

AIR COMMANDO

JOURNAL

A Professional Publication by the Air Commando Association
Dedicated to Air Commandos Past, Present & Future

Spring 2012



Vol I: Issue 3

Congress to the Rescue

Statutory Creation of USSOCOM FY 1987

By Honorable James Locher III

Eagle Claw

AKA: Desert One 1980

Urgent Fury

Grenada 1983

Tragedy Strikes

Laos Site 85 -- 1968

Year of the Dragon

Part I



Foreword by General (ret) Charles Holland
Former Commander in Chief USSOCOM



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9

Tragedy Strikes: *Laos Site 85*

12

Operation Kingpin: *Son Tay Raid*

16

Element of Surprise

18

Eagle Claw: *Successful Failed Mission*

27

Operation Urgent Fury:
Invasion of Grenada

40

Match Made by Pinatubo:
Case Study in Jointness



45

The Year of the Dragon: *Part I*

4

Foreword:

General (ret) Charles Holland USAF

5

Chindit Chatter: *Editorial*

6

Reunion Updates

8

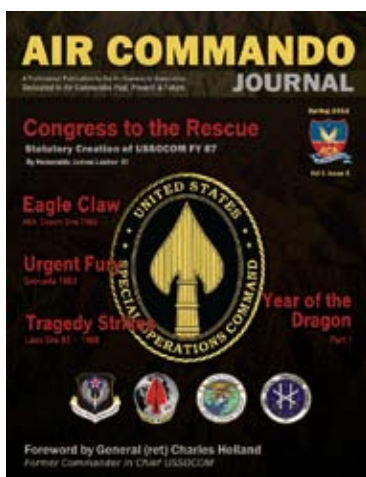
Hotwash: *Letters & Comments*

50

**Air Commandos Support
Education in Honduras**

55

Medal of Honor Recipient
A1C William H. Pitsenbarger



**ON THE
COVER**

**33
CONGRESS
TO THE
RESCUE**

FOREWORD

As we Air Commandos reflect on the early exploits of Johnny Alison and Heinie Aderholt, we are reminded of the challenge each of them had to overcome to integrate a force many did not understand nor appreciate. When the Vietnam era came to an end, we still faced an uncertain future with conventional wisdom not understanding the relevance of special operations forces (SOF). Upon our return to CONUS, we faced a downturn with a disinvestment in SOF capabilities. It was not until the failure at Desert One on 24 April 1980, that the Nation realized the consequences of previous decisions. This wake-up call to the nation was considered the birth of modern day special operations.

With Jim Locher working behind the scenes to form the legislation that led to the implementation of the Cohen-Nunn Amendment and the establishment of the US Special Operation Command (USSOCOM), SOF was finally placed on a path of national importance. This year marks the 25th anniversary of that historic legislation and the impact of this amendment continues to be felt throughout the community.

In Panama, Iraq, the Balkans, and the aftermath of 9-11, these forces have been called upon at an unprecedented level for the most sensitive and critical operations in support of our national objectives. With USSOCOM taking on the supported role for the planning of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), new realities for SOF were apparent. Prior to 9-11 with a USSOCOM budget of just over \$3 Billion per year, leveraging the services was the norm. However, after 9-11 the Command needed to expand in order to meet the new commitments for GWOT. With the increased demands for SOF from all the Combatant Commanders, USSOCOM developed 13 initiatives for approval by SECDEF; not without controversy. The one question of major concern involved the Major Force Program (MFP) funding for the Command. The “snowflake” from Washington questioned the need for MFP-11 with an assumption these funds could be better exercised by the services in support of SOF. As the debate continued and the need for additional resources gained momentum, SECDEF chartered the President of the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA), General (Retired) Larry Welch, to conduct an analysis of the 13 initiatives. On Saturday, 7 December 2002, in a private meeting, the assessment of

the 13 initiatives was presented to SECDEF which, if supported, provided the resources required to fulfill the new role of the Command. During General Welch’s assessment of MFP-11, he succinctly stated, “I was the TAC/DO during Desert One and if you take away the MFP-11 funding, SOF will die of benign neglect.” After completing his assessment for all 13 initiatives with a positive recommendation, SECDEF asked if resources were available to fund them. The answer was yes. With the Command now at an estimated \$10.5 Billion per year (with the services providing the funding for military personnel accounts of \$3.5 Billion) and still growing, USSOCOM and the components, along with the Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs), are in a better position to fulfill their global commitments.

For Air Commandos, the past ten years have shed more light on the importance of the SOF Operator. From Special Tactics personnel on horseback calling in B-52 close air support (CAS), to AFSOC aircrews developing new tactics, techniques and procedures for upgraded capabilities on legacy aircraft, the innovativeness of our personnel maintains our premiere war-fighting capabilities. In the same manner, the introduction of new systems such as the CV-22, Non-Standard Aviation (NSAV), Predator remotely piloted aircraft and specialized ordnance delivery capabilities such as Dragon Spear and the maintainers who keep a step ahead in supporting multiple small fleet size operations, prove the SOF truth that “Humans are more important than hardware”.

For the future, we are steadied knowing that the Quiet Professionals are well led, well trained, well resourced and ready to continue to meet the challenges of the 21st century—anytime, anyplace. I salute each of you for your dedication and resiliency. You continue to make a difference!



General (ret) Charles Holland
AFSOC Commander
July 1997 - August 1999
USSOCOM Commander in Chief
October 2000 - October 2003



CHINDIT CHATTER

Throughout America's history there were times that the country disarmed or at a minimum were ill-prepared for different crises that were sprung upon us. Since Vietnam, no individual Service or capability had this occur with greater impact to capabilities than SOF--and in particular Air Force SOF. After Viet Nam, Air Force SOF was reduced to minimal and obsolete assets and assigned to Major Commands that did not truly understand, nor particularly care for, the need for those Air Commandos' specialized skill sets. This disdain and lack of understanding for what Air Commandos brought to the fight led to a lack of funding for modern hardware and the personnel to maintain even a basic capability and was indicative of overall benign neglect.



During the Viet Nam conflict, just as they had during the Second World War and Korea, Air Commandos adapted the aircraft available to accomplish the mission. Air Commandos created the gunships by taking existing aircraft; C-47s, C-119s, and finally C-130s, and modifying them to create a new and unexpected capability. In the first issue of ACJ, General Loy showed how Air Commandos modified T-28 trainers to provide lethal fire support at night, before the invention of night vision goggles. As the USAF transitioned to an all-jet force, Air Commandos kept their Douglas A-1 Skyraiders to support the ground teams because they carried more ordnance, had a loiter time measured in hours instead of minutes, and the crews were completely dedicated to supporting the teams. In true Air Commando style, the operators and maintainers turned those old assets into a very capable and lethal force. However, as Viet

Nam wound down, even those assets that were created largely through the ingenuity of Air Commandos led by General Aderholt and other Air Commando pioneers, were allowed to atrophy. When other national crises occurred with great need for Air Commando capabilities, there were few assets and crews available. Further, coordination with the other Services SOF was loosely structured with, at best, questionable command and control alignments. There were several occasions where, even with Air Commandos displaying great initiative and ingenuity to solve the tasks at hand through unquestioned courage and aplomb, they could not overcome these limitations.

This was recognized at the highest levels of government and led to Congress taking action through the Goldwater-Nichols DOD Reorganization Act, which reorganized the US military in 1986. Goldwater-Nichols was followed in 1987 by the Cohen-Nunn Amendment that addressed Special Operations Forces specifically. April, 2012, marks the 25th anniversary

continued on page 7

REUNIONS

September 6 - 8, 2012

SPOOKY AC 47 GUNSHIP REUNION

4th Annual Spooky Reunion in Las Vegas Nevada

We are still seeking all personnel that dealt with "Spooky" 1965-1969. Anyone who was involved with "SPOOKY" in Vietnam in 1965-1969 is invited, as well as any others who were with Spooky.

US Air Force, 14th Special Operations Wing (formally 14th Air Commando Wing)

Contact: Junior Skinner 12226 SE 99th Ave. Belleview, FL 34420

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September 28 -30, 2012

6 SOS COMBAT AVIATION ADVISORS REUNION & ROTARY-WING STAND-DOWN CEREMONY

A 6th Special Operations Squadron reunion and stand-down ceremony for rotary-wing operations will be held on 28-30 September 2012 at Hurlburt Field, Florida.

Planned events:

- Rotary-wing stand-down ceremony
- Updates on recent operations
- Aviation-foreign internal defense discussions
- Past successes and ideas on future direction
- BBQ and Family Day

The centerpiece of the weekend will be a ceremony terminating rotary-wing operations at the 6 SOS. The divestiture of the rotary-wing mission will mark the end of a proud chapter in the squadron, and all 6 SOS members, past and present, along with their families, are invited to attend.

For more information on the reunion or the ceremony, please contact Diane Beck at diane.beck@hurlburt.af.mil

To submit your organization's reunion information please email the following information to info@aircommando.org

Please make sure your submissions have:

Event date, event time (if applicable), location, sign up information, point of contact information, and a brief description of what it is.

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of that watershed legislation. This edition of the Air Commando Journal is dedicated to that critical juncture in SOF history. There are several articles that highlight operations prior to that date and we are truly honored to have the first permanent Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (ASD SOLIC), the Honorable James Locher, provide us an inside look at how the legislation evolved. Mr Locher had a ringside seat and largely led the effort to structure the whole package. We are also grateful that three former AFSOC commanders have made significant contributions to this edition.

The standup of United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) was the result of hard fought legislative efforts. Over the last 25 years the wisdom of that Congressional decision has been proven in operations that began almost immediately after the law was implemented and have been non-stop ever since. In the most famous recent employment of SOF assets, recently retired Admiral Olson made the point that the tactics, techniques, procedures and some of the mission assets used during Operation Neptune Spear against Osama bin Laden were years in the making and refining, and demonstrate what a consistent and supported investment in SOF can achieve. SOF, therefore, has evolved from a neglected capability to the force of choice in almost every major US conflict to the smallest contingencies. In fact the mantra “first in and last out” is now espoused not

only by leaders of SOF forces but also by other leaders at the highest levels. (A more cynical view is “SOF--first in; never out”, but that can be a theme for a future issue of ACJ).

Air Commandos led the way in many of those efforts and have had a significant role in nearly all. Admiral McRaven, the present commander of USSOCOM, recognizes the ever increasing desire for SOF forces and is busy structuring his forces to have even greater impact throughout the globe....a gigantic change in SOF status in the last quarter century. The existing commands that were created as a result of the Cohen-Nunn Amendment, have evolved into extremely lethal and capable forces. This is an absolute in AFSOC.....it is incumbent on all Air Commandos Past, Present and Future, to make sure that we retain these new and hard fought gains and never regress to times in the past where we had to scrape the dregs from the ash heaps of the past to carry out the fight.

We recognize, and are actually hopeful, that this edition will spark discussion and debate about some of the opinions and insights that are presented. The Air Commando Association welcomes your thoughts. Please e-mail us at info@aircommando.org or mail them to our headquarters at the address listed on page 6. We will put your comments and opinions in our Hot Wash section in following editions. Enjoy this edition with the critical and questioning attitude that is inherent in Air Commandos Past, Present, and Future.



Col (ret) Dennis Barnett USAF
ACA Vice President and Editor In Chief

Advertisers in this issue:

ATK Special Mission Aircraft.....	49
Black Diamond	49
Blanchard Family Wines	32
Bless The Children.....	52
CACI	26
Eglin Federal Credit Union	17
Emerald Coast Convention Center	20
Lockheed Martin	44
Pioneer Technologies	32
Rally Point Management, LLC	20
Sierra Nevada Corporation	20
SRA	37
SSAI	26
Special Operations Warrior Foundation	2
Veteran Data Solutions.....	25

“Special Tactics – Send Me!”

Unfortunately ACA discovered that we made a very bad error in “*Special Tactics – Send Me!*”, Winter 2011/2012. We showed photos of the three 24 STS airmen (page 46) recently lost in the Chinook accident but inadvertently transposed TSgts Zerbe and Brown’s names under their photos. We cannot express in words how badly we feel.

We corrected the error on the electronic version of the Air Commando Journal posted on our Web site www.aircommando.org.

We truly apologize to the families, the unit, the ST community and all of AFSOC for this error.

The Editor

Corrections

Thanks for correcting the ACA Journal online edition link to correctly identify TSgt Brown and TSgt Zerbe. I also noticed two other errors, one no fault of ACA.

If you make corrections to the link again or in the next issue please change the following.

1. The AFSC badges that were inserted (pages 40-41) in my article has the old Combat Weather badge logo and not the newer Special Operations Weather badge.

2. The other error is the picture at the bottom of page 51. The (USAF photo) used incorrectly says: Combat controller preparing his equipment in Japan. That was a mistake that someone else made and was duplicated. It should read: Special Operations Weatherman preparing his equipment in Japan. The person pictured is TSgt Ray Decker, 320th Special Tactics Squadron, Kadena Air Base, Japan.

We really appreciate the ACA featuring Battlefield Airmen in the second Journal issue, and very much appreciate what the ACA continues to do for all Air Commandos!

Best regards,
Wayne G. Norrad, CIV, DAF
720th Special Tactics Group
Analyst, Public Relations

*Chief,
Thanks for the inputs.*

Dennis Barnett Col (ret), USAF,

This letter is several weeks overdue. Congratulations on the publishing of the first edition of the Air Commando Journal. Its presentation, tenor, and content speak well of the efforts you and your editing staff have focused on this project. The Journal’s particular emphasis on the people of action that are the basis for the many articles comes through loud and clear.

