

Operation Kingpin and Operation Eagle Claw

Christina Combs

"Also I heard the voice of the Lord saying, whom shall I send, and who shall go for us? Then said I, here am I. Send me." Isaiah 6:8¹

Operation Kingpin and Operation Eagle Claw were attempts at recovery of prisoners of war or hostage rescue in a foreign country. Operation Kingpin was the final phase of Operation Ivory Coast during the Vietnam War and an attempt to rescue fifty-four American held by the North Vietnamese at Son Tay. Operation Eagle Claw was an attempt to rescue hostages in Iran in the 1970s. Both required joint operations and accurate and shared intelligence.

During the Vietnam War, most Americans who were prisoners of war (POWs) typically found themselves in Hanoi. A small group of POWs was also held Son Tay, a village twenty-three miles from the North Vietnam capital city of Hanoi. Based on different types of intelligence sources, the United States learned of the POW site in mid-1970, and they soon after identified whom the captives were in the camp with sixty-one identified as Americans. Over time, they quickly devised a plan to clandestinely move fifty-six members of the United States Army's Special Forces units to the camp and conduct the rescue operation. This mission would also require the assistance of the

1. Isaiah 6:8 NKJV.

United States Air Force and Navy to carry it out. Much to the United States Marine Corps objections, no one from the Corps was selected for the mission.²

Planning began six months out from the date of the planned raid on Son Tay POW Camp. Everyone wanted in on the action, and initial estimates had the raiding party numbering close to three hundred fifty personnel. This number was cut down fast as planning was conducted by actual operators rather than the service chiefs in the Joint Chiefs of Staff reducing the opportunity for the services to try and exaggerate their role. The fifty-six individuals selected were selected based on their specialty and how much experience they had in Southeast Asia, not based on rank or service. During the six months, the rescue force clandestinely trained at a full-scale mockup of the camp built at Eglin Air Force Base, Florida based on aerial reconnaissance images, the different assault plans based on what was known and potential unknowns.³

The plan was to deliver Special Forces troops using the United States Air Force HH-53 Pave Lows and HH-3 Jolly Green Giant helicopters. MC-130 Combat Talon aircraft would be used as pathfinders and any required aerial refueling. A-1 Skyraiders would escort these aircraft. During this insertion, the United States Navy would launch aircraft to fly over Hanoi to create a diversion to draw attention from Son Tay Camp. The ground team was expected to be on the ground less than thirty minutes and return to the helicopters with the POWs. Once on the ground, the mix of Air Force and Army operators would break into three different teams. One would go directly to the cells that

2. William C. Thomas, "Operation Kingpin-Success or Failure?" *Joint Force Quarterly*, Spring (1997): 120-124, accessed March 4, 2019, <https://apps.dtic.mil/docs/citations/ADA528536>.

3. Thomas, "Operation Kingpin-Success or Failure?", 5

the POWs were believed to be in; a second group would blast a hole in the wall of the prison to create an escape route. A third team would defend the other two groups and prisoners from the enemy response. As soon as the POWs were found and moved they would be loaded on the helicopters that were holding at a nearby landing zone, and all would fly back to Thailand.⁴

Initially, the raid was supposed to take place in October, but Henry Kissinger, the National Security Advisor to the President, delayed it a month. During this delay, they continued to train for more what-if scenarios, one of them dealing with losing a helicopter. This additional training would prove to be beneficial. Also, unknown to those planning and training for the operation, President Nixon was working to obtain the release of the POWs via diplomatic channels and was concerned the planned raid on the compound would hamper his initiatives.^{5 6}

The mission was finally blessed, and on 20 November 1970, the rescue package of at least fifteen aircraft departed from five different air bases to include Udorn, Royal Thai Air Force Base en route to Camp Hope the name given to the Son Tay citadel. Simultaneously, there were aircraft in the area tasked with combat air patrol, surface-to-air missile suppression, aerial refueling as well as early warning command and control. Meanwhile, several strike capable aircraft took off from three aircraft carriers bound for

4. Thomas, 3.

5. Thomas, 6.

6. William H. McRaven, *Spec Ops: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Kindle edition: Presidio Press, 2009), 4972.

