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**TSGT LEROY M. WRIGHT**  
**AIR FORCE CROSS RECEIPTANT**  
**SON TAY PRISON RAIDER**

On November 25, 1970, President Richard M. Nixon pinned the Air Force Cross on the chest of TSgt Leroy M. Wright. He was one of four persons honored in a White House ceremony to recognize the brave individuals who had participated in an attempted POW rescue. President Nixon remarked that he knew each person was a volunteer for the mission. He also stated that he knew the mission only had a 50% chance of success and that each person only had a 50% chance of returning from the mission. (6:240,241)

The purpose of this paper is to inform you of the role that TSgt Leroy M. Wright had in the raid of Son Tay prison camp, just 23 miles northwest of Hanoi, North Vietnam. I will discuss the events that led to the planning for the raid, the training that took place, the raid itself, and the effects the raid had. I will also relate the limited information that I found out about TSgt Wright's role in the Son Tay raid, which earned him the Air Force Cross.

In May 1970, Colonel George J. Iles and Colonel Rudolph C. Koller both assigned to 1127<sup>th</sup> USAF Special Activity Squadron (Headquarters Command), obtained intelligence indicating that US POWs were being held in a camp on the outskirts of the city of Son Tay, 23 miles northwest of Hanoi. (3:1) The staff studied the rescue possibilities and presented the findings to Brigadier General Donald D. Blackburn, Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities (SACSA), JCS.

On June 5, 1970, the Joint Chiefs of Staff were brief by Brigadier General Blackburn on the findings and recommended conducting an in-depth feasibility study. (3:1) A 12-man study group representing the Services and DIA received commissioning 10 June 1970, after the JCS

approved the study. The JCS received a briefing that a rescue attempt was feasible and received an expanded concept of operations briefing on 10 July 1970. The JCS approved the concept on 8 August and formed a Joint Contingency Task Group (JCTG) under the JCS with SACSA as the office of Office of Primary Responsibility (OPR). Brigadier General LeRoy J. Manor, Commander, USAF Special Operations Force (SOF), Eglin AFB Florida, was designated Commander and Colonel Arthur D. Simons, USA, J-4, XVIII Airborne Corps, Fort Bragg, North Carolina, was assigned as Deputy Commander of the Task Group. (3:2)

The Army screened more than 300 volunteers from the John F. Kennedy Center for Military Assistance, Fort Bragg, North Carolina, in selecting their 103-man operations and support force. (3:3) The Air Force selected the aircrew from many sources, with the final decision resting with the Commander, JCTG. One of the four helicopter aircraft commanders came from TAC's Shaw AFB, one came from South East Asia (SEA), and four came from the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Training Center (ARRTC), Eglin AFB, Florida. (TSgt Wright was an instructor at ARRTC when he volunteered for this mission.) The 1<sup>st</sup> Special Operations Wing, Eglin AF Auxiliary Field 9, Florida, provided five A-1 aircraft commanders and five pilots were obtained from the 56<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Wing, Nakhon Phanom RTAFB, Thailand. Detachment 2, 1<sup>st</sup> Special Operations Wing, Pope AFB, North Carolina, provided one C-130E and the 7<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Squadron, Ramstein AB, Germany, provided the second C-130E aircrew.

The basic plan for the air element was to deliver the ground assault force to Son Tay Prison undetected, protect it while it was there, then return hopefully, with a large number of POWs. The total mission time from initial takeoff to final landing at the recovery base would be approximately five and one half hours. This included 30 minutes of holding time while the assault force was on the ground assaulting the prison camp just 23 miles northwest of Hanoi, North

Vietnam. More than one hundred primary mission and support aircraft, operating from seven bases and three aircraft carriers, would participate in the operation. (3:vi) The ground assault force's mission was to breach the prison wall, and terminate any resistance from the prison guards. Next they were to extract the POWs from their cells and carry them to outside the prison camp, to the waiting helicopters for extraction.

One HH-3 helicopter, Banana 1, (TSgt Wright's Helicopter) carrying 13 man assault team would purposefully crash land inside the prison camp walls, to an area the size of a volleyball court, in between two buildings. This would block the guards from exiting their barracks and killing the POWs, prior to the rest of the assault force breaching the walls and reaching the prison cells.