Thanks!
Much continued success!

Regards,
Tom Leard
Carefree, AZ

Kind sir,

“*Combat Control: First There: Last Out,*” in the Winter 2011/2012 issue of Air Commando brought back memories to me. The article was interesting but there is far more to the story than was possible to cover in a short article. I was sent in to Vietnam to replace the mission commander who had been at Kham Duc right after the battle and was immediately deployed with the two combat controllers to Quang Tri where we remained for a week or two. While there, there was not much activity and I received pretty thorough first-person accounts from TSGT Mort Freedman and Airman Jim Lundie. Alan Gropman was a member of the 463d Tactical Airlift Wing at the time, and he had participated in a landing at Kham Duc during the evacuation. Later, while a student at the Air War College, he wrote his academic thesis on the evacuation and it gives a much more complete story--and it was first published as one volume in the AF Southeast Asia Monograph Series. It has since been republished commercially as “*Airpower and the Airlift Evacuation of Kham Duc*”, and is available through www.Amazon.com. I recommend it most highly as a case study of the confusion and difficulties faced by combat control teams in the heat of battle--and of the heroism and competence of Freedman and Lundie

David R. Mets
Lt Col (ret), USAF

“A Zorro Tale” (Fall 2011)

On page 11 of the Fall 2011 issue is a photo of the last “Zorros”. The last man in the back row is my father Lt. Col Edward H. Miller, not George. My Dad flew B-17’s in WWII, C-47’s in the Berlin Air Lift and T-28’s in both Korea and Viet Nam. He also served with SAC at Vandenberg AFB during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Thanks,
Michael Miller

*Mr Miller,
Thanks for pointing this out and thanks to your father for his service.*

Dear Editor,

Great edition of the Air Commando Journal. I read with great interest from cover to cover. I especially liked the SOWT article. Keep up the good work. Our new web page is up and running for past and present SOWT personnel at www.combatweather.org/InstantForum/. If you can, add a link to your Links of Interest page on www.aircommando.org, I would appreciate it.

Thanks,
Ronald H. Kellerman,
SMSgt (ret), USAF
ACA L-4010

Gen Secord and ACA Exec Committee,

I just wanted to say that I really like the new look for the “same GREAT newsletter”!

Likewise I am so happy to see the corporate sponsorship program and the Endowment Fund that have been started that are helping to keep this great organization and more importantly its heritage alive and growing. Finally, I want to say that I love the ACJ!

Keep up the great work! God bless.

Connie Lutz,
ACA Member #2463

Submissions can be e-mailed to info@aircommando.org or mailed to Hot Wash c/o Air Commando Association, P.O. Box 7, Mary Esther, FL 32569. ACA reserves the right to eliminate those that are not deemed appropriate. However, we will answer each and every input, whether it is placed in this column or not. Thank you in advance for your interest in the Air Commando Journal.

Tragedy Strikes



Laos Site 85

By Major General (Ret) Richard V. Secord

Aerial view “The Sacred mountain” of Phou Pha Thi, known as Lima Site 85. Photo courtesy of Lt/Col (ret) Jeannie Schiff USAF

Today’s Air Commandos have a motto “No Fail”. This is an admirable goal, but in war not always achievable; especially when the odds are stacked against you. This is the story of one such event which became a tragedy in Laos during the US war in Southeast Asia (SEA) and involved two Air Commandos and a number of USAF radar technicians.

It all began in July 1967. At the time I was a major on loan or “detailed” to the CIA in Laos. Detailed military personnel were sometimes jokingly referred to as “Christmas Help”. This was a tremendously interesting and challenging assignment, both personally and professionally. I was assigned to the Laos Station from 1966-1969, during the height of the US war in SEA. The conflict in Laos, often called the Secret War, was under the direction of the CIA and involved the use of Laotian military and paramilitary forces. This had proven to be an effective strategy in confronting a greatly superior North Vietnamese Army (NVA) as far back as the French experience 10 years earlier. The Americans resurrected this program with the Laotian’s during our Viet Nam experience from 1962-75. Air Commandos were big players throughout this conflict in many areas.

In this case, my job was that of Chief of the CIA Tactical Air Division -- I supervised a number of specialists in both fixed and rotary wing support for our friendly forces as well as a Photo Interpretation (PI) Branch. This was a tremendously important task since air power was the trump card in this otherwise uneven, guerrilla conflict -- somewhat like today in Afghanistan.

In July 1967, my boss, our paramilitary main base chief,

Bill Lair, and I attended a meeting at the USAF 7/13 AF Hq, at Udorn Air Base in Thailand. This meeting was conducted by CINCPACAF, Gen Hunter Harris, during which he laid out a plan, directed by JCS and the CIA, to place a TSQ-81 radar at one of our sites, atop a mountain in far northern Laos. From this location, which we called Lima Site 85, using a Tactical Air Navigation System (TACAN), a low frequency radio beacon (decades before GPS) and a new radar installation, the AF intended to clandestinely direct all-weather bombing in North Vietnam. Lima Site 85 was located about 120 miles from Hanoi. When operational it was planned that radar vectors would be transmitted to Air Force aircraft attacking targets in North Vietnam via relay through an orbiting communications bird. This was supposed to keep the site secret.

I did not comment during this meeting, but my boss did and he opined that the NVA would soon react to this remote location becoming so active with construction and logistics activities, all being supported by numerous helicopters and small fixed wing aircraft from Air America. The paramilitary Chief stated clearly that we did not have enough friendly ground forces, mainly Muong irregulars under Gen Vang Pao, to defend Lima Site 85 against a main force NVA attack, which would surely come. The CIA Chief of Station (COS) and my boss decided that the only way we could hold the site was through the employment of USAF close air support. Reliable and consistent USAF close air support was going to be essential in order to protect the site. We were assured that USAF TacAir would be provided.

The CIA gave my division responsibility for the overall defense of Lima Site 85, to be supported by our Ground Branch



Chief. We ended up with a few hundred Muong irregulars, a company of less than 200 Thai infantry, a couple of CIA case officers, and one Air Commando forward air controller (a combat controller, naturally). There were also about 15, on average, supposedly civilian, contractor personnel (actually “sheep-dipped” USAF radar technicians) at the site. This was our ground defense.

As we looked at the problem, defending the site against a determined, conventional enemy force, it became clear that our real defensive advantage would be USAF tactical air support, provided mainly by F-105, F-4 and A-1 aircraft. At that time, there were only 1 or 2 AC-130’s in theater, then being employed on a trial basis and were not available to us. My staff and I therefore started planning close air support and interdiction sorties to be used as our extensive, indigenous intelligence network turned up targets which threatened the site.

That summer, the AF began moving the radar vans and support equipment to Lima Site 85, at the top of Phou Pha Thi Mountain. This was a huge task brilliantly completed and the site became operational in late October 1967. By the end of the year, LS 85 was controlling up to 55% of the air strikes in North Vietnam. In October 1967 we detected the trace of a new road (Rt 602) being carved out of the jungle, leading from the small town of Sam Neua, about 25 miles away. The road was aimed directly at Phou Pha Thi and clearly was intended to bring artillery and logistics support forward for a large NVA force. Unfortunately, we were only allocated a handful of close air support sorties each day and were unsuccessful in halting the road’s progress. The NVA was slowly cutting a road out of the jungle and it was obvious that the road was definitely a “dagger” aimed right at us.

As early as October we became increasingly worried about the radar team which rotated crews every seven days. They were unarmed and were supposed to stay that way according to US Ambassador William Sullivan and his embassy staff. The State Department had decided these technicians needed to maintain the perception of being civilians. If Washington wanted them armed, we were told it would have been so directed. I also requested the ambassador authorize a small, combat experienced, US Army Special Forces team to protect the radar technicians -- request denied, repeatedly!

In November, after a number of attempts at getting embassy authorization to provide the radar technicians with small arms, I decided to disregard Ambassador Sullivan and went to the AF 7/13 commander, Maj Gen Lindley, in Udorn, explained the dilemma and requested permission to draw 40 M-16s and ammunition from his stocks. The CIA had plenty of weapons, but no M-16s. My rationale was that these airmen at least had some familiarity with the M-16, having gone through basic training. Gen Lindley stated he was with us and allowed me to draw the weapons from the AF base supply on a hand receipt. We issued the rifles to the radar team, along with a number of Browning 9mm side arms, ammunition, and a large supply of M-1 hand grenades. The Embassy was never informed. My boss issued instructions to our case officers to give weapons training to the radar crews as time permitted.

As the threat to Lima Site 85 grew and the TacAir sorties remained insufficient to stop the road construction, we prepared a detailed emergency evacuation plan, including demolition of the site. We were so concerned about the lack of sufficient air support that I traveled to Saigon in December ’67 to confront the planners in 7th AF HQ which controlled the allocation of combat air assets throughout the theatre. I showed the planners how the road was approaching LS 85 and explained that it was only a matter of time before the site would be under attack. Without sufficient air support, they were in danger of losing their most effective air control station. Unfortunately, the planners could not provide additional CAS or interdiction sorties to help us.

Back in Laos, still no improvement in the air support. However our intelligence improved. A friendly team ambushed an NVA artillery survey party in late December and captured detailed charts which laid out their planned artillery and mortar positions. Also, our technical intelligence identified two NVA regiments that were preparing for deployment, most likely against our site. Our Hmong troops then captured a phony Buddhist party doing reconnaissance of Phou Pha Thi. And finally, in early January ’68 a flight of 4 Russian built AN-2 bi-wing “Colt” aircraft attacked the site in broad daylight. Some of our people, using small arms, shot one down and an



An Air Combat First by Keith Woodcock

Air America Bell 205 vs attacking North Vietnamese Air Force An-2 Colt
 Captain Theodore H. Moore and Flight Mechanic Glenn R. Woods 12
 January 1968 at Lima Site 85, Phou Pha Thi, Laos.

Air America Huey helicopter shot down another. A mural of this action is displayed at the CIA today. Who ever heard of a chopper shooting down a fixed wing airplane?

Meanwhile the Tet Offensive was underway in South Viet Nam and was the focus of Saigon's attention. In northern Laos, though, Route 602 inched closer to Phou Pha Thi and motor vehicles were now using the road. We had failed to stop the construction and thereby sealed our own fate. NVA conventional forces could now deploy against Lima Site 85 – and we knew it!

On the night of 10 March 1968 the assault began. The CIA Chief of Ground Ops and I had begun sleeping at our Hqs in Udorn, where the various communication links were located in a simple Command Post arrangement. At around 1930 we received a call from a CIA case officer at Lima Site 85 – the attack had begun. Incoming artillery was fairly heavy and the weather was poor with low clouds. The radar technicians had begun calling in air strikes for their own defense, against coordinates we had previously designated as probable artillery and mortar locations. Suddenly there were a lot of F-4 and F-105 sorties available. By around midnight, a lot of the wiring powering various defensive devices had been cut by incoming fire. Power to the TSQ-81 radar system was also knocked out, but restored in a few hours through heroic repair efforts of the “civilian” technicians.

We decided to evacuate the site after first light despite orders from Washington a couple of weeks earlier to hold at whatever cost. I directed Air America to immediately move as many helicopters as possible to Lima Site 36, about 30 miles south of Phou Pha Thi, in preparation for an emergency evacuation early the next morning, 11 March.

Then came an instruction from Ambassador Sullivan, we were to evacuate the site. Of course, preparatory measures were already in progress. There were 18 US personnel at the site and several hundred Thai and Muong soldiers dispersed around the mountain. Fifteen US personnel were manning the radar. The two CIA case officers and an Air Commando combat controller, AIC Huffman, were located at a command post about 1000 yards away, and 500 feet below the TSQ-81 radar.

Around midnight we lost communications with the radar site, but still had contact with the CIA officers and Airman Huffman who was prepared to direct close air support if the weather improved. Shortly thereafter, one of the CIA case officers told us he heard automatic weapons fire from the vicinity of the radar. My boss immediately ordered the CIA officer to get some Muong soldiers and get up to the radar – stat! This was done and they ran into a squad of enemy near the radar control vans. A firefight ensued and the CIA officer was wounded in the leg. He continued to fight and protect the radar vans and the airmen behind the sandbags. These were the guys who were supposed to remain unarmed according to the Embassy. One of these radar technicians, CMSgt Richard Etchberger, had rallied his men and led the fight against NVA sappers attacking the TSQ-81 radar and the control vans. Chief Etchberger was fatally wounded during the early morning of 11 March, while an Air America Huey was lifting him and other survivors out of LS 85. Richard Etchberger was awarded the Medal of Honor,

posthumously, in 2011, 43 years after the fact.

Earlier, around 0300, I directed Pete Saderholm, chief of our photo interpretation branch and a part of my Air Liaison Division, to get over to the nearby 602nd Air Commando Squadron and “preach a holy war”. He and his PIs laid out detailed maps and photos of LS 85 for the air commandos. The 602nd Air Commando Squadron (ACS) launched several combat formations of A-1 Skyraiders before dawn as the weather started to clear. By around 0630 the first A-1s with their heavy loads of ordnance (up to 7,500 lbs each) and their four 20mm cannons were bringing effective fire to bear against the NVA attacking LS 85. AIC Huffman controlled a number of them. Unfortunately, one A-1 was downed by enemy fire and the pilot, Capt. Donald Westbrook, was lost.

The A-1 strikes, along with a number of jet fighter sorties, created a shock effect and the Air America Hueys were able to sweep in to rescue the survivors. In the end we lost 11 men on the radar team and one A-1 pilot in the debacle; which remained classified until 1983.