Hanoi to create a diversion.⁷ This operation would become the most wide-ranging night operation of the entire war.⁸

Upon reaching the target location, the team would have to rely on the “what if” training they had accomplished as one of the HH-3’s crashed inside the prison yard, so they abandoned it in place. Everyone who was supposed to be on that helicopter was moved to others, thus reducing the chances that the damaged aircraft would become a target and force another rescue operation to recover those lost in that event. Once the ground rescue teams exfiltrated the helicopters and went to complete their tasking they discovered that the camp was empty and that none of the POWs were there. Once this was discovered everyone loaded back up into the helicopters and departed for their home bases. Total time spent on the ground was under 30 minutes.

Sometime between the summer of 1968 and the spring of 1970, assets of the United States intelligence community located Camp Hope and the Interagency Prisoner of War Intelligence Committee (IPWIC), within the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), started to focus more of its reconnaissance efforts on the camp to try and figure out if there were any American POWs were being held there.⁹ During analysis of aerial reconnaissance in May of 1970, it was discovered that there was a coded message placed by the prisoners which said how many prisoners were there and a possible recovery site located nearby at Mount Ba Vi. Later reconnaissance missions verified the

7. McRaven, *Spec Ops*, 4972.

8. Benjamin F. Schemmer, *The Raid: The Son Tay Prison Rescue Mission* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1997), 200.

9. McRaven, *Spec Ops*, 4890.

existence of prisoners at the camp the following month, and more aerial reconnaissance missions were tasked with the area surrounding Camp Hope. Intelligence assets monitored the camp during the six months of planning and preparation.

Early on, there were hints that all might not be as it seemed. Some aerial reconnaissance images gave the appearance that the camp was empty, but this was unverifiable via other means. Other times, the camp seemed to show signs of limited use and activity, but again they were unable to verify if any American POWs were still at the camp. A human intelligence source in the North Vietnamese government indicated that the prisoners had been moved to another camp two days before the raid. Military and government leaders decided to continue “stating that it would be “unforgivable” to not go in after all the training and preparation only to find out later that the POWs had been there.”¹⁰

With much written about the intelligence failure at Son Tay, the intelligence successes commonly go unsaid. In assessing the intelligence provided the planners, General Blackburn later said that “operational intelligence was flawless.”¹¹ Every known capability in the national intelligence community was placed at the disposal of the developers. In fact, at the time, the national level of support utilized for the raid on Son Tay was unique. The planners had individuals from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), DIA, National Security Agency and Strategic Air Command. With this wide variety of assistance, planners were able to figure out important air defense nodes, and they were able to rebuild an accurate mock-up of the camp and all the buildings in it.

10. Thomas, 3.

11. McRaven, *Spec Ops*, 5472.

A year later, it would become public knowledge that the POWs had been moved, possibly to Hanoi, months earlier due to consistent flooding. Ironically, during this time the CIA was conducting a covert program called Operation Popeye, where they would seed clouds to modify the weather in the area. Another prospect is that the camp was under repair or being extended as there was evidence during the raid of lumber, cement, and tools. For some Americans, the Son Tay raid became yet another manifestation of the US failure in Vietnam and a colossal failure for the intelligence community. Many in the media and public were surprised that the intelligence community could not verify if the POWs were at the camp or not before the operation. As the Secretary of Defense, Melvin Laird, said later during a congressional hearing, “We have not been able to develop a camera that sees through the roofs of buildings.”¹²

