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ESSAY ON ENLISTED FORCE PARTICIPATION
IN
THE SON TAY SEARCH AND RESCUE MISSION

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IN

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This paper will discuss the participation of Army Enlisted Special Forces soldiers and Air Force Pararescuemen in the 1970 Prisoner of War search and rescue mission at Son Tay prison in North Vietnam. Information will be provided covering the type of basic special forces qualification training received by enlisted Special Forces Green Berets and Pararescuemen. The Army and Air Force selection process for Son Tay Raider volunteers will be addressed in addition to mission specific training requirements for ground assault /rescue teams, area ground security, road block, and aircrew extraction teams. Source information on basic special forces skills and mission specific training was extensive, however, information addressing the activities conducted by enlisted ground forces during the execution of the mission was limited. The selection process for the Son Tay Raider volunteers will be covered first.

The Army ground force commander conducted a thorough personnel records review and personal interview on each Green Beret volunteer. The screening process covered the volunteer's military and civilian background, mental aptitude, physical abilities and Noncommissioned Officer status. The Air Force special operations liaison officer for the mission reviewed aircrew personnel records and selected the air support crews upon recommendations from each crewman's commander. All enlisted Green Berets were triple volunteers from the start, being a volunteer in the Army, Airborne and Special Forces in that order, with an average of 16 years active duty time. Air Force enlisted Pararescuemen had an average of 10-15 years active duty time. Army special forces training was conducted at Fort Bragg, North Carolina where each student was assigned to the Special Forces School to attend the Special Forces Qualification Course which was structured in three phases.

Special Forces Qualification Course Phase I consisted of four weeks of training starting with common combat skills required of all special forces troops. Physical and Mental testing identified and

eliminated students lacking the motivation and initiative required for special forces. Students were required to make five and ten mile runs, 70-pound rucksack marches, parachute jumps, tactical patrolling exercises, land navigation and five day endurance training without food (while training continued at a fast pace). After successful completion of Phase I, the "green beret" was awarded, which brought the student to Phase II training.

Phase II of the qualification course was eight weeks long and the starting point for Special Forces Specialty Training. Physical training continued at an accelerated pace in combination with a primary academic phase with "hands-on", performance-oriented training conducted. Emphasis was placed on students being able to teach advanced special forces skills to others. Five specialties were taught in Phase II; the Engineers Course, Weapons Course, Communications Course, Medical Course and Operations and Intelligence Course. Each one of these specialty qualification courses will be covered in the following paragraphs.

The Engineers Course covers conventional and unconventional (home made) explosives, demolition techniques, obstacle, light building and bridge construction; and engineer reconnaissance. Some special forces engineers were sent to the Army Engineer School for additional training in heavy construction equipment operations. The Weapons Course was divided into light and heavy weapons. The light weapons portion trains students to operate and disassemble a wide variety of small arms: handguns, rifles, submachine guns, machine guns, grenade launchers, etc. Current and obsolete US, Allied, and Communist weapons were studied, especially older weapons that guerrilla forces would have in use. Heavy weapons training dealt with mortars, recoilless rifles and infantry rocket launchers, with the mortar training being predominate. The Communications Course concentrated on field radio repair, operation of special forces radios, cryptographic systems, manual Morse Code and clandestine special forces communications techniques. The Medical Course was 25 weeks long and the most difficult specialty to qualify in. The curriculum was divided into 13 weeks of "in-house" training at the Army's

Academy of Health Sciences at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, followed by six week of patient care and laboratory techniques. The special forces medic receives extensive training in advanced field medical and surgical procedures. The Operations and Intelligence Course was reserved for Senior NCOs and team operations sergeants and conducted outside of Phase II training. The course covered the many aspect of mission planning, unconventional warfare and special operations intelligence techniques.