The fight at LS 85 was an enormous military and political failure of command at high levels. The facts, of course, were generally unknown due to security concerns for many years. These men all fought bravely without hesitation. AIC Huffman, the Air Commando combat controller, who has since passed away due to natural causes, was amazingly cool and effective. I guess it has become the norm – Air Commandos do not fail, but others sometimes do.

The “sheepdipped” radar technicians’ squadron commander, Col Gerald Clayton, USAF(Ret), resides today near Tampa, FL. He was not deployed at the site the night of the attack.

There is a memorial dedicated to this radar team located at their original home station, Barksdale AFB, LA. Those men were all Air Commandos at heart! 🇺🇸

About the Author: Major General (ret) Richard Secord is currently serving as the president of the Air Commando Association.



The bust of Medal of Honor recipient Chief Master Sergeant Richard L. Etchberger shines onstage at the Air Force Senior Noncommissioned Officer Academy on March 26, 2012. The bust, sculpted by John Lajba, will be a part of the permanent exhibit at the academy. (U.S. Air Force photo by Melanie Rodgers Cox)

OPERATION KINGPIN

The Son Tay Raid



By Rick Newton, Contributing Editor

By the spring of 1970, there were more than 450 known American prisoners of war (POWs) in North Viet Nam. The United States was in its sixth year of the Viet Nam war. Some of the POWs had been imprisoned over 2,000 days, longer than any serviceman had ever spent in captivity in any war in America's history. Furthermore, reports of horrid conditions, brutality, torture, starvation, and even death were being told in intelligence reports.

In May of 1970, reconnaissance photographs revealed the existence of two prison camps west of Hanoi. At Son Tay Camp, 23 miles from Hanoi, one photograph identified a large 'K' – a code for 'come get us' – drawn in the dirt. At the other camp, Ap Lo, about 30 miles west of North Vietnam's capital, another photo showed the letters SAR (search and rescue), apparently spelled out by the prisoners' laundry, and an arrow with the number '8' indicating the distance the men had to travel to the fields where they worked. Examining the reconnaissance, intelligence analysts in Washington, DC, determined that it just might be possible to rescue the prisoners from SonTay.

On 6 Aug 70, Brig Gen Leroy Manor, the commander of the USAF Special Operations Force, then at Eglin AFB, was called to the Pentagon and instructed to report to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, ADM Thomas Moorer, at 0800 on

8 August. The instructions also included a stopover at Pope AFB, NC, adjacent to Ft Bragg, to pick up an Army colonel, Arthur "Bull" Simons, a Special Forces officer assigned to XVIII Airborne Corps, who also had instructions to report to the Chairman the morning of 8 August.

Before meeting with ADM Moorer, both Manor and Simons met with Army Brig Gen Don Blackburn, the Chairman's Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities. Brig Gen Donald D. Blackburn, who had trained Filipino guerrillas in World War II, told them the Chairman was going to if they were prepared and willing to examine the feasibility of rescuing some US POWs in North Viet Nam. When Gen Manor and COL Simons were asked the question, their answers were immediately affirmative. The Secretary of Defense then authorized the creation and training of a joint task force and directed that all necessary resources would be made available. Gen Manor was appointed the joint task force commander and COL Simons was the deputy commander. Almost immediately a joint planning group was assembled, representing each of the four Services.

Although the camp was little more than 20 miles west of Hanoi, the joint task force planners believed Son Tay was isolated enough to enable a small group to land, release and

collect the prisoners, and safely withdraw. The ground element commander was LTC 'Bud' Sydnor from Ft Benning, GA. LTC Sydnor had an impeccable reputation as a combat leader. Also selected from Ft Benning was CPT Dick Meadows, another superb combat leader. Cpt Meadows would later lead the team that landed inside the camp.

Son Tay was small and was reconnaissance photographs revealed 40-foot trees throughout, which obstructed a clear view. Only one power line and one telephone line entered the camp. The camp was located in the open and was surrounded by rice paddies. The POWs were kept in four large buildings in the main compound. Three observation towers and a 7-foot wall encompassed the camp.

The 12th North Vietnamese Army (NVA) Regiment totaling approximately 12,000 troops was in close proximity. Also nearby were an artillery school, a supply depot, and an air defense installation. Located 500 yards south was another compound, called the 'secondary school', which was an administration center thought to house about 45 guards. To make matters more difficult, Phuc Yen Air Base was only 20 miles northeast of Son Tay. It was evident that the raid would have to be executed swiftly. If it was not, the Communists could have fighter planes in the air and a reactionary force at the camp within minutes. Because of the camp's small size, analysts determined that only one chopper could land within the walls. The remainder would have to touch down outside the compound.

Weather was another obstacle due to heavy rains during the monsoon season. The rescue had to be conducted at night to allow the helicopters to infiltrate into North Vietnamese airspace, but with a quarter moon at approximately 35° above the horizon. Cloudless or near cloudless skies were also needed so that the helicopters could refuel from the C-130s. The seasonal weather challenges, combined with the time needed to train and rehearsal the mission, meant the raid could not occur until late fall. Late October and late November were selected as the best opportunities to conduct the raid because the moon would be high enough over the horizon for good visibility in flight and on the ground, but still low enough to obscure the enemy's vision.

The air element was formed around volunteers from the USAF Special Operations Force and the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service at Eglin AFB. It included five HH-53s, one HH-3, two MC-130Es, one HC-130P, and five A-1Es. The crews were assembled from highly experienced combat veterans. They were given a cursory briefing on the mission and asked to volunteer. All accepted.

While Gen Manor was recruiting the airmen, COL Simons went to Ft Bragg and asked for volunteers. He also wanted men with recent combat experience in Southeast Asia. Approximately 500 men responded and each one was interviewed by COL Simons and SGM Pylant. From that group, 100 volunteers were selected. Although a force of 100 men was selected, Simons believed that the number might be excessive. However, as some degree of redundancy and a reservoir of spares were deemed necessary, it was decided that to train the 100.

By late August, the joint task force had formed at Eglin



AFB, FL, primarily at Duke Field. The CIA provided an accurate scale model of the Son Tay camp which was used for planning and rehearsals. A full-scale replica of the compound was constructed nearby, in a remote location, to allow detailed training by the ground and air elements. The mock compound was dismantled during the day to avoid detection by Soviet spy satellites.

The leadership team for the air element implemented a phased approach to aircrew training in order to bring together all the different elements; beginning with dissimilar formation at night, then low-level tactics, flare drops by C-130s, and close air support from the A-1s. New tactics were developed, allowing the HH-53s and HH-3 to fly formation off of the lead MC-130. Drafting techniques were developed and proven that allowed the slower HH-3 to stay in formation with the assault force. The strike force of A-1s, led by a second MC-130 had a different problem. They developed tactics to fly S-turns of daisy chains in order to stay with the assault force. This was later abandoned in favor of the two, MC-130-led forces arriving at the initial point at a designated time. In over 1,000 hours of flying training, most of it blacked out, there were no incidents. The training concluded with two, complete full mission profiles by all the elements of the joint task force.

The National Security Agency tracked the NVA air defense systems and artillery units nearby. Also, in addition to the SR-71 Blackbird reconnaissance flights, several unmanned AQM-34 Buffalo Hunter drones were sent to gather intelligence on the camp. The photographs from the drones' were inconclusive and it was feared that the NVA would be tipped off if the drone flights were continued. In July, an SR-71 photo reconnaissance mission depicted less activity than usual in the camp. Later reconnaissance flight showed very little signs of life at Son Tay, however, flights over Dong Hoi, 15 miles to the east of Son Tay, were picking up increased activity. The mission planners were scratching their heads. With limited information and restricted access to the target area, the analysts did not know what the signs meant.

On 8 Sep, Manor, Blackburn, and Simons met with the Joint Chiefs of Staff to brief them on the mission. Gen Manor stated that the mission was feasible and the joint task force



would be ready to execute by 21 Oct. The Chairman accepted the recommendation and on 24 Sep

they briefed the Secretary of Defense, who also approved the concept and gave permission to brief the White House. On 8 Oct, Dr Kissinger, the National Security Advisor approved the concept as briefed, but delayed the execution until the November because they could not brief President Nixon in time to make the October window of opportunity. ADM Moorer did give Manor, Blackburn, and Simons to begin briefing the commanders in-theater, though. On 18 Nov, ADM Moorer briefed the President, who then approved the raid.

Between 14 and 16 Nov, the Son Tay raiders moved to a secure compound at Takhli Royal Thai Air Force Base (RTAFB), Thailand. It was there that final preparations were made. The compound at Takhli became a beehive of activity. Weapons and other equipment checks were carefully conducted and ammunition was issued. COL Simons, LTC Sydnor, and CPT Meadows made the final selection of the force. Of the original 100 SF members of the force, 56 were selected for the mission. This was unwelcome news for those 44 volunteers who were trained and ready but not selected.

Only COL Simons and three others knew what the mission was to be. Five hours before takeoff, on 20 Nov, COL Simons told his 56 men, "We are going to rescue 70 American prisoners of war,

maybe more, from a camp called Son Tay. This is something American prisoners have a right to expect from their fellow soldiers. The target is 23 miles west of Hanoi." A few men let out low whistles. Then, spontaneously, they stood up and began applauding.

Later in their barracks at Udorn, Simons' men stowed their personal effects – family photos, letters, money, and anything else that should be returned to their next of kin. The raiders were then transported in closed vans to the base's biggest hangar. Inside the hangar, a four engine MC 130 waited to take them on board.

The plan was not unduly complicated. Using in-flight refueling, the six helicopters would fly from Thailand, across Laos and into North Vietnam. While various diversions were taking place locally and across North Vietnam, the task force would close on the camp under cover of darkness. The single HH 3E, call sign Banana 1, with a CPT Meadows and a small assault force on board, would autorotate into the middle of the prison compound, while two HH-53s, call signs Apple 1 and Apple 2, would disgorge the bulk of the assault force outside. The wall would be breached and the prison buildings stormed. Any North Vietnamese troops found inside would be killed and the POWs would be taken outside and flown home in the HH-53s.

On 21 Nov, at approximately 2318, the helicopters carrying the Son Tay raiders, led by HC-130P on the initial leg to provide aerial refueling, departed Udorn. The A-1s departed Nakhon Phnom RTAFB, led by the MC-130s. At the same time, diversionary attacks were being launched all over the country. The US Navy flew a huge strike force from three aircraft carriers stationed in the Gulf of Tonkin against North Viet Nam's port city of Haiphong. Ten Air Force F-4 Phantoms were flown combat air patrols to screen the force from enemy fighters, while an F-105 Wild Weasel force launched raids on enemy surface-to-air missile

sites. After a final refueling on the Laotian side of the border, the HC-130P tanker exchanged places with the MC-130, who would lead the helicopters to the camp. Five A-1 Skyraiders, call signs Peach 1 through 5, and their lead MC-130, arrived at the initial point to suppress enemy ground fire around the camp.

As the assault and strike forces neared the prison, two HH-53s, call signs Apple 4 and Apple 5, climbed to 1,500 feet to act as reserve flare-ships in the event the MC-130s' flares did not ignite.

Suddenly, Major Frederick M. 'Marty' Donohue's HH-53 helicopter, call sign Apple 3, developed trouble. Without warning, a yellow Caution Light appeared, signaling transmission problems. Maj Donohue calmly informed his co-pilot, Capt Tom Waldron, to "ignore the SOB". In a normal situation, Maj Donohue would have landed, but this was no normal mission. Apple 3 kept going. As Maj Donohue's chopper 'floated' across Son Tay's main compound, both door gunners let loose with 4,000 rounds a minute from their mini-guns. The observation tower in the northwest section of the camp erupted into flames. With that, Donohue set down at his 'holding point' in a rice paddy just outside the prison. On the HH-3E, Banana 1, Maj Herb Kalen was negotiating the landing inside the compound with CPT Meadows and the assault group, code-named 'Blueboy'.

The 40-foot trees that surrounded Son Tay were, in actuality, much larger. "One tree", a pilot remembered, "must have been 150 feet tall ... we tore into it like a big lawn mower. There was a tremendous vibration ... and we were down." Luckily, only one person on Banana 1 was injured; the crew chief suffered a broken ankle. Regaining his composure after the controlled crash, CPT Meadows scurried from the downed aircraft and said in a calm voice through his bullhorn, "We're Americans. Keep your heads down. We're Americans. Get on the floor. We'll be in your cells in a minute." No one answered back, though. The raiders sprang into action immediately. Automatic weapons ripped into the guards. Other NVA soldiers, attempting to flee, were cut down as they tried to make their way through the east wall. Fourteen men entered the prison



to rescue the POWs, however, to their disappointment, none were found.

As the raiders were neutralizing the compound, Lt Col John Allison's HH-53, Apple 2, was heading toward Son Tay's south wall. As his door gunners fired their mini-guns on the guard towers, Lt Col Allison wondered where Apple 1, carrying COL Simons, was. Lt Col Allison put his HH-53 outside the compound and the SF soldiers streamed down the rear ramp. Wasting no time, they blew the utility pole and set up a roadblock about 100 yards from the landing zone. A heated firefight ensued. Guards were 'scurrying like mice' in an attempt to fire on the raiders. In the end, almost 50 NVA guards were killed at Son Tay.

Apple 1, piloted by Lt Col Warner A. Britton, was having troubles of its own. The chopper had veered off course and was 450 meters south of the prison and had erroneously landed at the 'secondary school'. COL Simons knew it wasn't Son Tay as the structures and terrain were different. To everyone's horror, it was no 'secondary school'—it was a barracks filled with enemy soldiers, 100 of whom were killed within five minutes.