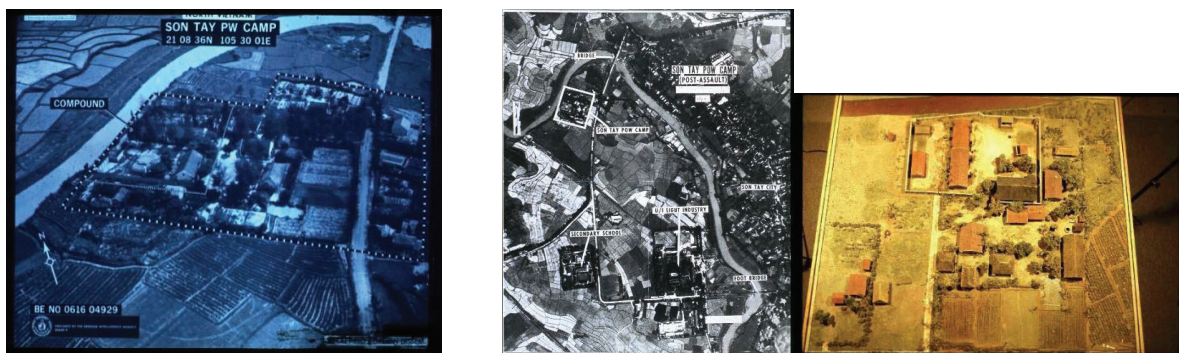


Figure 1: Intelligence photos and mockup of Son Tay POW Camp.¹³

Fast forward ten years and move 3,414 miles west to Tehran, Iran. A group of armed militants has stormed the American Embassy taking over 60 Americans hostage.

12. Schemmer, 35.

13. "History - Son Tay Raider Association," <http://www.sontayraider.com/history.htm>.

In a rush to respond and at Presidential direction, preliminary planning for a rescue operation began only two days after the embassy was taken.¹⁴ The rescue operation had issues from the beginning. The hostages were in a heavily defended embassy complex in which the blueprints for the embassy sat in a drawer within the embassy. This forced planners to use maps from Anti-Aircraft Artillery of Tehran and seek out the knowledge of former defense attachés who had been assigned to the embassy in the past. To avoid driving a massive wedge between the services, the planners were told to include all services. Unlike Operation Kingpin, participants were not picked based on experience in Southwest Asia. One senior observer was quoted saying, “there was a general feeling that it would be nice if everyone had a piece of the pie.”¹⁵ That universal feeling can lead to placing the wrong people into a job.

The first part of the rescue plan called for eight United States Navy RH-53D Sea Stallion helicopters to take off from the USS Nimitz in the Arabian Sea and fly 600 miles to a makeshift airstrip in the Iranian desert code-named Desert One. Waiting for them, there would be three United States Air Force troop-carrying MC-130 Combat Talons, and three ground-refueling configured United States Air Force EC-130 Commando Solos which were based on the island of Masirah off the coast of Oman. Also, on board these cargo aircraft would be large fuel bladders for the helicopters to use to refuel on the ground. The helicopters would refuel then fly to a spot 50 miles southeast of Iran’s capital city Tehran. From this point, 90 men of the United States Army Delta Force

14. Charlie Beckwith, Donald Knox, *Delta Force: A Memoir by the Founder of the U.S. Military’s Most Secretive Special-Operations Unit* (New York: Harper Collins, 1983), 194.

15. John E. Valliere, “Disaster at Desert One: Catalyst for Change,” *Parameters*, vol. 22, no. 3 (Autumn 1992): 78.

would travel in trucks during the night to the embassy in Tehran to conduct the hostage rescue assault as the helicopters flew to a nearby soccer stadium. United States Air Force AC-130 Spectre gunships would provide air cover from above during the hostage rescue.

In the meantime, the United States Army Rangers would inhabit an abandoned airstrip southwest of Tehran. This airstrip is where the helicopters carrying the Special Forces and hostages would land and be destroyed as all personnel would load on to a United States Air Force C-141 Starlifter and airlifted to Egypt. The trucks to be used would be supplied by Department of Defense personnel who arrived in Tehran several days prior. Similar to Kingpin, the team would be divided into three separate groups. Once executed and target personnel acquired, helicopters flying nearby would land and extract the assault team and hostages and move them to the abandoned airstrip which the Rangers secured earlier in operation. This plan was staggering in its complexity and size, bringing together a lot of aircraft and thousands of men from all four military services. There was over a 132 Delta Force, Rangers, Force Recon Marines, and support personnel for this operation. This brings to mind another lesson learned from Kingpin; force structure must be determined by mission objectives and the limitations inherent in any operation. If that means using every service then, by all means, do so, but if it can be carried out by a single service then do so and minimize the risk. Crisis

operations planners tempt fate if they cater to every whim and wish of the military services by increasing their roles and budgets.^{16 17}

Unlike Kingpin, senior leadership, as well as the impromptu units formed for the operation, had limited joint experience. In six months of preparations, there was not a single rehearsal that included all the components. If there had been, they would have discovered that their equipment was not compatible and that each services skill did not complement each other. This lack of being able to communicate would be one of the contributing factors to the mission's failure. Fail to prepare is preparing to fail.