Phase III qualification training was a four week segment where special forces students were required to put their newly acquired team level skills and knowledge into practice. During this four week phase, special forces students learned the basics of Unconventional Warfare operations and mission planning. The unconventional warfare segment was completed with a two week unconventional warfare exercise. Students were required to plan and prepare for the mission and then parachute into the Uwharrie National Forest north of Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Each special forces team had to link up with it's designated guerrilla group, which was made up and led by a special forces instructor and students. Students were required to organize and train the guerrilla forces and assist them in conducting a raid exercise and other unconventional warfare tasks. The special forces students graduated after successful completion of Phase III training and were then "flash qualified" to wear the Special Forces' green beret insignia. Once assigned to a special forces unit, the trooper was authorized opportunities for additional training. Special Forces training is a continuous process which involves military occupational specialty cross-training and foreign language qualification. Advanced training in SCUBA (Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus) and free-fall parachuting was available for selected individuals. Other Army courses available included Ranger, Pathfinder, Jumpmaster, and Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape (SERE) qualification courses. Source for preceding information: "*US Army Special Forces 1952-84*", pp 1:26-28. The following paragraph will address Air Force Pararescueman qualification training.

The Air Force Pararescue applicant spent eight weeks at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas for physical fitness indoctrination training which followed Air Force basic training. The indoctrination course consisted of five and ten mile runs, push-ups, sit-ups, push-ups, distance swimming and weapons familiarization with the M-16 rifle and 38 caliber revolver. After completion of the indoctrination course pararescue students were sent to the four week Advanced Fitness Course at Headquarters Air Rescue and Recovery Service at Orlando Air Force Base, Florida. Fitness training concentrated on improving body strength and stamina in preparation for Airborne training. Students were sent to Fort Benning, Georgia, to attend the US Army Airborne School where they received three weeks of parachute qualification training along side Navy SEALs (Sea, Air and Land), Army Rangers, and Army Special Forces Green Berets. After successfully completing airborne training, pararescue students were sent to Navy SEALs Underwater Combat Swimmers Course at Key West, Florida. Students received extensive training in SCUBA (Self-Contained Breathing Apparatus) along side Navy SEALs and Navy UDTs (Underwater Demolition Team). The course covered the laws and physics of diving, and the application of the laws of diving, mental development and discipline in the underwater environment. This was followed by the Air Force Survival Training School at McChord Air Force Base, Washington. The three week course was required training for all aircrew members and provided instruction on survival skills in the wilderness environment. The school also conducted the Prisoner of War (POW) indoctrination school which was required training for all combat aircrew members. The POW school provided simulated training conditions of wartime captivity, starvation and mistreatment. Students were exposed to controlled physical and mental stress interrogation exercises to get pararescue specialist accustomed to isolation in an adversarial environment. The Pararescue Medical Training School followed successful completion of the Air Force Survival Training School.

The Pararescue Medical Training School at Sheppard Air Force Base, Texas provided the pararescue students with four week of extensive trauma management training and special field surgical procedures. Students were trained to perform intravenous therapy, clamping off damaged arteries and veins, emergency cricothyroidectomy (surgical placement of a breathing tube in the patient neck), endotracheal intubation (inserting a breathing tube into the mouth and into the windpipe), spinal and fractured bone immobilization and managing other conditions from traumatic amputations to severe internal injuries. Once the advanced medical skills were mastered, pararescue students would be thrown into training exercise where they would have to parachute or helicopter insert into the medical site; take the survivor and extract him over a cliff in a mountain operation scenario. The pararescueman's medical training was continuous, with updated training in new medical procedures and performance evaluations conducted by pararescue teams and on-the-job training in Air Force medical facilities. After medical training, the student was sent to the formal Pararescue School for the final stage of training. The Pararescue School at Eglin Air Force Base, Florida provided four months fast pace, extensive, comprehensive training that combined all the previous training and qualification courses into one specialized program tailored to pararescue operations. Source material is from: Oral History Interview with CMSgt Wayne L. Fisk, pp. 17-29, 176-177. Mission specific training will be addressed in the following paragraph.