As COL Simons' helicopter left to go to a holding point, the raiders opened up with a barrage of automatic weapons. CPT Udo Walther cut down four enemy soldiers and went from bay to bay riddling their rooms with his CAR-15. Realizing their error, the group of raiders radioed Apple 1 to return and pick them up from their dilemma.

Lt Col Britton's chopper, Apple 1, quickly returned when he received the radio transmission that Simon's group was in the wrong area. He flew COL Simon and the raiders back to Son Tay.



Less than half an hour after arriving over Son Tay, things were beginning to wind down. There was little resistance from the remaining guards. CPT Meadows radioed LTC Sydnor, the head of the 'Redwine' group on the raid, "Negative items." There were no POWs. The raid was over. Total time elapsed was 27 minutes.

What went wrong? Where were the POWs? It would later be learned that the POWs had been relocated to Dong Hoi on July 14. Their move was not due to the North Vietnamese learning of the planned rescue attempt, but because of an act of nature. The POWs were moved because the well in the compound had dried up and the nearby Song Con River, where Son Tay was located, had begun to overflow its banks. This flooding problem, not a security leak, resulted in the prisoners being transported to Dong Hoi.

Was the raid then a failure? Despite the intelligence failure, the raid was a tactical success. The assault force got to the camp and took their objective. It's true that no POWs were rescued, but no friendly lives were lost in the attempt. Furthermore, and more importantly, the raid sent a clear message to the North Vietnamese government that Americans were outraged at the treatment the POWs were receiving and that the United States would go to any length to bring their men home. At Dong Hoi, 15 miles to the east of Son Tay, American prisoners woke up to the sound of surface-to-air missiles being launched. The prisoners quickly realized that Son Tay was being raided. Although they knew they had missed their ride home, those prisoners now knew for sure that America cared and that attempts were being made to free them. Their morale soared.

The North Vietnamese got the message. The raid triggered subtle but important changes in their treatment of American POWs. Within days, all of the POWs in the outlying camps had been moved to Hanoi. Men who had spent years in isolation found themselves sharing a cell with dozens of others.

From their point of view the raid was the best thing that could have happened to them, short of their freedom. In the final assessment, the raid may not have been a failure after all.



Political cartoonist R.B. Crockett of the Washington Star said it best, and first, the day after the news of the Son Tay raid broke. At the top of the Star's editorial page was a drawing of a bearded, gaunt POW, his ankle chained to a post outside his hutch, looking up watching the flight of American helicopters fade into the distance. Below the cartoon was a three word quote, "Thanks for trying!" 🦅

About the Author: Rick Newton served 22 years in the USAF as a helicopter pilot, combat aviation advisor, planner, and educator. He retired from the USAF Special Operations School in January 1999. He teaches planning and air integration, as well as develops doctrine, for SOF aviation at the NATO Special Operations Headquarters and at Joint Special Operations University. He continues to write about special operations, irregular warfare, and air power.

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Element of Surprise

By Annie Jacobsen

Gutsy helicopter raids deep behind enemy lines always make captivating headlines – and sometimes, they even turn into history lessons.

It was the most elegantly executed special-operations raid to date in modern American warfare. High risk. The chances of returning were 50 percent. Of the six helicopters involved, one would crash-land inside the target's high-walled compound.

When Green Berets stormed out of the copter, they'd spend a mere 26 minutes on the ground. So secret was the raid, its mission planners had security officers following them into public bathrooms and listening in on their telephone calls.

"There were huge political and military connotations... presidential implications as well," says Lawrence Ropka, former principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs, one of the raid's most experienced planners, whose knowledge of clandestine special operations earned him a place in the Air Commando Hall of Fame for maneuvers that included parachuting supplies and guerillas into Tibet to assist the Dalai Lama's resistance movement in the late 1950s.

It may sound like Ropka is talking about Operation Neptune Spear—the raid that killed Osama bin Laden in May—but in fact, he is talking about Operation Kingpin, the lionhearted attempt to rescue dozens of American POWs from the Son Tay prison camp in North Vietnam 41 years ago last November.

"The Son Tay raid was audacious," says Ropka. "Very high risk. But this is age-old tradecraft. In a raid, the first element is always surprise. You must do something no one thinks you can—or will—do. That is how to find success." In 1970, thanks to surveillance photos from a SR-71 spy plane, the Defense Intelligence Agency had discovered a prisoner-of-war camp near the citadel at Son Tay.

The plan was to fly in with a small force of commandos, kill the enemy guards, free the POWs and fly everyone out. The challenge was that Son Tay, situated beside the Red River, was 23 miles from downtown Hanoi, which utilized one of the world's most heavily fortified air-defense systems.

"We knew how to send a single aircraft in on a low-level, terrain-following mission," says John Gargus, then an Air Force major and a navigator on the raid. "But a single helicopter could not bring all the POWs out." That, planners determined, required six helicopters and five Skyraider planes to be escorted by two C-130 transports that could navigate for them.

"Here was a fleet of aircraft going into one of the most heavily defended targets in the world—blind and dumb, in formation, over the mountains, at night," Ropka recalls. It was audacious, all right. If the problem was the strength of the

North Vietnamese air-defense system, then the solution was to find its weakness—a way to navigate in and out without being shot down.

To accomplish this, planners had to find assistance in the national intelligence community that was willing and able to help. The team sent members to L.A., where they began working with the Air Force at one of the most counterintuitive locations imaginable: Ontario Airport.

In the late 1960s, Ontario Airport was a throwback to a bygone era. Located 35 miles east of downtown Los Angeles, the airport served only two carriers, Western and Bonanza. Passengers could catch regional flights to San Francisco, Sacramento, Las Vegas, Palm Springs, Phoenix and Los Angeles, and that was about it.

The main runway was crumbling and in need of extensive repairs. But at the far end of the tarmac, hiding in plain sight, was a group of mysterious C-130 aircraft (also referred to in the industry as MC-130 Combat Talons) without any Air Force markings.

"Sometimes, they were painted with a single blue stripe," Gargus says. In agency parlance, these aircraft were, and still are, "sanitized" so as not to contain markings or serial numbers that could link them to any government organization.

It was inside these modified mystery airplanes—flying in and out of otherwise inconspicuous Ontario—that the Air Force was developing one of its most highly classified special-operations test beds of the Vietnam War. The program, known as Project Heavy Chain, is still largely classified: "Let's just say I spent some time at the Ontario Airport," Ropka says.

Gargus recalls the day Ropka showed up at Pope Air Force Base in North Carolina with a very unusual request: "Two planners [Lt. Col. Kraljev and Lt. Col. Ropka] asked to be flown as slow as possible in a C-130—which was 105 knots. Any slower, meaning 104 knots, and the aircraft would stall.

Once the men saw that 105 could be done, they said thank you very much and left." Some weeks later came the shocker. "I learned we were going to be escorting six helicopters with a C-130," Gargus says. "The maximum speed on the Huey was 87 knots. The minimum safe speed with our C-130 in the Southeast Asia climate was 105 knots...that's an impossible difference in speed if you need to fly in formation...So then, how could we solve the problem? Well, we had to use something called 'drafting,' flying the helicopter so close to the airplane's

wing that the helicopter would get pulled along faster, like in a vacuum.”

The raiders rehearsed this audacious flight formation to perfection, flying over the Florida, Georgia and Alabama countryside for 793 hours—using the exact distances to be traveled on raid day. The closeness of the flight formation seems impossibly tight.

“The helicopters flew 5 feet behind the wing of the C-130 and 10 to 12 feet above it,” Gargus says, recalling the practice missions as if they were yesterday. “As noisy as the C-130s were, the slap, slap, slap of the Huey’s rotor blades were clearly discernible. We were continuously aware of the small piece of airspace we had to share. It still frightens me when I think back at what might have happened to the whole project had there been a midair collision between a Huey and a C-130. How could such a thing be explained? Why was an Air Force aircraft flying in formation with an army helicopter in a scenario where both aircraft were exceeding their designed flight-specification limits?”

For the military men involved, there was serious motivation. Almost all the Air Force personnel on the team had served at least one tour of duty in Vietnam. It seemed as if everyone knew someone who was a POW. For Gargus, it was Harley Chapman, a classmate from high school. Another raider, George Petrie, had a cousin who was a prisoner in Hanoi.

During the planning phase, Ropka acted as a liaison between the CIA and the Defense Department. “I had seven years in the CIA,” says Ropka.

“We cross-serviced each other’s needs,” Gargus says. “I knew they had two FLIR systems [forward-looking infrared imaging technology, which was cutting edge in 1970], and we needed to borrow them. FLIR gave us night vision, the ability to see clearly in low light conditions using heat detection. This is not something we [navigators] had before.”

Come raid day, Gargus and fellow navigator Bill Stripling were seated inside one of the C-130s, behind a closed curtain so the lights from their navigational equipment didn’t cause a reflective glare inside the pilot’s side of the cockpit. “Standard terrain-following radar was useless on this raid because it was designed to work at speeds between 160 and 500-plus knots,” Gargus says, “so the terrain radar was going beep, beep, beep, warning!—like a truck backing up. It was saying there’s terrain above us!”

Gargus and Stripling ignored that navigational system and instead relied on the CIA’s forward-looking infrared. “Because I needed to be behind the curtain, I could not see the lights of Hanoi. But the FLIR allowed me to see the river very clearly, because of its difference in temperature from the trees. This helped to guide us in.”

Gargus noted the FLIR reading of the Red River’s width. “[It] was twice its pre-mapped size,” he recalls. What he didn’t know was that the swollen river would prove to be the key to why, despite the Son Tay raid’s unflinching and painstaking execution, it would not go down in the annals of history as one of the nation’s most successful rescue missions.

The fleet of aircraft made it to Son Tay undetected but not without a last-minute hitch. During the first dress rehearsal, on


October 6, 1970, planners determined they needed to use a larger helicopter. The Green Berets were so cramped in the Huey they wouldn’t be able to storm out and perform their jobs.

The new helicopter would be an HH-3, which required 14 more feet of space to land. This meant the first helicopter was going to have to crash-land inside the compound with only two feet of room to spare. Everyone on board would spring into action the moment they hit.

The other five helicopters would land outside the prison compound, and the raiding party would use C-4 to blow a hole through the wall to get in, through which the POWs would escape. The crucial step in maintaining the element of surprise was getting that first helicopter in. And it was a hard landing; one of the participants broke his ankle.

It all worked according to plan, but when the raiders stormed Son Tay, there were no POWs. The rising river had threatened to flood the prison camp, and the POWs had been moved. (The exact reason the POWs were relocated is complex and remains classified.) The Son Tay rescue team left North Vietnam without a single loss of life, but they were crushingly disappointed. “Our diligently prepared mission of mercy seemed to be a devastating failure,” Gargus says.

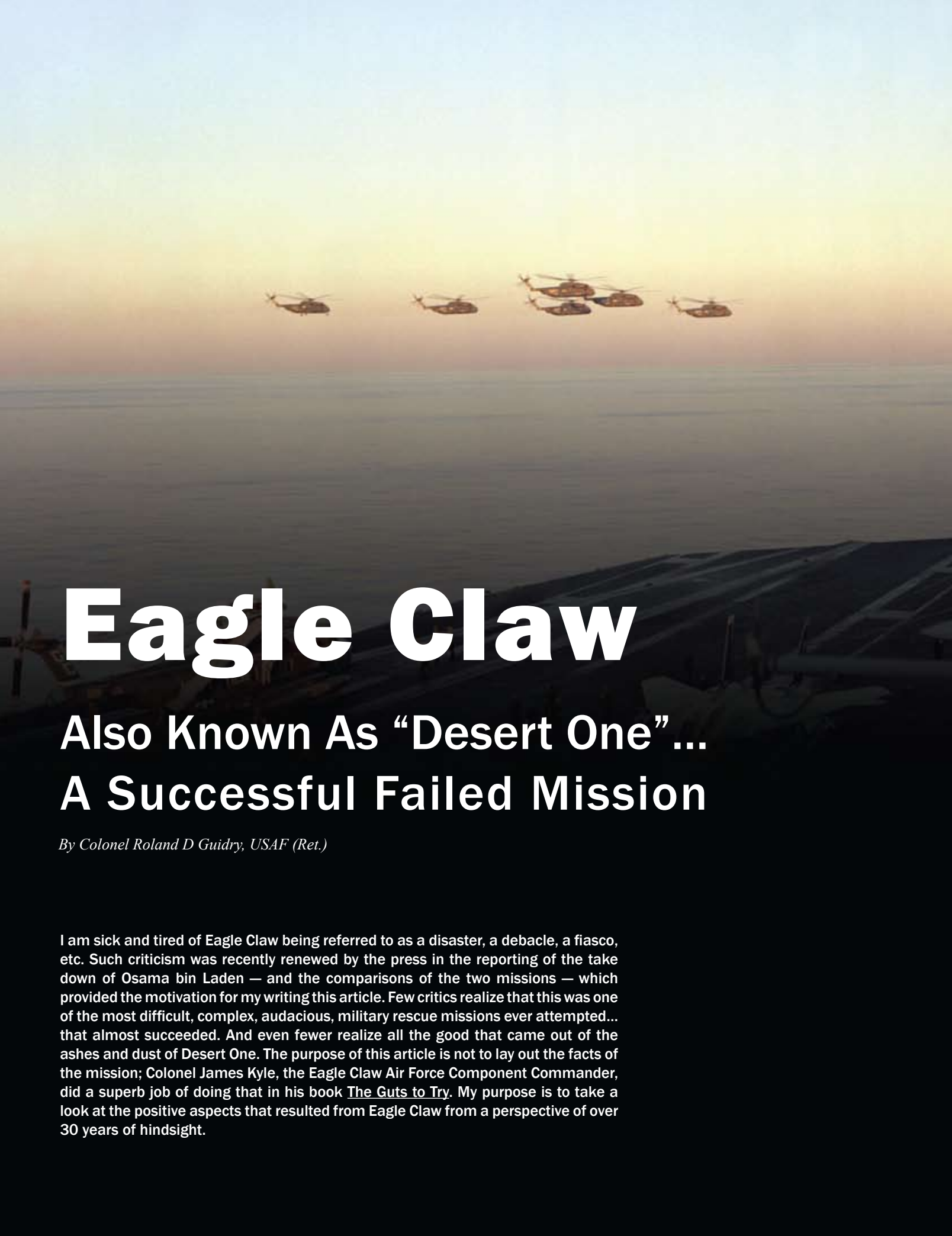
But according to Vice Admiral William H. McRaven, head of the military’s Joint Special Operations Command during the bin Laden raid, it actually wasn’t. “The raid on Son Tay is the best modern-day example of a successful special operation and should be considered textbook material for future missions,” McRaven wrote in his 1995 book, *Spec Ops: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice*. And on May 2, 2011, a similar raid was a success.