As the mission started, the lack of joint training and preparation would soon become glaringly obvious. As the MC-130s arrived at the abandoned airstrip, Rangers on board saw a truck driving across the desert and chased after it to remove the threat of their operation becoming known. Unfortunately, the truck they saw was a fuel truck, and it burst into flames. Simultaneously, eight RH-53D's took off from the USS Nimitz with their dust filters removed bound for Desert One. On the way there one of the helicopters had to be abandoned due to pressurization of a rotor blade, another returned to the Nimitz after losing navigation and flight instruments, the rest of the helicopters soon flew into a dust storm called a haboob. With no secure communications, there was no way to communicate with others of low visibility.¹⁸ Also,

16 . Richard F. Brauer Jr, "A Critical Examination of Planning Imperatives Applicable to Hostage Rescue Operations," Student Essay, U.S. Army War College, 1984, <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a140872.pdf>.

17. Thomas, 3.

18. Richard A. Radvanyi, "Operation Eagle Claw – Lessons Learned," Master's Thesis, United States Marine Corps Command and Staff College, 2002, <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a402471.pdf>.

many of the helicopter pilots were not used to flying with night vision goggles, and they were also not very familiar with the helicopter they were flying. Once they reached Desert One, an RH-53D developed a hydraulic issue making it unflyable. This left only five usable helicopters, far less than what they needed to get all the Delta Force operators to the embassy. Seeing this issue, Colonel Charles Beckwith, Delta Force commander, consulted with President Jimmy Carter using secure satellite radio communications, the mission was canceled by President Carter. While preparing to leave Desert One and return to their bases, a RE-53D moving to allow another helicopter to refuel, struck one of the EC-130 and both burst into flames. The remaining forces left the remains of the destroyed aircraft, operational RE-53Ds and the bodies of eight individuals behind as daylight was approaching and ammunition was exploding.¹⁹

During Operation Kingpin, most of the intelligence community at the time aided in the preparation and training of the teams selected to go. For Operation Eagle Claw, this would not be the case. Eagle Claw was planned with an extreme lack of intelligence. The CIA was tasked with providing the ad hoc Joint Task Force with current intelligence. Unfortunately, the CIA's human intelligence footprint inside Tehran was small and almost non-existent. The planners used what satellite imagery they could find, and they were assured they knew Iran's order-of-battle and the capabilities of their radars. What had people worried was the lack of information the assault team would need to know about the embassy. In Arizona, a full-size mock-up of the embassy was built for the

19. Brauer Jr.

Delta Force to train, but there were so many unknowns that they were not sure if they even had the mock-up built right.²⁰

Director of the CIA, Navy Admiral Stansfield Turner ordered a small aircraft fly from Rome to Iran to take soil samples to see if the ground was hard enough to support all the aircraft to be used in the rescue operation. Also, a mission was required to install infrared runway lights, created by the CIA, that could be distantly initiated to direct aircraft landings at the abandoned airfield. This mission was carried out by Air Force Major John Carney and Bud McBroom. A possible negative omen was while they were taking samples and installing the lights, several vehicles drove past them in the desert and while waiting for their flight home on a Concorde, CIA officers recognized them and called them by their real names instead of their cover names.²¹

In the investigation after the mission and written in the Joint Chiefs of Staff Special Rescue Mission Report, also known as the Hollow Report, it was noted that besides the CIA, other intelligence agencies asked to support the mission were not entirely told about the mission that they were supporting. The lack of total knowledge led to them not being able to assist as much as they could had they been thoroughly read into the mission. Also, since intelligence was needed quickly some reports that were not fully vetted or evaluated made their way to the planners before the analysts could verify the information. There was not a process put in place to send requests and

20. Charles Cogan, "Desert One and Its Disorders," *The Journal of Military History* 67, no. 1 (2003): 201-216, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/40443/pdf>.