Training for the rescue mission was conducted at Eglin Air Force Base Auxiliary Field Number 3 where construction was started of the mock prison camp erected to the exact scale to Son Tay Prison in North Vietnam. The camp was constructed of upright wooden 2x4 frames and canvass target cloth produce standing buildings. Buildings were placed in their correct locations and distances. Barriers and steel mesh was added to the building doorways for training realism, requiring the ground assault/rescue teams to break into the huts and buildings. A ten foot high wall was erected around the compound and collapsable wooden guard towers set up with target silhouettes placed inside to simulate prison guards.

The mock camp was constructed as a collapsible structure for easy disassembly to avoid detection from Soviet spy satellites passing over Eglin Air Force Base on a regular basis. The Central Intelligence Agency constructed a reduced scale 3x4 foot replica of Son Tay prison which was given the code name "Barbara" for security reasons. The table top model had exacting details of building, towers, vegetation, and landscape inside and outside the camp compound. An optical platform device functioned as a periscope allowing the viewer to look straight down as if he were peering down at the ground from inside the camp. The periscope device also provided a horizontal view that simulated being on the camp grounds. This model was used extensively by pararescuemen and special forces ground teams to familiarize themselves with the camp layout. Sources: Oral Interviews with CMSgt Fisk, pp 94; LtCol Grimes, pp 54; and Brig Gen Manor, pp 6-7.

The mission commanders devised a large matrix screening board that identified approximately 50 different critical skills needed to support the tactical side of the mission. Skills such as welding, coordinating controlled air strikes, photography, machine gunners for ground assault teams, and forward air guides. Special Forces enlisted troops were utilized in skills that they excelled in other than their primary specialties. For example, a communications specialist was an expert shoot with an M-79 grenade launcher and was assigned as a grenadier. A combat medic was assigned as a forward air guide due to his expertise at coordinating air strikes. Green Berets that were nonselectees for the mission due to previous combat wounds were retained to provide support functions such as weapons maintenance, armorer duties and other special forces skills like demolition, communications and radio maintenance, intelligence functions and field medicine. Support personnel fabricated equipment items like 30 round capacity magazine pouches which were not in the Army inventory at that time. Portable oxi-acetylene torches were borrowed from the Navy and carrier packs fabricated. The support personnel procured commercial "night optical sights" for M-16 rifles which allowed accurate weapons firing in the dark. Night firing accuracy increased from less than 35 percent to over 95 percent. This proved to be of critical importance on the mission when the ground teams shot and hit every enemy target at night with the optical sights. Source: Oral Interview with LtCol Grimes, pp 50-52.

Training for special forces ground assault teams was intense and dangerous with the authorized use of live ammunition and explosives for breaching the compound wall, shooting guard silhouettes inside the buildings. Multiple searches of the prison cells were conducted simultaneously during the firefight inside the mock compound. At the onset of the training assaults on the camp, Sikorsky HH-53 Super Jolly Green helicopters hovered over the camp at tree top level while pararescuemen neutralized the guard silhouettes in the towers with pinpoint accuracy from window mounted General Electric GAU-5 7.62mm caliber mini-guns. Demolition charges were used with each rehearsal to breach the compound walls and blow-up an access bridge leading to the compound to block the arrival of enemy reinforcements. The ground defense and security teams trained with night vision monoculars, blocking access roads and identifying approaching enemy forces in the dark. Their job was to eliminate enemy forces attempting to reach Son Tay prison. Other advance ground assault teams trained to blow-up a pump house, military compound and electrical transformer station in close vicinity to the prison. During the actual raid it was discovered that the transformer station supplied power to the northern portion of Hanoi City. Forward Air Guide teams trained on calling in coordinated air support to destroy enemy ground forces and enemy aircraft in the area. Source: Oral Interviews with Brig Gen Manor, pp 7-9; 15 and LtCol Grimes, pp 55, 61-62. The raiders were prepared for the mission and the date set for 21 November 1970.