In the winter of 1973, the American POWs held captive in Vietnam were released according to the terms of the Paris Peace Accords. 

Editors Note: The Son Tay Raid is still chronicled in different ways. This article originally appeared in the LA Times Magazine, in January 2012. It is reproduced with the permission of the author.

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Eagle Claw

Also Known As “Desert One” ... A Successful Failed Mission

By Colonel Roland D Guidry, USAF (Ret.)

I am sick and tired of Eagle Claw being referred to as a disaster, a debacle, a fiasco, etc. Such criticism was recently renewed by the press in the reporting of the take down of Osama bin Laden — and the comparisons of the two missions — which provided the motivation for my writing this article. Few critics realize that this was one of the most difficult, complex, audacious, military rescue missions ever attempted... that almost succeeded. And even fewer realize all the good that came out of the ashes and dust of Desert One. The purpose of this article is not to lay out the facts of the mission; Colonel James Kyle, the Eagle Claw Air Force Component Commander, did a superb job of doing that in his book [The Guts to Try](#). My purpose is to take a look at the positive aspects that resulted from Eagle Claw from a perspective of over 30 years of hindsight.

Background

The US Embassy in Tehran was taken over by Islamic militant students on November 4, 1979. A few days later, members of the 1st Special Operations Wing at Hurlburt started scrambling to comply with requests for planning assistance from the Pentagon. These requests came from the leaders of an ad hoc task force formed from within the headquarters of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The initial concept was not to plan a rescue mission but for a punitive option—deploy the AC-130 Gunships to Guam to be in position for a long range, multiple air refueling, deep surgical strike into Iran. So, the wing commander, Colonel Dick Dunwoody, and the Deputy for Operations, Colonel Tom Wicker, suddenly disappeared from Hurlburt, along with several Spectre Gunships, crews and support personnel. That left very little experienced leadership at Hurlburt among the key positions charged with planning a rescue mission. This included a deputy Wing Commander new to Special Operations and the author, a commander of the MC-130E squadron (8th Special Operations Squadron) who was new to the Hurlburt community and had been away from flying for eight years. However, my recent six years managing Operational Test and Evaluation projects, including special operations equipment and tactics, were to later come in handy.

In those days there was no Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), no US Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC), or United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM). Special operations had been decimated four years earlier when the Vietnam War ended. Special Ops had little money, little emphasis, little priority, and antiquated assets. The AC-130 aircraft came very close to going to the “Boneyard”¹ in 1977. On any given day, the 8th SOS had three to four MC-130 Combat Talon aircraft on station at Hurlburt, one of which was committed to the Combat Talon qualification course, then run from within the squadron.

During the drawdown at the end of the Vietnam War, the Air Force did not know what to do with the 1st Special Operations Wing or where to fit it into the Air Force organizational structure that

was re-orienting towards conventional and nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union. The 1st SOW was assigned to 9th Air Force (a fighter numbered air force) and Tactical Air Command (now Air Combat Command), neither of which knew what to do with, or cared much about, special operations. This turned out to be advantageous. As the planners at the Pentagon developed their plans for a possible hostage rescue, guidance and tasking for the Iran situation were very simple and streamlined: orders flowed from the joint task force at the Pentagon directly to the MC-130 and AC-130 squadrons, bypassing intermediate commands except for key people in the 1st SOW. The third flying squadron at Hurlburt, the 20th SOS, was equipped with only short range CH-3 and UH-1 helicopters and lacked heavy lift helicopters capable of performing a long range mission. The eight Pave Low helicopters in the Air Force all belonged to Air Rescue and Recovery Service and were not asked to participate in Eagle Claw.

A few weeks after the Gunships and the 1st SOW leadership disappeared, a few MC-130 aircrew members from Hurlburt were ordered to report to the Pentagon to assist in working out details of various rescue options. This happened even though President Jimmy Carter had publically declared that a rescue mission was out of the question due to the risk to the lives of the hostages and the location of the targets almost 1,000 miles deep into the interior of Iran and halfway around the world. The hostages were held in two widely-separated Tehran locations; the US Embassy and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This complicated the planning due to the need to take down the dual targets simultaneously. The lack of suitable US bases near Iran initially

complicated the planning for a rescue mission. As the situation evolved and a plan was developed that seemed feasible, the emphasis shifted from a punitive to a rescue option.

The planners set up shop in the office of JCS/J-3 SOD (Special Operations Division) and slowly expanded the staff by tapping into other special operators who had the expertise needed for the JTF. That person was then invited to join the planning group, signed a non-disclosure statement, and joined the JTF planning staff. One of the reasons this was an ad hoc joint task force based in the Pentagon was so that the JCS Chairman, USAF General David Jones, could personally



Scene from Main Gate of US Embassy in Tehran during Takeover in 1979

direct and oversee mission planning as well as develop tasking of assets needed by the task force. The reaction to the hostage situation was changing so fast and the situation was politically charged that the JCS leadership made the decision, just as with the Son Tay mission, to keep the joint task force at the JCS rather than assign the mission to one of the geographic combatant commands in Europe, the Pacific, or elsewhere.

Many readers of the Air Commando Journal (ACJ) have attended a briefing on Operation Eagle Claw, also known by other names such as “Desert One” or “Rice Bowl,”...or they may have read one of the books on the mission, such

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as “*The Guts to Try*” by Colonel James Kyle, the JTF Air Force component commander. But few may realize how degraded Air Force special operations was when the embassy fell, and how much progress was made in developing tactics, procedures, and hardware in three periods that followed the embassy takeover. Those three periods were the 5 ½ months between the November 1979 embassy takeover and rescue attempt in April 1980; the next 6 months during which Project Honey Badger, preparations for a second rescue attempt, was organized and the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) was formed; and the early JSOC period between the fall of 1980 and the release of the hostages in January 1981. This article focuses on the first period and leaves the other two periods for future articles. I was involved in all three periods, first as commander of the 8th Special Operations Squadron leading up to Desert One; then as one of the primary fixed wing planners during Honey Badger; and finally as the first Chief of Air Operations and a founding member (“Plankholder”) of JSOC.

With that as background, here is how the rescue mission evolved. By coincidence, the assault force received its final certification from Army brass as fully ready for combat operations on the very day the embassy fell on the 4th of November 1979. So, from the beginning, the assault force would be the “over the wall” force to rescue the hostages. The challenge the planners faced from the beginning was how to get the assault force to the targets undetected...and how to extract the force and the hostages from the middle of Tehran after the rescue. If there is a war or other air-intensive military conflict going on, it is relatively easy to cover the movement of aircraft to position them for a rescue mission. During the special operation to rescue the POWs from Son Tay in 1971, it had been relatively easy to cover the repositioning of aircraft within Southeast Asia. The aircraft movements blended in all the other aircraft movements and were undetected by the North Vietnamese. However, in 1979, the world was at peace and the clandestine movement of mission and support aircraft from the United States to halfway around the world was very challenging.

The plan called for Navy RH-53D mine sweeping helicopters from Norfolk to launch from the aircraft carrier USS Nimitz and for Rangers from the 75th Ranger Battalion from Hunter Army Air Field, GA, to secure a drop zone, landing zone, or airfield in the Iranian desert on the first night. The location would be used to refuel the helicopters on night one and to trans-load the Rangers to the helicopters after being airlifted to the site by MC-130s. The assault force would board the helicopters for insertion into a second “hide” site (Desert Two) south of Tehran. Colonel Charlie Beckwith, commander of the assault force, was dead set against his men being transported to the aircraft carrier and then fly all the way to the Desert One refuel site and on to Desert Two by helicopters. This was why the assault force was transported to the refuel site on the MC-130s to a rendezvous with the helicopters. On the second night, the Rangers would seize another airfield some 40 miles southwest of Tehran for use as a trans-load site to transfer the assault force and the hostages

from the helicopters to fixed wing aircraft for extraction.

The Task Force commander was a rough and tough Army general officer named James Vaught who was known for playing a key role in many operations by Special Forces where he stressed unconventional tactics. His Air Force Component Commander was Colonel James Kyle, a Vietnam War AC-130 Gunship veteran who had extensive special operations staff experience at various levels of command within Pacific Air Forces (PACAF). From the very start their guidance to the Air Force commanders, planners, and crews was to develop tactics, procedures, and hardware to do everything blacked-out (total darkness)...no visible light and no unnecessary electronic emissions...and to maintain radio silence until the assaulters went over the wall on night two. Here are some tidbits on how our marching orders were implemented that may be of interest to those who wish to learn more about how difficult rescue missions are put together.

Enhanced Night Operations

The following paragraphs describe the various aspects of implementing the mandate that all operations would be conducted blacked-out. The Night Vision Goggle (NVG) picture of a C-130 (pictured on page 22) landing blacked out tells it all: no lights, minimum electronic emissions, no radio calls, no advance party to set up portable lights, and very little sound if the runway is long enough for the C-130 to use normal wheel braking for deceleration rather than the noisy reverse thrust of the propellers.

Night Vision Goggle (NVG) Operations

In the mid-70s, the US Army was pressuring Air Force special operations units to develop enhanced nighttime capabilities which required NVGs during flight operations. An operational test and evaluation project was conducted to evaluate the first generation AN/PVS-5 NVGs for flight operations. The conclusion was that these early models of NVGs were unsafe to fly with in fixed wing aircraft. General Vaught ignored this finding and gave the two MC-130 squadrons involved, the 8th



Eagle Claw Lead MC-130 Aircrew; Lt Col Bob Brenci, Aircraft Commander and pilot, is fourth from right standing on aircrew entrance door; Lt Col Roland Guidry, author and 8th SOS commander, is second from right.

and 1st Special Operations Squadrons, the mandate to do what was necessary to develop the procedures and tactics to land blacked-out when seizing airfields or landing at desert landing zones. The third MC-130 squadron stationed in Europe, the 7th SOS, was not directly involved in the execution phase of Eagle Claw because their aircraft had not yet been modified for aerial refueling, a necessary requirement for the long range insertions and extractions needed for Eagle Claw. At that time, Global Positioning System (GPS) was only a gleam in some inventor's eye. And the few sets of NVGs available required general officer intervention to release them to elements of the task force. The development of blacked-out operations would never have happened in normal peace time with the primitive goggles available at that time. The national attention and sense of urgency of the hostage crisis provided the necessary permissive "laboratory" environment to do as General Vaught and Colonel Kyle commanded.

The MC-130 squadrons were blessed with the best stick and rudder pilots I have ever flown with in my C-130 flying career dating back to the early 60s: Bob Brenci, Bob Meller, Jerry Uttaro, Hal Lewis, and Russ Tharp to name a few under my command. Other MC-130 crew members – navigators, flight engineers, loadmasters, radio operators, and electronic warfare officers - were equally highly qualified in their respective specialties. We deployed to Norton Air Force Base, CA, in December 1979 to develop the blacked-out landing capability and to start training with the mission helicopters. The initial, and obvious, choice was to exploit the "see in the dark" feature of Forward Looking Infrared (FLIR) that was available only on the PACAF MC-130s from the 1st SOS. The FLIR could be used to display the terrain ahead of the aircraft flight path on short final approach. But the MC-130 Combat Talon aircraft at the time were designed such that the landing gear and the FLIR turret could not be lowered at the same time. This negated using FLIR as a short-final-approach landing aid on the lead aircraft in blacked-out airfield seizures. However, when a preliminary low pass that would not tip off the enemy was appropriate, a preliminary FLIR low pass (landing gear up, FLIR turret extended) was very useful in observing remote



President Carter thanking Eagle Claw Air Force Participants. General James Vaught, Task Force Commander, is third from left and Colonel Roland Guidry, author, is second from right. Colonel Kyle is the middle of three officers in the background.



C-130 landing blacked out



MC-130 Aircrew members wearing early NVGs.



C-130 Landing Light and Blacked-Out Lighting Modification Parts.



Daytime photo of Rangers Exiting an MC-130 During Airfield Seizure Training.

landing zones to check the suitability of the area for landing. This tactic was actually done at the Desert One landing site. But for seizing a defended airfield where a preliminary low pass might alert ground personnel, here is what we actually tried at Norton during our tactics development effort. The lead FLIR-equipped aircraft would come down final approach with FLIR turret extended but landing gear up, make a low pass over the runway or landing zone, and drop a string of portable lights to guide the following MC-130, 30 seconds in trail and containing the airfield seizure Rangers rigged and ready for landing, to seize the airfield. We hoped that the string of dropped lights would be useful in guiding the airfield seizure aircraft to short final approach from which to make a blacked-out landing. The portable lights we tried (don't laugh; we were thinking out of the box) were multiple chem-lights taped around the cardboard center from rolls of toilet paper. This did not work because the following aircraft could not pick up the string of lights far enough out to find the runway...so we abandoned this method.