The training began 20 August 1970, at Eglin AFB Florida (code named Ivory Coast). Eglin was chosen for the following reasons: it provided an isolated training area, adequate troop facilities and it was the home base for the HH-3 helicopters, H-53 helicopters and the HC-130P tankers. Also the A-1 strike aircraft was located at nearby Hurlburt Field (Eglin Auxiliary Field # 9) and reoccurring joint Army and Air Force exercises were routinely conducted at the ranges of Eglin AFB. The all volunteer JCTG was sequestered from the time they arrived at Eglin AFB until the raid was completed. They had no outside contact with the world, nor did they know the location of their objective.

The training phase had to be of the utmost importance, both flying and ground operations. It can be compared with rehearsing for a drama, except an error in the matinee performance could not be corrected in the evening show. (3:6) Every facet of the operation was rehearsed more than 170 times. More than 1,000 hours of incident-free flying, training hours were flown primarily at night under combat conditions

The aircrew had to develop new procedures and techniques to formate the various types of aircraft involved. The HH-3 (TSgt Wright's helicopter) had to operate beyond its normal flight envelope. It had to fly in a drafting position, immediately behind the left wing tip of the lead C-130E and HC-130P, to compensate for the excessive density altitude and gross weight combinations. Note: The HH-3 was latent with explosives to facilitate its destruction after the crash landing into the prison camp. All night flight training was conducted under minimum aircraft lighting conditions and in almost complete radio silence. Also procedures were developed for loss of visual contact, weather penetrations and combat contingencies for the formation.

The JCTG used a building block approach to the training, ensuring that each facet of the training was mastered prior to moving to the next step of the mission. A complete scaled, mock-up of the prison camp was constructed on the Eglin Range Complex. The mock prison camp was even landscape to match the prison camp at Son Tay. The mock camp was constructed in such a way that it was reconstructed every night. It was dismantled prior to sunrise, to keep the Russian satellites from photographing the mock prison camp. The JCTG initially started training in the daylight, flying the same amount of time, the same route, and then walking through the ground assault until everyone knew their assigned tasks to the most minute detail. Every possible contingency and "what if" scenario was discussed and practiced. Training progressed as plan moving from dry firing to live firing in the target area and insertion of the ground elements in real-time sequence. Once the heliborne assault was mastered, the A-1E element was introduced and the air to ground ordnance delivery started. After all phases were mastered in the daylight hours, the training shifted to nighttime training. The JCTG had trained at night until the complete raid had been accomplished within specified time constraints with no errors. The force was declared mission ready on 6 October 1970.

General Manor reported to the JCS that the Task Group was trained and ready to deploy on 10 October 1970. He also recommended that the operation be conducted during 20 - 25 October period, dates which had been predetermined for favorable weather conditions.

On 8 October 1970, General Manor briefed Henry Kissinger, Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, and it was determined that the mission should be delayed until November.

On 27 October 1970, Admiral Thomas Moorer, Chairman, JCS, approved the deployment of the in-theater coordination staff starting on 1 November, and deployment of the Task Group commencing 10 November. (3:13)

By 16 November 1970, the entire Task Group was assembled at Takhli RTAFB. On 17 November 1970, the JCTG assembled in the Base Theater at Takhli RTAFB for a joint operational briefing. Colonel "Bull" Simons briefed the ground plan and General Manor briefed the air plan. For security reasons the name of the prison camp and its geographical location were withheld from members of the ground force who had not participated in the planning. The Task Group went crazy when the briefing started. As stated in Chief Wayne L. Fisk's oral interview, {Colonel Simons and General [Lt Gen] Leroy Manor called all the participants together in the theater that served as a mass briefing area and officially stated, "We are going up and bringing our POWs home." Tremendous roar, esprit de corps, whooping, yelling, whistling. If there had been a Gook in the theater at that time, you would never have seen him again because he would have been shredded to micro particles. We are going to kick ass, and we are ready for it.} (1:69) On 18 November 1970, the JCS gave final approval for the operation.

The weather became a factor, by the 21<sup>st</sup> of November, Typhoon Patsy would be less than 100 miles off the coast of Vietnam that would make the Navy diversion impossible. Thick clouds,

poor visibility and high winds would soon be covering North Vietnam and the Red River Valley (the flight path of the Task Group). The night of the 20/21 November 1970 was the only night for many days before and after that date that a launch would be possible. Finally, after many weather reconnaissance missions and long discussions with the weather forecasters a decision was reached to launch the mission on the night of November 20, 1970.