21. John Prados, *Safe for Democracy: The Secret Wars of the CIA* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), 21-27.

receive intelligence from other agencies. The report was also critical of some elements of the intelligence community for not giving enough support promptly.²²

“It was later discovered that the CIA was given secret communiqué that contained some of the most important information needed. That being the exact location of hostages being held in the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs,” said John Carney, the lead Combat Controller for Eagle Claw.²³ The CIA made up a story to cover up a source they had in Tehran that was passing great intelligence, which they held back from the planners for fear that the existence of their source and sub-sources would become known putting all at risk. Also, at the last minute, the agency started to pass other critical data regarding the layout of the embassy, where the light switches were located and even which direction the doors opened.²⁴

During this time, the culture within the intelligence community and military were one of withholding critical information in the interest of preserving the reputation of a single agency or a career. Rivalries ran deep within the intelligence community and military branches. This runs counter to the national security interests of the United States and puts people’s lives in danger.²⁵ The flow of intelligence and information should go top-down and down-up to allow for personnel on the ground to quickly pass information to not only the intelligence community but other military services so that all

22. Mark Bowden, "The desert one debacle," *Atlantic Monthly* 297, no. 4 (2006): 62.

23. Michael Smith, *Killer Elite: The Inside Story of America's Most Secret Special Operations Team* (London, England: Macmillan, 2008), 20.

24. Smith, *Killer Elite*, 20.

25. Radvanyi, Operation Eagle Claw.

can see the complete intelligence picture and thus provide the best support possible to those who need it.

Both missions highlight the successes and failures of intelligence and how the community can help or hinder an operation rescuing POWs or hostages in a foreign land. The time during both operations were geopolitical tightropes, the Vietnam War and the fall of the CIA-backed Shah of Iran. Both operations relied heavily on intelligence and intelligence was a deciding factor in their overall success or failure. During Operation Kingpin, the relationship between the planners and the intelligence community was one of teamwork and partnership. A decade later the relationship was strained, and a game of keeping secrets emerged up to the last minute. Both operations ran the gamut of respective teamwork and jointness to one of one-upmanship.

Operation Kingpin was and still is a model for joint planning and operations, while Operation Eagle Claw is the example of what not to do and what happens when the team does not address issues early on.

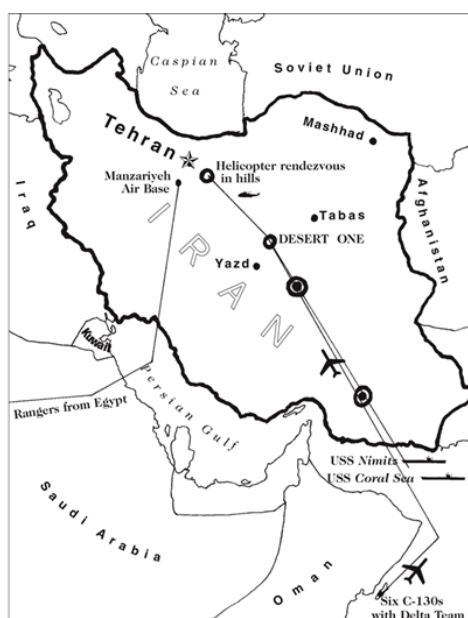


Figure 2: Map was adapted from a sketch.²⁶

A military raid is...a high-risk venture that operates on the outer margins of the possible, relying on skill, daring and a goodly measure of luck. When a raid succeeds, it acquires almost magical qualities and endows its authors with the badge of genius. Hence the appeal. When it fails, it invites ridicule and the second-guessing of armchair strategists.

– Gary Sick²⁷

26. Otto Kreisher, "Desert One: The mission was to rescue the hostages held in Iran, but it ended in disaster" *Air Force Magazine* 82 (1999): 60-67.

27. Gary Sick, *All Fall Down: America's Fateful Encounter with Iran* (London, United Kingdom: I.B.Tauris, 1985).

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