We next tried putting goggles on the copilot of the MC-130 containing the Rangers, with the navigators directing the pilot, who was not wearing NVGs, to the runway with an Airborne Radar Approach (ARA). When the copilot on NVGs obtained visual contact with the runway or landing zone, he would fly the aileron and rudder to line up the aircraft with the runway, while the pilot continued to fly elevator and throttles to control glide slope and airspeed. The pilot focused on his flight instruments, but was blind as to the approaching runway. The early NVGs were fixed focus, and there were no Heads-Up Display (HUD) or other precision landing aids such as GPS on the aircraft. At the last minute the pilot, still not wearing NVGs, would hope to see the runway illuminated only by moonlight and complete the landing safely. After several hard landings and near accidents, the MC-130 aircrew members finally came up with the following procedure that worked: NVGs on both pilots, with the pilot focused on infinity and the copilot focused at 18 inches so he could see his flight instruments. The copilot flew the ARA on instruments to short final approach where the pilot would take control when he had a visual of the runway or landing zone. From then on, vertical velocity, absolute altitude, and airspeed were fed to the pilot verbally over the interphone since he could not see his flight instruments because his goggles were focused on infinity in order to see outside. This requires a very skilled pilot and supporting aircrew since having airspeed and vertical velocity provided verbally robs the pilot of trends and other "quality of approach" visual cues he would normally pick up by cross-checking his flight instruments. At the direction of Colonel Kyle, the procedures were standardized between the two MC-130 squadrons, including the addition of a third pilot added to the cockpit crew to aid the pilot and copilot in situational awareness. The standardized procedure worked very well and was used for many years until technology (better NVGs, heads-up display, GPS, etc.) caught up.

Blacked-Out Aircraft Landing and Taxi Lights

Midway through our development of blacked-out landing capability, a CIA officer appeared at Hurlburt and provided a box of rolled-up special black paper informing us that lights modified with the paper would illuminate items that could be seen only by persons wearing night vision goggles. We whipped out a pair of scissors and some aircraft speed tape and attached the paper to C-130 landing

lights. Bingo, it worked...but the heat of the landing lights burned through the paper and the paper tore off at 200 knots. So we got the help from the Ontario, CA facility of Lockheed Aircraft to come up with two circular plates of tempered glass and inserted the paper between the two layers to make the modification to the landing lights that would survive high speed flight and not burn up from the heat of the landing lights. But we had a security problem once we modified our landing lights. We would be repeatedly called by airport control towers to turn on our landing lights when landing since our only set of landing lights had been modified to a blacked-out mode invisible to all but persons equipped with NVGs. We solved this problem by installing a second set of both landing and taxi lights; one set of regular lights and a second set for blacked-out operations. This lighting system did not unilaterally help us find the runway in total darkness, but it did provide runway illumination on short final approach and helped with depth perception to accomplish a safe landing. Precise navigation by MC-130 navigators provided the necessary guidance to accomplish an Airborne Radar Approach that was needed to direct the aircraft to the runway. This combination of precise Airborne Radar Approaches and modified landing lights allowed us to land blacked-out safely and without the threat of go-arounds and resultant tactical warning to the bad guys.

Airfield Seizure

The old way to seize an airfield prior to Eagle Claw was to airdrop Rangers, which is fraught with vulnerabilities such as injured paratroopers, spread-out assault force and weapons, limited equipment that can be airdropped, delayed reaction time to engage the enemy, etc.). Gen Vaught and Col Kyle instructed the MC-130 aircrews, the Combat Controllers, and Rangers to plan to use the tactic of landing rather than parachuting to seize airfields in order to reduce the vulnerabilities. The tactic dictated that a string of MC-130s would come down final approach and land at 30 second intervals, blacked-out. Two MC-130s would be on the runway at the same time, one rolling to the end and hugging the left side of the runway; and the second one stopping short and hugging the right side. Night after night MC-130 aircrews, Rangers, and Combat Controllers (now known as Special Tactics Units) developed, trained and rehearsed until Airfield Seizure was a polished new tactic.

Seizing an airfield was a completely joint operation. First, intelligence would inform the Ranger commander of the threats and opposition at the airfield to be seized. The commander then determined the number of Rangers, gun jeeps, motorcycles, etc., needed to neutralize the threats, including how quickly and in what order the ground force needed to be inserted. The air commander then designed the flow and spacing of aircraft needed to accomplish the Ranger's airfield seizure plan. Contingency planning was incorporated to address go-arounds that might disrupt the airfield seizure plan or blocked runways which would require in-flight reconfiguration to the airdrop mode. We were initially supposed to use this new procedure on night one of Eagle Claw to seize the small Iranian airfield for the refueling and trans-load operations, and were programmed to also use it on night two to seize the extraction airfield. The clearing pass by a FLIR-equipped MC-130 provided useful information, such as an Iranian vehicle on the road next to the landing zone. The clearing pass also confirmed that the lights planted weeks earlier had come on when remotely activated on short final



SATCOM Hatch-Mounted Antenna in Proximity to C-130 Airborne Refueling Receptacle



AC-130 conducting Silent/No-Electronic-Emission Airborne Refueling



Fuel Bladders in C-130 Cargo Compartment

approach and had correctly pinpointed the intended landing area where soil samples had been collected to assure sufficient load bearing capability of the desert landing zone.

Hatch-mounted SATCOM Antennas

An assault force radio operator appeared at my office carrying a Satellite Communication (SATCOM) antenna about the size of a toilet seat and told me General Vaught wanted it mounted on the lead MC-130 for one of our final rehearsals. At that time, there were only a few of these antenna available and General Vaught wanted it mounted on the aircraft that would be the lead aircraft on the actual mission. Knowing that we would probably use a PACAF FLIR-equipped aircraft as the lead aircraft--but the aircraft was in the Pacific area at that time, we had to come up with a way to transfer the scarce antenna from one aircraft to another rapidly and easily. We again obtained help from Lockheed Ontario to mount the antenna on a spare C-130 overhead escape hatch that could be easily transferred from one C-130 to another. Hatches are inserted into the opening in the top of the aircraft fuselage from within the aircraft, requiring the antenna diameter to be smaller than the hatch opening. Luckily, the diameter of the antenna was slightly smaller than the hatch opening. We installed the antenna-modified hatch and took the aircraft to altitude and slowly increased the airspeed, observing the integrity of the hatch and the antenna as the aircraft accelerated. The hatch and antenna remained stable even at high speeds.

The easiest of the three C-130 hatches to get to from within the aircraft is the forward hatch but it is located close to the aerial refueling receptacle. So we flew an airborne refueling mission to make sure the hatch-mounted antenna did not interfere with air refueling. This was the genesis of hatch-mounted SATCOM antennas and was used throughout the Air Force for many years until operational aircraft were eventually equipped with permanently-mounted SATCOM antennas. This capability is still occasionally used to this date by communication squadrons who carry their

own antenna-modified hatches for use in the aircraft they deploy on to provide en-route satellite communications. Development of this new capability was not done by a Flight Test Center...it was done by MC-130 crewmembers and members of a communications unit with help from Lockheed.

Silent/No-Electronic-Emission Air Refueling

Because of the great distances to the target for both the punitive and the rescue options, airborne refueling of mission C-130 aircraft would have to be done in areas of the world where electronic and radio transmissions could be intercepted by nations friendly to Iran. The threat of mission compromise was particularly critical due to the concern of being detected on the first night of the two-night mission. Therefore, the aircrew members of the 16th SOS AC-130 Spectre Gunship squadron and special KC-135 aircrews from Plattsburg and Grissom Air Force Bases developed special air refueling procedures. They developed a very simple approach to a refueling rendezvous—the tanker arrived at the assigned pre-contact location at the appointed time and altitude and the receiver, at 1,000 foot lower altitude, arrived at the same time and location, with neither aircraft emitting any electronic, radio, or other signals that could be intercepted. If communication was required, light signals or hard-wire communications through the refueling boom could be used.

Extreme Heavy Weight Flight Operations

The lack of human intelligence on the two targets in Tehran had a significant effect on mission planning. The commander of the assault force needed to know how heavily defended the embassy and the other target were, the military preparedness of the guards, how many guards were present and what their weapons and work habits were, how much vehicular traffic was there between Desert Two, the embassy, and the soccer stadium, etc. What little was known came mainly from television coverage available from the nightly

news and not from “eyes-on-the-target” so necessary to a tactical commander. So, to account for the unknowns, the number of assault force operators was increased significantly. This had a ripple effect in that it increased the number of helicopters needed, which in turn increased the amount of fuel needed at the refuel site, which then increased the need for space in the fuselages of the C-130s for the fuel bladders. Because the MC-130 cargo compartment could accommodate only one 3,000 gallon fuel bladder, we quickly ran out of available MC-130s to carry the necessary fuel for the helicopters. We borrowed regular “slick” C-130s that were modified for aerial refueling and could accommodate two 3,000 gallon fuel bladders internally. These fuel-carrying aircraft served as numbers 4, 5 and 6 C-130s during Eagle Claw.

When a C-130's internal wing and pylon tanks are full, then add in two 3,000 gallon bladders of fuel with the accompanying sleds, straps and chains to restrain the bladders, plus the hoses, pumps, and fuel-handling personnel, the gross weight of these fuel carrying C-130s significantly exceeded 190,000 pounds. This was more than 35,000 pounds over the normal peacetime maximum operating weight of 155,000 pounds and almost 20,000 pounds over the emergency wartime gross weight limit of 175,000 pounds. MC-130s 1, 2 and 3 were also heavily over-grossed. The software for the Terrain Following/Terrain Avoidance (TF/TA) system had to be modified to allow it to work above the normal maximum setting of 135,000 pounds aircraft weight. And because the three fuel-carrying aircraft were not equipped with TF/TA systems, they flew low-level, at night, blacked out, in formation with number 3 MC-130 leading. The extremely over-grossed C-130s used modified terrain-following flight procedures through in mountainous terrain. Those aircrews earned their flight pay that night! And the ruggedness of the C-130 aircraft was significantly tested. The venerable, old Hercules, designed in the early 50s and in continuous production ever since, met the test. Unfortunately, the ultimate failure of the mission masked the superior feats

of airmanship of the C-130 aircrews that would have reaped accolades and aviation awards had the mission succeeded. But then they are those quiet professionals, who knew what they accomplished that night and needed no formal recognition other than knowing that they made the best out of a bad situation by getting everyone still alive out of Desert One. Unfortunately, we had to leave the bodies of eight brave fellow warriors behind to suffer the desecration of their remains by the Iranians.

Dealing with Higher Headquarters Tasking

The daily communications while preparing for Eagle Claw involved constant communication between the flying squadrons at Hurlburt and the Task Force headquarters in Washington, DC. All normal protocol and chain of command were done away with for expediency. One day General Wilbur Creech, Commander of Tactical Air Command, came to Hurlburt Field and was escorted to my office. He closed the door and he asked me to brief him on what was going on. Satisfied that all was in order, he told me to continue responding to orders from the Pentagon and to contact him directly if anyone denied my squadron any needed assets or assistance. His visit was followed a few days later by the Chairman of the JCS, General David Jones.

We needed an office in a secure area to do all the coordination with the Pentagon, the Rangers, the assault force, bilateral training, rehearsals, and to coordinate the thousands of details associated with equipping and training the elements of

the Task Force. To complicate matters, for security reasons, the Pentagon did not want to use aircraft outside of the Task Force for administrative airlift.... so our mission aircraft were constantly being tasked by the Joint Task Force for administrative airlift. As a result, Colonel Kyle directed the 1st SOW to come up with a dedicated operations center in some out-of-the-way location on Hurlburt Field to solve the problem of securely communicating and coordinating with the Pentagon and other elements of the Task Force. I was instructed to turn over day-to-day operations of my squadron to my very capable operations officer, Lt Col Bob Brenci, and to establish and man the operations center in a remote upstairs corner of a maintenance hangar. Our little office was manned by MC-130 aircrew members (Duke Wiley, Bill Diggins, and Lyn McIntosh) as an additional duty. Our communications link with the Pentagon was made using a "Park Hill" device that secured a regular telephone line. A teletype machine was added to send secure documents within the Task Force network. Our little office continued into project Honey Badger, the early days of JSOC, and for many years thereafter and was known as "D-O-S" – the staff office that dealt with higher-headquarters tasking and coordination.

Special Ops Buildup

Besides the tactics, hardware, and procedures we developed to support Eagle Claw that later revolutionized special operations, an equally-significant result of Eagle Claw was the shock wave the mission abort and subsequent accident sent through Congress and the

Pentagon. This reported "disaster" led to the realization that the future of military operations would be characterized by "little dirty wars" with limited objectives that would require highly trained specialists and special operations forces with unique capabilities. How prophetic this turned out to be! The validation of Congress' decision to rejuvenate and revitalize the nation's special operations forces is illustrated by the fact that at the time of Eagle Claw, the highest ranking special operations officer in the US military was an Army colonel, the head of JCS J-3 Special Operations Division. Today, USSOCOM is a combatant command with a global mission and is headed by a 4-star general or admiral. SOF was given its own funding (Major Force Program 11) that cannot be raided by the military Services as it had been in the years after Vietnam. The USSOCOM budget for fiscal year 2012 is approximately \$10.5 billion, to support a force of over 66,000 highly-trained special operations soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines.

