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A classic military snafu

The Raid

By Benjamin F. Schemmer.
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By KEVIN BUCKLEY

The Son Tay prison camp raid in November 1970 was one of the most controversial and difficult to report episodes of the entire war in Indochina. With all the intelligence resources that were supposedly at hand, how was it possible that American raiders could assault a compound 23 miles from Hanoi only to find that the P.O.W.s they were supposed to rescue had long since been moved elsewhere? The controversy deepened when it was known that well before the raid took place there had been highly persuasive evidence available that the camp was already empty. Answers to all sorts of questions were hard to come by. The entire operation had been planned and carried out in the utmost secrecy. Beyond that, Administration officials

Kevin Buckley teaches at Boston University and reported from Vietnam from 1968 to 1972 for Newsweek.

lied time and again to protect themselves. After all, the Son Tay Raid was a dud in the same measure that the Israeli raid at Entebbe, Uganda, was a success.

"The Raid" hardly answers all the questions about Son Tay—and indeed it opens new controversies. But it is still a valuable book. Benjamin F. Schemmer is editor of Armed Forces Journal—and quite obviously a resourceful insider in the military establishment. From a great variety of sources he has produced an engrossing, detailed and often hilarious autopsy of a classic military snafu.

The most sensational suggestion in the book is that the raiders inadvertently gunned down some 200 Russian or Chinese troops in the 26 minutes they were on the ground. In Schemmer's telling, one part of the assault force landed by mistake 400 yards from the objective at a compound which intelligence had said was a secondary school. The force was commanded by Col. Arthur D. Simons, a Telly Savalas look-alike and legendary "special operations" veteran who packs his own bullets at home in his spare time. Simons and his men reportedly found themselves in a firefight

with people who, to some of the raiders at least, did not look like North Vietnamese. For one thing, they seemed taller. Also, they were wearing "T-shirts and fitted dark undershorts." To his credit, Schemmer never insists that the defenders killed by Simons's force were Russians or Chinese. But the other evidence he assembles to back up that possibility is about as unconvincing as the details of physique and wardrobe. He might just as well have concluded they were basketball players.

Schemmer makes an interesting case that the living conditions of P.O.W.s were improved as a result of the raid. But the value of the book is less in his debatable conclusions that it is in the glimpses of the preoccupations of the military and civilian personalities who were involved in the raid. In a section on life at Son Tay when it was occupied, he recounts the arrival of a new prisoner. One of the first messages he tapped out in Morse code to his fellows was that "a turbine-powered car had led the Indianapolis 500 for 197 laps." The C.I.A. built a \$60,000 table-sized model of the camp (code-named "Barbara"), which was so elaborate that it presented the camp as it would be seen in quarter-or half-moon light, by flares or in almost total darkness. Needless to say, the planners of the raid had some of the highest security clearances ever issued. Yet one of them was temporarily denied access to meteorological information at a crucial time because he did not have the proper clearances to hear the weather reports.

Then there was the case of the baby-water buffalo that people in the White House and Henry Kissinger especially were sure the raiders had taken back from Son Tay as a mascot. Just where the story started is unclear according to Schemmer, but "Henry Kissinger apparently got some very strange intelligence briefings." The raiders denied having kidnapped any animals but the White House, fearful of new embarrassments, ordered the helicopters to be examined. The investigators, undoubtedly equipped with top secret security clearances, did find traces of water buffalo dung. Schemmer leaves the episode as a mystery but the answer seems clear enough. Some of the raiders had obviously stepped in it—quite as literally as the Pentagon and White House had figuratively in launching the raid.