All the raiding aircraft launched on time except for one of the C-130s, which took off 23 minutes late after fixing an engine problem. The Air Assault aircraft arrived 3.5 miles short of their objective on time, the C-130E pulled up and away from the five HH-53s and one HH-3 that were slowing to turn on to final approach to Son Tay Prison Camp. At this same instance, the Navy's Carrier Task Force 77 aircraft began striking active FanSong radars in Haiphong Harbor on the east coast of North Vietnam. Now the eyes and ears of the North Vietnam were focus on the East coast instead of the West where Son Tay was located. The C-130E dropped flares directly over Son Tay, as HH-53 four and five proceeded to their holding area on the islands in the Finger Lake, seven miles west of Son Tay.

HH-53 Number three, arrived first at the military complex 400 meters south of the objective and started a firing maneuver before they realized it was not the proper target. They did not fire and proceeded to the correct objective, where they made their firing pass, destroying the northwest guard tower and damaging the southwest guard tower, and the guard barracks in the support area. (3:25) The HH-3 realized the same thing that number three HH-53 did and proceeded to the correct objective. The landing in the compound was delayed by one minute because of this mistake.

The first HH-53, which was following the HH-3, was concentrating so intensely on the landing zone, that he failed to see the HH-3 proceeding to the correct objective. It immediately

started its firing pass and landed in an area very similar to its intended landing zone at the prison compound.

The number two HH-53, which was ten seconds behind number one, lost sight of number one and proceeded to the correct objective. Once number two realized number one was not at the objective, he notified the ground force commander aboard his aircraft that the alternate plan Green, which allowed for the loss of number one, was now in effect. Number two took number one's targets under fire and then landed at the correct area and disembarked the ground assault force, then he proceeded to the holding area one and a half mile west of the camp and landed.

The crash landing of the HH-3 (Banana 1) inside the compound was much harder than planned, even for Capt Meadows who was stretched out on the mattress on the floor of the H-3, to let his entire body absorb the impact. No one knew that Banana 1's aircraft commander had lost control of the helicopter at the last second when it struck a tree prior to the small landing zone, the approximate size of a volleyball court. The helicopter had hit a tree approximately 150 feet high, it was much higher than they had been led to believe it would be. The helicopter tore through the 10 inch diameter tree trunk like a giant lawn mower. As the rotor blades of the helicopter ripped through the tree trunk, the helicopter twisted 30 or 40 degrees to the right and struck the ground. The impact was so hard that a fire extinguisher tore loose and crushed the foot of TSgt Leroy M. Wright with such force that it broke his ankle. Another person in back of Banana 1 was thrown clear of the helicopter, because he had not braced for the impact. Capt Meadows and the rest of the raiders aboard Banana 1 exited the crashed helicopter and began their actions on the objective. Capt Meadows shouted into his bullhorn, "We are Americans. This is a rescue. We're here to get you out. Keep your heads down. Get down on the floor. We'll be in your cells in a minute."



(6:204). There were no return cries for help, however. As the whine of the HH-3 engines died out, the prison camp became a live with automatic weapon fire. Three minutes into the raid, a blast from the south wall allowed more of the ground assault force to enter the prison camp.

Bull Simons' helicopter had landed at the wrong objective. He and 21 other men had landed at the compound 400 meters south of Son Tay. The spooks had told him that it was a "Secondary School", and had labeled it as such on all their maps. Once Simons was on the ground outside the helicopter it did not take long for him to realize that his men and the helicopter were in real trouble. The school's walls were barbed wired at the top. Other than that the school looked just like what he expected to see at Son Tay. A huge fire fight exploded all around him. AS Apple One (HH-53) seen the fire fight and realized that they had dropped Simons off at the wrong objective, they immediately banked to return to recover Simons and his men. Meanwhile Simons' men had turned the "Secondary School" into a blazing ruin. Apple One's mistake of dropping off Simon and his men at wrong compound might have save the lives of over half of the Son Tay Prison raiders. The "Secondary School" was loaded with 100 to 200 men who were of unknown origin. Bull Simon believed them to be Russian and Chinese because they were much taller than the North Vietnamesc guards, and much better equipped. So the threat to the Son Tay raiding force was not several miles away but only 400 meters away. Within five minutes Simons' 22 men had killed somewhere between 100 and 200 occupants of the "Secondary School".