It is questionable if USSOCOM and SOF would have gotten to where it is today without the sad events that night at Desert One. But, what I refer to as a "successful failed mission" was the spark that accelerated the process and allowed Congress to push the Services to make US Special Operations Forces what they are today. The process of change is always faster after failure than after success. Consider where the force might have been after September 11, 2001, if Eagle Claw been an operational success.

These are a few of the war stories about Hurlburt in the dark days between

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Vietnam and the buildup that followed the “successful failure” at Desert One. The tactics, procedures, and hardware developed by innovative aircrew members thinking outside of the box, unhampered by conventional wisdom or bureaucratic meddling, are still used today. Similar stories can be told about the gunship squadron, combat controllers (now special tactics), helicopter squadrons, communicators, and other special operations units. I will leave those stories to be told by them in later issues of the *Air Commando Journal*.

Air Force special operations was blessed with dedicated and innovative aircrew members at the time of Eagle Claw, men who had the “Guts to Try” new tactics and untested hardware, and to develop new procedures to address a most audacious, complex, and difficult rescue mission. I and my fellow Combat Talon and gunship squadron commanders realized we had “eagles” under our command...we stayed out of their way and let them fly! 🦅

About the Author: Col Guidry had a wide and varied 26 year career. On Eagle Claw, he served as commander of the 8th Special Ops Squadron and was one of the pilots on the lead MC-130. He was a founding member of JSOC at Ft Bragg as the first Chief of Air Operations and later as JSOC's second Air Force Component Commander.

1. The Defense Military Aircraft Reclamation Center at Davis-Monthan AFB, Tuscon, AZ, is known by the nickname, “boneyard.”



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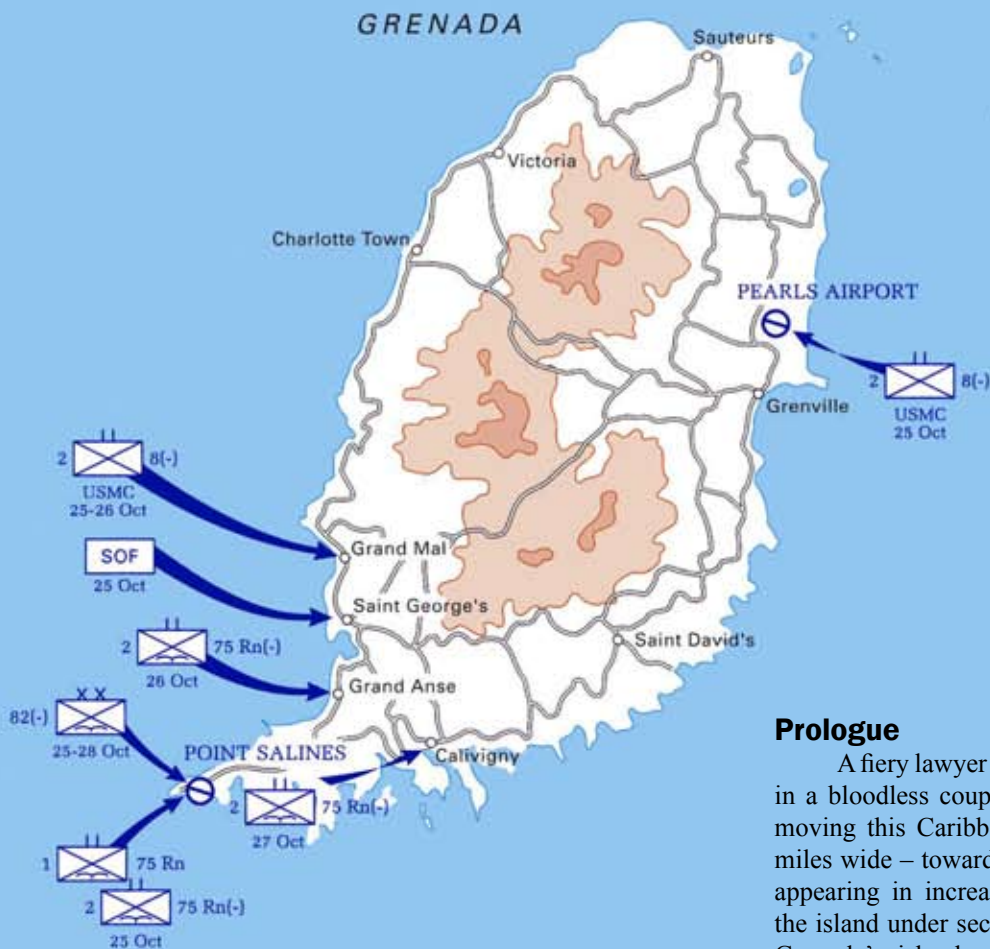
Operation Urgent Fury



“No Operation ever goes as planned, except occasionally, and then only by accident”
Winston Churchill

The Invasion of Grenada October 25, 1983

By Major General (ret) James L. Hobson Jr.



Editor's Note: The first portion of this article is a first person account of the Air Force portion of the invasion of Grenada by then Lt Col Jim Hobson, commander of the 8th SOS. The Lessons Learned portion is a collaborative effort by the Air Component Commander Lt Gen (ret) Bruce Fister and Maj Gen (ret) Hobson.

Prologue

A fiery lawyer named Maurice Bishop seized control of Grenada in a bloodless coup in March 1979. Almost immediately he began moving this Caribbean island nation – only 20 miles long and 12 miles wide – toward Marxism. Soviet and Cuban “diplomats” began appearing in increasing numbers. Tons of arms were delivered to the island under secret agreements with the Soviet Union and Cuba. Grenada’s island neighbors grew increasingly uneasy as Cubans began building an airport on Grenada large enough to handle long-range military aircraft.

The Grenada Grinder Crew
from 1st Special Operations
Wing, Hurlburt Field, Fla.



Then on October 13, 1982, the charismatic Bishop fell to an even more hard-line faction in his own government, led by his deputy Bernard Coard and army general Hudson Austin. Washington began to prepare for any contingency.

On the mind of all involved in the planning was President Reagan's frequent reminder that there must never be "another Teheran" – a hostage situation involving U.S. citizens. Within the White House, serious planning began for a possible Noncombatant Evacuation Operation (NEO) to rescue Americans on the island, principally the 700 students (130 US citizens) at an American medical school.

Pre-Planning

On 19 October, General Hudson Austin killed Maurice Bishop and an unknown number of Grenadians were slain as troops fired machine guns into a crowd. After the massacre, Milan Bush, U.S. Ambassador to several Caribbean nations cabled that Barbados' Prime Minister had asked for US intervention.

A White House "crisis pre-planning group" (CPPG) convened, and Gen John Vessey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, informed the CPPG that the carrier Independence and Marine Task Force had been directed to change course and steam closer to Grenada on their way to the Mediterranean. Shortly thereafter, the ranking US diplomat in the Caribbean, Charles A. Gillespie, was told by the

Prime Minister of Dominica that the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) wanted the United States to join them in a military operation designed to restore order and democracy on Grenada. Gillespie cabled the news to the State Department.

Presidential Directive

On Friday, 21 October, President Reagan became involved in the planning and signed a National Security Decision Directive (NSDD) with a threefold objective: 1) Ensuring the safety of American Citizens on Grenada. 2) In conjunction with OECS friendly government participants, the restoration of democratic government on Grenada, and 3) Elimination of current, and prevention of further, Cuban intervention on Grenada.

Preparing to Achieve the Three-fold NSDD Objective

The national planning for a Grenada operation was reflected at the 1st Special Operations Wing, Hurlburt Field, FL where the 8th SOS (MC-130 Combat Talons) and 16th SOS (AC-130 Gunships) were directed to assume a "heightened alert" posture on Wednesday, 19 October. I (Lt Col Jim Hobson) was the commander of the 8th SOS at the time. On 21 October, both squadrons went on "telephone alert," and the next day, each unit dispatched crew planners to the Jt Special Operations Command

(JSOC), Ft Bragg, NC. The 8th SOS formed crews on Sat 22 October for an unknown contingency requiring five Combat Talon aircraft. On Monday, 24 October at 0900L, I directed squadron recall of the 8th SOS, followed by a short crew briefing concerning their imminent flight to Hunter AAF, SC. They departed Hurlburt Field at 1300L.

On 24 October at 1500L, the 16th SOS Gunship crews reported to the squadron, accomplished their preflight duties and went to the 8 SOS squadron briefing room for the crew brief. After crew flimsies were distributed, the mission briefer opened the curtain covering the flight planning maps and said, "Today's mission is to rescue U. S. citizens who are medical students on the island of Grenada." A few quizzical looks around the room suggested the unasked question, "Where the hell is Grenada?!" Once the staff navigator completed the mission briefing – including times, air refueling details, weather and intelligence - the crews asked any remaining questions, and departed the briefing to their awaiting aircraft.

Three gunships subsequently departed Hurlburt Field at 1730L on 24 October enroute to their first in-flight refueling point 300 nautical miles (nm) east of Jacksonville, FL, with a second refueling 250nm Northeast of San Juan, Puerto Rico. Their initial task was to perform reconnaissance of the Point Salines airport to determine if the runway was free of obstacles and safe for air land and off-load of the Rangers.

Meanwhile at Hunter Army Airfield (AAF), Talon crews gathered with their mission planners and, in excruciating detail, studied the mission objectives and specific tasks of each aircraft and crew to accomplish those objectives. Overall mission objectives were:

- Seize Point Salines Airfield
- Seize the city of Pearls
- Secure the safety of Americans
- Protect Sir Paul Schoon (Governor General)
- Restore a democratic government

The assault was planned for three waves of MC and Tactical Airlift (T/A) C-130 aircraft at thirty minute intervals. Crews were also briefed that there would be three AC-130 Gunships in the area of

Point Salines airfield to provide cover for the initial assault. Colonel Bruce Fister, the Air Component Commander (ACC), would be circling overhead in an Airborne Command Control and Communications (ABCCC) aircraft to provide updates and direction should the plan require "adjustments." Likewise, Brig Gen Bob Patterson, as Commander of Airlift Forces (COMALF), would be on the net for the T/A C-130s and to direct follow-on airlift flow as required. The new 23 AF Commander, Maj Gen Bill Mall, would be on my aircraft – scheduled to be the first of three C-130s to land, and would serve as the Military Airlift Command (MAC) Mission Commander after the field was secure.

Beginning the assault, the first wave, 1st element of two MC-130's was to airdrop, or air land to seize, and if required, clear the runway for follow-on landings. The appropriate option (air drop or air land) would be determined based on information from Combat Controllers (CCT) who would have been inserted by surface means the night before the assault, or from AC-130 Gunships that would be orbiting in the area. But as it turned out, Lt Col John Carney was the only CCT along with a number of SEALs that were inserted in the Point Salines area the night before (Sunday night). Sadly, three SEALs were lost in the process due to heavy seas.

The first wave, 2nd element of one MC-130 and four T/A C-130's, were to land 30 minutes later with more Rangers, including Headquarters and Command elements. The second wave of two MC & three T/A C-130s would land seven minutes behind the first wave. The third wave of ten T/A C-130s with additional Rangers and their equipment would be appropriately spaced for an orderly air land flow.

Collateral missions included SEAL Team 6 rescuing Governor General Sir Paul Schoon at his residence. Delta Forces would breach Richmond Hill prison to free the political prisoners and take down Radio Free Grenada.

The planning session broke up and the crews departed for their aircraft with Admiral McDonald's (CINCLANT) guidance resonating in their ears: "Get it done as quick as you can, with

minimum casualties and no collateral damage!" Additional guidance from Vice Admiral Metcalf, the Joint Task Force Commander: "Do the job as fast as you can with minimum casualties, and don't bust up the place!"

The Talons, along with 18 T/A C-130's from Pope AFB, NC departed Hunter AAF for Grenada at 2115L, 45 minutes late due to loading. We (the Talons) accomplished two inflight refuelings enroute to our holding positions 70 nm west of Point Salines airfield.

Putting the Planning into Action

Once established in the holding pattern, we realized weather was going to be an issue; thunderstorms were active in all quadrants, so we reduced our holding altitude to minimize the weather effect. Simultaneously, the gunships had passed on to our ACC (Col Fister) that the airfield was covered with equipment and not suitable for landing. Likewise, CCT John Carney who was just off shore in a raft, gave Maj Gen Dick Scholtes (JSOC/CC) and Col Fister a similar report of activity and clutter on the runway. Therefore, a runway clearing and seizure team would airdrop first, followed thereafter with the air lands.

Number 1 & 2 Talons departed the holding pattern to make good their 0500L time over target (TOT) with number 2 aircraft 30 seconds in trail. About 20 miles from the drop zone (end of Pt Salines runway), the lead aircraft lost his

inertial navigation system, and being in marginal weather conditions, aborted his run-in. He broke out to the south with number 2 in trail.

The ACC called our aircraft - the number 3 Talon - and relayed that we were now going to be the first in to drop, rather than airland. Moreover, the scheduled number 1 and number 2 aircraft that previously pulled off, would join behind me as we flew by their holding position. But there was one small problem; I had the Ranger battalion commander – Lt Col Wes Taylor - his staff and other troops on my aircraft, and our plan was to land so they could unload all the equipment he needed to carry out his immediate tasks. My loadmaster informed him they would now airdrop, and should immediately suit up with parachutes for we were about 50 miles from drop. In addition, because of weather, drop altitude would be 400' vice the planned 500', the lowest known combat drop to this date. Col Taylor later told me they had one swing in the parachutes before impacting the runway! He and his troops did a marvelous job in a short period of time of mentally and physically converting from an air land, drive your Jeeps off the aircraft, to a combat airdrop from 400' AGL.