Documentation reflecting a detailed account of the activities of enlisted special forces personnel during the raid was limited. The Son Tay rescue attempt was launched at approximately 0200 hours, on 21 November 1970. The Army Special Forces ground assault teams and Air Pararescuemen performed magnificently. The HH-53 "Super Jolly Green" helicopters hovered at tree top level over the compound at 15-18 knots air speed while pararescuemen neutralized the guard towers with precision mini-gun fire. The special forces ground assault /rescue team breached the compound wall with 30-pound satchel charges, eliminated enemy soldiers inside the prison, and searched the prison cells for POWs.

Unfortunately the POWs had been relocated to other camps approximately four months before the rescue attempt, due to flooding of a nearby river. The advanced assault teams destroyed the military pump station and electric transformer station, cutting off power to Son Tay prison and the northern portion of Hanoi City. Other ground assault teams secured the bridge and roads leading to the prison compound. The Son Tay raiders returned to their base in Thailand without casualties and only minor injuries. The mission had been completed and was an operational success. Sources: *"The Raid"* by Benjamin F. Schemmer, pp 200-215; Oral Interview with CMSgt Fisk, pp 82.

In summary, the selection process used by senior Army and Air Force leadership was extremely effective in identifying the most capable warriors in the Special Operations community. Training requirements for enlisted special forces personnel was extensive and continuous, covering diverse aspects of conventional and unconventional warfare. Army Special Forces Green Berets and Air Force Pararescuemen were trained and qualified in advanced combat skills that transformed them into the perfect weapon for use on the Son Tay rescue operation. From an operational standpoint, the Son Tay Search and Rescue Mission was a success. The mission caused an indirect, positive benefit for American POWs in North Vietnam. After the Son Tay raid the North Vietnamese government closed down their isolated jungle camps and relocated most if not all POWs into consolidated prison camps, primarily in the Hanoi area. This precluded future American POW rescue attempts due to the heavily defended locations of these camps. However, POWs who were previously held in captivity in the jungle by themselves were now housed together with fellow POWs in prisons like the Hanoi Hilton. In almost every case, living conditions and the morale of American POWs in the consolidated camps improved.

The mission also made a political statement to the government of North Vietnam, the message that the US Armed Forces could penetrate North Vietnamese territory "at will", anywhere American POWs are located in isolated camps. Sources: Oral Interviews with Gen Vogt, pp 205-206; CMSgt Fisk, pp 96; "Meeting is Reunion for Son Tay Raiders", *Fuji Flyer* article, pp 89-90. The United States would never forsake its warriors held in captivity.

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ESSAY ON ENLISTED FORCE PARTICIPATION
IN
THE SON TAY SEARCH AND RESCUE OPERATION

- INTRODUCTION

-- Introduce yourself

--- SMSgt Pete Davenport

-- **Subject/Purpose:** This background paper will discuss the participation of enlisted personnel in the 1970 Prisoner of War rescue mission at Son Tay prison in North Vietnam. You will be given insight into the training and duties of enlisted special forces personnel that participated in the mission.

-- Overview

--- Selection process of Army and Air Force special forces enlisted personnel

--- Training requirements for enlisted special force personnel and assigned duties in support of rescue mission.

- BODY

-- Selection process of Army and Air Force special forces enlisted personnel

--- Army leadership selected ground forces volunteers by review of medical, personnel records, interviews

--- Air Force leadership selected aircrew volunteers by records review, recommendations from commanders

-- Training requirements for enlisted special forces personnel and assigned duties to support rescue mission

--- Air Force Pararescuemen and Army Green Berets possessed similar special forces qualifications in parachuting, scuba diving, jungle, desert, and arctic warfare, weapons skills

--- Enlisted ground forces performed area security, POW extraction team duty, and aircrew recovery element.

- CONCLUSION

-- Summary

--- Selection process of Army and Air Force special forces enlisted personnel

--- Training requirements for enlisted special forces personnel and assigned duties in support of rescue mission

-- Closure

--- Enlisted personnel of the Air Force and Army special operations community were an invaluable resource that contributed to the "operational success" of the Son Tay rescue mission.