When Apple One landed for the extraction of Simons' men, Simons called for the "insurance" the air strike of the footbridge between Son Tay Prison Camp and the "Secondary School".

Most of the 55 guards at the Son Tay Prison were killed or wounded before they ever knew the raid was taking place. Now the extraction of the ground assault force had begun.

However much to everyone's dismay there were no POWs to be rescued. They had been moved a week earlier due to the river adjacent to the camp, flooding its banks. This was the result of a CIA operation that seeded the clouds to make rain, to flood the valley and destroy the NVAs crops. There were two casualties and two persons wounded (TSgt Wright, one of them) during the raid. The helicopter extracted their ground assault forces and returned to their staging base in Thailand.

The emotions varied amongst the raiders; the biggest being disappointed that there were no prisoners to be rescued, betrayal that they were not told there were no prisoners at Son Tay, and elation that the hard work and training had paid off. After all they had done what no one else had tried to do. They had gone to the backdoor of the North Vietnamese to extract their fellow warriors from their North Vietnamese captors.

Their emotions were mixed back in the states as the president briefed the American public that a failed rescue attempt had taken place in North Vietnam. The families of the POWs were saddened that no POWs were freed, but at the same time they were happy to see that the U.S. government had not forgotten their family members that were being held prisoner.

In the halls of Congress, emotions were split with the Republicans in support of the attempted rescue and the Democrats were opposed to the attempt. In the Pentagon, there was a lot of finger pointing going on, as to who's fault it was, that there were no prisoners inside of Son Tay.

Colonel Donohue, Apple 3's pilot, wrote the following statement:

Now I and all the Son Tay raiders know that our efforts did aid our North Vietnamese prisoners. In May 1975, the Son Tay raiders and the prisoners were brought together in San Francisco through the thoughtfulness and sponsorship of H. Ross Perot.

In San Francisco, we learned the prisoners had been at Son Tay, but had been moved before our arrival. We learned that often the word of the mission was received by the prisoners and passed through their underground 'Tap Code'. We also learned that they raid directly and indirectly aided the POWs' materially and morally. For instance, in the few months directly after the mission the majority of the prisoners were consolidated to one area in down town Hanoi. This enabled the POWs to organize more efficiently and through their strength in numbers and organization gain some privileges, that they had not previously been granted. (4:hand written note)

TSgt Leroy M. Wright was assigned to the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Training Center at Eglin AFB, FL, when he was asked to volunteer for a very dangerous classified mission. (2:16/17) He could not be told of any details of the mission, other than once he volunteered that he would not have contact with the outside world, and that he would be sequestered until the mission was complete. He was also told that he probably have less than a 50% chance of returning from the mission. He volunteered after getting what little information that he could concerning the mission.

As discussed earlier, he was the flight engineer on Banana One, the HH-3 that purposely crashed inside the compound of the Son Tay Prison camp. His crashed helicopter would block the North Vietnamese guards from leaving their barracks, to possibly kill the Son Tay prisoners during the attack. His helicopter was the only helicopter to be landed inside the prison camp walls.

During their flight into the compound, Banana 1, struck 150 foot tree and crash landed to their assigned area much harder than planed. In fact they crash landed so hard that the landing threw one Army soldier out of the helicopter. One of the fire extinguisher tore loose from the interior of the HH-3 and crushed the ankle of TSgt Wright. Despite his injury and the danger of the helicopter exploding, he expertly used his weapon to help the Army combat troops advance to

their target. Realizing that requesting assistance could jeopardize the mission, Sgt Wright, suffering intense pain, returned to the recovery area on his own. He was the only enlisted man who participated in the rescue mission to receive the Air Force Cross. (5:79)

On November 25, 1970, in a White House ceremony, President Nixon decorated four members of the Son Tay Raid. TSgt Wright was one of those four men.

As recorded in the History Of The Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Training Center, 1 October - 31 December 1970, the participants of the raid were highly decorated. It is very unlikely that any other Air Force unit has received so many high honors for a single mission in the entire Vietnam conflict.

In conclusion, I have discussed what led to the raid on Son Tay, the training for the raid, the raid itself, the effects of the raid, and the role TSgt Leroy M. Wright had had in the raid. Enough praise can not be given to the brave volunteers who were willing to risk it all to rescue their fellow airman, marines, sailors and soldiers being held captive by the North Vietnamese.

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