carry some protection with us to protect the lives of the men who are participating, but the ordnance that we carried was specifically selected for that purpose or with that purpose in mind, to suppress the enemy's capability to inflict casualties on our own forces.

(Question) Colonel, did you take any prisoners, temporarily or permanently, on this operation?

(The General) I can't answer that.

(Question) Did you find any graves or any evidence that some of our prisoners had been dying?

(The General) We found no specific evidence. However, you must remember that this was at night and we were not searching for that, we were searching for the prisoners themselves, so that we could bring them out.

(Question) Any indication how long that camp had been abandoned?

(The General) Several weeks. However, again you must realize that the type of construction in that part of the world will deteriorate rapidly when not used.

(Question) How long were you on the ground?

(The General) Less than an hour.

(Question) Did you kill anybody in the ground skirmishing? Did you fire your weapons?

(The General) I will call on Colonel Simons for the answer to that question.

(The Colonel) Yes, we did fire our weapons.

(Question) Did you kill anybody?

(The Colonel) I would imagine so. Certainly we didn't go around and count the bodies or determine if anybody was dead. We fired only when it appeared to threaten the success of the mission.

(Question) On whom do you blame the intelligence failure?

(The Colonel) I can't answer the question at all. I am not sure I know what you mean by "intelligence failure."

(Question) People were out for three weeks which indicates you don't do daily reconnaissance of the prisoner of war camps.

(The Colonel) I cannot comment on the question.

(The Secretary) I will comment briefly on that. As you probably are aware, the location of the prisoner of war camps in the North is indeed a very difficult assignment. The prisoners of war are not exercised on a regular basis. It is most difficult to identify a prisoner of war camp. The situation was such, however, that we were reasonably confident that this particular location had been used. We were reasonably confident that we could land this force at this location and the location was indeed a very important factor in determining on Son Tay, on the final determination as far as this particular alleged camp was concerned.

(Question) Mr. Secretary, how many SAR missions of approximately this scope have been held before?

(The Secretary) This was a larger mission of course than normally is held when you have one or two pilots down. We have conducted over 30 SAR missions this year and of course last year we conducted more. These troops that carry on the search and rescue missions are given indeed very difficult assignments. This search and rescue mission as I said in my statement was manned by volunteers from the Air Force and the Army and all of our SAR missions have been manned by volunteers.

(Question) Mr. Secretary, is this the first one where they have gone in after prisoners -- the ones before gone in and get men who have been shot down in planes -- is this the first one of this kind that has ever been run?

(The Secretary) I would not want to say "ever been run" because in World War II those of you who have covered the Pentagon are aware of several of the missions that were conducted at that time. This is the first SAR mission conducted in North Vietnam on prisoners of war during this war.

(Question) Mr. Secretary, do you think the enemy might retaliate against the American POW's as a result of this mission?

(The Secretary) I thought that question over very carefully and have thoroughly prior to the time that I recommended the mission to the Commander-in-Chief, our President.

One of the things that influenced me greatly was the recent report of prisoners dying in prisoner of war compounds. I have spent many hours with the wives, the families, the mothers, the fathers and the children of prisoners of war.

Back in March of 1969, shortly after I became Secretary of Defense this Administration initiated a program of going public on the prisoner of war matter. We have brought this matter up continually in Paris. The President offered to exchange 35,000 for some 3,000 prisoners of war as far as the other side was concerned. We have constantly brought this matter up in all of the capitals of the world. There has been no indication on the part of the other side that they would abide by the Geneva Conventions.

As Secretary of Defense I felt that I could not stand idly by and not take action and recommend action to demonstrate our concern for these men. This mission, this daring mission, which was conducted by these volunteers of the United States Air Force and the United States Army I believe does show our dedication to these men and we will do everything that we can in our power to accomplish their early release.

Thank you very much, gentlemen.

(The Press) Thank you, Mr. Secretary.

November 25, 1970

I N S E R T I O N

USIS Special Report No. 70-125 "Transcript of Defense Secretary Laird's News Conference, Washington, D.C., Monday, November 23, 1970"

Insert the following in Page 2 between Paragraph 2 beginning xxx This policy has the President's, etc. xxx and ending xxx for such search and rescue missions. xxx and Paragraph 3 reading xxx "You and your men have earned that tribute."

(Begin insert)

On Friday, November 20th, shortly after 2:00 P.M., Eastern Standard Time, which was about 2:00 A.M. in North Vietnam, a small rescue team successfully landed by helicopter at a reported prisoner-of-war compound at Son Tay, approximately 20 nautical miles west of Hanoi.

The operation was under the overall command of two distinguished officers whom I would like to introduce to you at this time.

They are Brigadier General Leroy J. Manor, U.S. Air Force, who was in overall command of the operation, and Colonel Arthur D. Simons, United States Army, who led the team in the search and rescue attempt. They arrived in Washington early this morning.

Operating in darkness, Colonel Simons and his men landed, entered and searched the compound where the prisoners of war reportedly were being held. Regrettably the rescue team discovered that the camp had recently been vacated. No prisoners were located.

The SAR team, according to its well-rehearsed plan, searched every building, broke the locks on doors of rooms which had been used as detention cells. They successfully returned to safety without suffering a single serious casualty.

One rescue helicopter which made a controlled crash landing in the compound was destroyed intentionally, precisely according to the plan prior to the evacuation of the rescue team.

Before General Manor and Colonel Simons answer your questions, bearing in mind the need at all times to maintain security, I want to conclude my statement by stating my belief that if there had been prisoners in the compound at Son Tay, they would be free men today.

I also would like to read to you the message I asked the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to send to General Manor and Colonel Simons and to their men. The message is as follows:

"The President has asked that I express to you, to Colonel Simons and to the officers and men of your command his deepest appreciation for the gallant humanitarian efforts which you have made. The daring and courageous performance which marked this hazardous mission was inspirational. He is proud of the magnificent example of skill, courage and devotion so valiantly demonstrated by you and by your men.

"The Secretary of Defense and I share fully the Commander-in-Chief's sentiments. We commend the high sense of duty which your long weeks of training and your dedication exemplify. There are no tributes greater than the willingness to sacrifice one's life for others.

Pickup xxx "You and your men have earned that tribute."

(End insert)