Inbound at 400' on night vision goggles and with number two C-130 in close trail, a spotlight illuminated our aircraft just before approaching the runway. My co-pilot, Capt P.R. Helm, commented that he didn't think this was going to be a surprise!

Over the end of the runway and with



An AC-130H Gunship used in Urgent Fury.



Historical photo of Tactical C-130E (Slick) during Urgent Fury.

paratroop doors open, our navigator (Maj Don James) called “Green Light.” After a few seconds, and with the troops still jumping, the loadmaster said over the intercom “they’re firing rockets at us!” 23mm tracers were now visible from both sides of the cockpit. When the loadmaster relayed all 41 jumpers were “clear,” we broke down and right out over the water and immediately notified the ACC of the 23mm fire along the runway. Meanwhile, number 2 and number 3 Talons behind us pulled off short of the drop zone due to the heavy AAA fire. number 2 received some minor 23mm damage to his aircraft, but fortunately no one was injured. Col Fister instructed all other aircraft behind our flight of three to remain in holding. He would then sequence them, one or two at a time, to drop. Once the Anti-Aircraft Artillery (AAA) was out of commission, this happened in fairly short order.

The ACC called in the two gunships circling above and they quickly decimated the Cuban resistance and AAA around the airfield. Once the airfield was secured, airdrops resumed and would continue until 0930L. After the drops were complete, airlift C-130s and C-141s air landed and off-loaded additional equipment to support the operation.

Col Fister initiated the drops again after the gunships worked the area over, but the first two C-130s took ground fire, so the flow stopped, and the gunships once again returned to the area. Then the flow commenced a couple aircraft at a time until all drops were complete.

While all of this was happening, an MH-6 helo was shot down and efforts were begun to retrieve a crewmember’s body from the wreckage. Simultaneously, Col Fister was advised that Armored Personnel Carriers (APC) were surrounding Sir Paul Skoon’s residence, and he shifted his efforts to getting the gunships over there to take care of that matter. Unplanned tasks were coming fast and furious at Col Fister.

To top it all off, the ABCCC with Gen Scholtes and Col Fister had to dash to Barbados to refuel as their aircraft inflight refueling receptacle was inoperative. They returned to Pt Salines airfield around 1100L. Then Col Fister and 2Lt Jeff Buckmelter (CCT Team Chief) jumped on a CCT motorcycle and surveyed the runway for landing suitability. Once clear, Col

Fister gave CCT clearance to begin landing C-141s carrying the 82nd Airborne.

After our Ranger drop, we orbited for 1.5 hours so Maj Gen Mall could perform his responsibilities as the MAC Mission Commander. All assigned airlift C-130s and C-141s eventually off-loaded at Point Salines. With the initial air mission assault, Talons and AC-130 Gunships recovered to Roosevelt Roads NAS, Puerto Rico for crew rest. The crews had been up for more than 48 hours for mission planning and execution.

LESSONS LEARNED

Train as you fight

Training as you intend to fight is always a lesson that is best adhered to in any military operation, although there will always be situations that occur (as it did over Point Salines) in the heat of battle that were not anticipated or for which an organization had no direct training. On Urgent Fury, the good news is that JSOC had done a significant amount of training around airfield seizure scenarios with the Rangers. The ACC had some field experience with the Rangers and their commander, Lt Col Wes Taylor, and he knew what to expect from him and the 1st Ranger Battalion when things got difficult. What we hadn’t trained for, at least during the ACC’s tenure, was a scenario where we’d exercise one of multiple options.

In the case of Urgent Fury, because of the poor intelligence, Maj Gen Scholtes, the SOF task force commander, felt that we needed flexibility. As the MC-130 formation approached Point Salines, the intended option was to airdrop the first two loads of Rangers plus their Combat Controllers and have them clear the runway and subsequently air land the remainder of the force. The other options were to initially air land the complete force (assuming we could confirm that the runway was clear), or airdrop the complete force and have each aircraft return to off load Ranger gun jeeps and equipment. After the ACC directed the first two MC-130s to air abort and go to holding, and because of the heavy fire and opposition at Point Salines, the task force was forced to exercise the airdrop option. The problems were communicating intent in a situation for which

we had never exercised. This involved the unexpected in-flight rigging for the Ranger's parachute assault after they had removed their rigging in preparation to air land. But, as one might expect, "Rangers Lead the Way" and they performed magnificently. But the lesson is simplicity; we probably should have chosen only two options for which we had experience. Either airdrop the first two aircraft and air land the remainder of the force or airdrop the complete force. This would have allowed the Rangers to remain rigged for airdrop until the last minute. It is easier and safer to take off the chutes in flight than put them on unexpectedly, particularly where large amounts of personal equipment are involved.

Lastly, because of the compressed and changing planning situation, the ACC had not thought through the possibility of the lead aircraft and his wingman air aborting because of equipment failure. This eliminated the complete first element and required that second element lead assume responsibilities for which he had not been briefed. For number two to assume lead responsibilities is fairly routine, but to move second element lead into formation lead and then have the aborted aircraft rejoin on the new lead was not something that we practiced.

"Lousy" and Inaccurate Intelligence

Had the task force commander and the ACC realized the extent of the opposition on Point Salines, the task force commander probably would have elected to airdrop the complete force after AC-130s dealt with the AAA threat. Unfortunately, the task force had very limited knowledge of the presence of AAA; we thought there might be a few old anti-aircraft guns in a warehouse on the island. Even after intensely examining our satellite imagery (the latest was 48 hours old), air planners could not identify any AAA opposition. The presence of AAA required that the ACC switch to the airdrop option described above.

Additionally, the task force did not have full knowledge of the enemy ground order of battle; i.e., the number of Cuban troops and armored personnel carriers on and around Point Salines. Nor

did we understand where the very people the task force was charged to rescue were located. We thought there was only a single campus at the east end of Point Salines airfield where in fact there were two campuses, another in St. Georges. This necessitated a subsequent Ranger helicopter assault the day after Point Salines was secure.

And last, the force did not have adequate maps of Grenada. Fortunately, the JSOC forces relied upon satellite photography overlaid with a grid that was very useful in positioning troops and directing AC-130 fire.

Poor Communications Plan

The heart of poor communications was the lack of compatible radios between the various parts of the task force. Generally from the ACC's perspective, satellite communications work fairly well. The greatest problem was direct communications with the SEALs. Consequently, we had to "creatively" build communications so the AC-130s could effectively support the SEALs protecting Governor General Scoon in his quarters.

Additionally, we should have subdivided communications among the C-130 force. There were just too many aircraft for the ACC to control once our initial plan was disrupted with air aborts and AAA opposition. Later as the ACC reorganized the airdrop and air land flow into Point Salines, he was able to hand off some of the control responsibilities to Colonel Bobby Mitchell, the Tactical C-130 mission commander. This facilitated much more effective control of the remaining C-130s. Further, when the Combat Control Team got established on the ground, they were completely effective at air traffic control, a role for which they were expertly trained.

No interface with the Customer (Rangers)

Because of the compressed planning cycle and changes in the plan, it was very difficult to directly interface with the Rangers. While the air planners were reacting to higher-level changes, the Rangers had similar problems in their attempts to rehearse for the assault. Geographic separation and time simply

did not allow for interface other than the Ranger planner interface with the air planners at Fort Bragg. In special operations this is not a good recipe for success.

There was good interface between Task Force-160 (today's 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment) and the Special Forces assault force going in to their various targets on Grenada. However, the poor intelligence and the fact that we lost the element of surprise by being forced into daylight operations by higher headquarters made those missions far more difficult.

Get involved in Planning ASAP

In a fast breaking scenario like Urgent Fury, early involvement in planning is mandatory. The recall of planners to Headquarters JSOC went as well as could be expected. The 1st SOW responded quickly with CMSgt Duke Riley and TSgt Taco Sanchez along with weapons systems experts, all of whom were critical in putting this plan together. The real problem was dissemination. Since the plan changed significantly three times during the compressed planning cycle, it became extremely difficult for subordinate units to make their plans. Initial requirements were that we seize both Point Salines Airfield and Pearls Airfield on the eastern side of the island. It was late in the planning cycle that we came to a final decision to assault only Point Salines with the three options described above. What also complicated planning was the limited number of secure phone lines available throughout the task force. The ACC had only a single line and more often than not, he got a busy signal.

Summary

Today, technology helps us overcome many of the problems associated with Urgent Fury. However, training as you fight and exercising potential branches, sequels, and contingencies is critical, particularly for special operations. If we could have had a Predator over Point Salines we'd have known of the AAA as the Cubans dug the gun pits and installed the weapons. Even Google Maps could solve the map problem. However, enemy force disposition would remain

a problem without good Human Intelligence (HUMINT). And today, special operators should beware of an over abundance of information. We have tremendous communications capabilities and much planning can be done on a virtual basis. However, good communications planning, interoperable equipment, and net (band width) discipline will always be necessary. Interface with the customer during planning and execution today is facilitated with great computer and communications capabilities. However, particularly for special operations, an understanding of how every member of the team operates can only be built through experience. Spending time with SEALs, Special Forces, Rangers, Army Aviators, and Air Force Special Operation Forces in their environment during exercises and training is a requirement for an effective joint special operations team. 🐻

Editor's Notes: There were three future AFSOC Commanders in key positions in this operation. Brig Gen Robert Patterson, the COMALF, was the 23 AF Commander and first AFSOC Commander after the Cohen-Nunn Amendment was implemented in 1987. The Air Component Commander, Col Bruce Fister, was AFSOC Commander from 1991-1994 and retired as a Lt General. The lead MC 130E Aircraft Commander, Lt Col Jim Hobson, was the AFSOC Commander from 1994-1997 and retired as a Maj General. In addition, Gen Hobson's performance as the Aircraft Commander of the eventual lead ship across the drop zone was recognized by winning the MacKay Trophy for the most meritorious flight of the year. A special thank you to Major (ret) Michael J. Couvillon, author of Grenada Grinder for his invaluable contributions to this article.



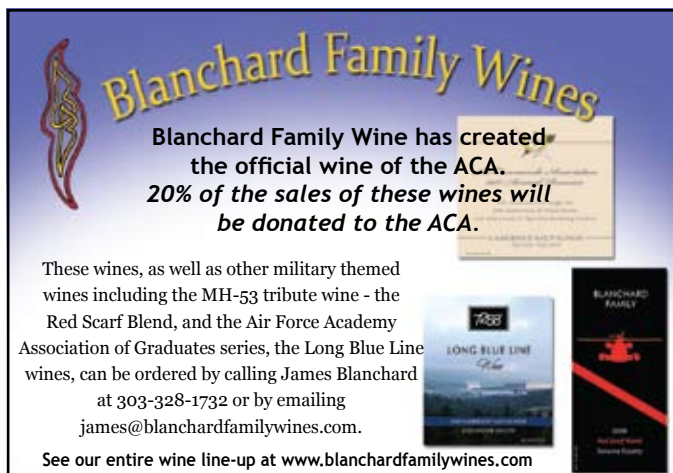
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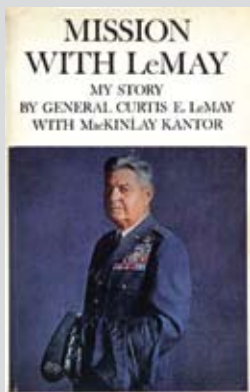


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Blanchard Family Wine has created the official wine of the ACA. 20% of the sales of these wines will be donated to the ACA.

These wines, as well as other military themed wines including the MH-53 tribute wine - the Red Scarf Blend, and the Air Force Academy Association of Graduates series, the Long Blue Line wines, can be ordered by calling James Blanchard at 303-328-1732 or by emailing james@blanchardfamilywines.com.

See our entire wine line-up at www.blanchardfamilywines.com



Mission with LeMay

Book review by
MGen Clay McCutchan

In the early 1960s, President John Kennedy urged the DoD to build counterinsurgency (COIN) forces to combat communist inspired “wars of national liberation.” The USAF version of this special operations force was established at Hurlburt Field, Florida with the establishment of the 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron or “Jungle Jim.” The order standing it up was signed by the then serving Chief of Staff of the Air Force, General Curtiss E. LeMay.

General LeMay’s authorized autobiography, Mission with LeMay is a great read for all ranks and civilians that want to understand the Army Air Corps, the Army Air Force, the buildup of Strategic Air Command (SAC), the USAF, and General LeMay. It is a study of a life time of hard work, management, leadership, and problem solving. It is also funny and full of human interest stories.

His discussion of life as an Ohio State ROTC cadet, Army Air Corps pilot training, early pursuit/fighter flying at Selfridge Field, navigator training and early bomber experience at Langley Field are very interesting as he works alongside many of the future leaders of the Army Air Force and United States Air Force. His description as a military officer leading Civilian Conservation Camps and later flying the air mail are enlightening. He also recounts throughout the book the peace time combat between Army aviators and the ground Army, Navy against Army and Army air, and later Navy against the Air Force.

He met and married his wife Helen Maitland while at Selfridge. It proved to be a good life long match as he recounts a number of personal, funny and serious family adventures.

His rise to responsibility and rank in the American bombing efforts over Germany in World War II and later over Japan is fascinating. Always the problem solver, unorthodox and unconventional in his tactics, publicity shy, a true quiet professional.

His early command of the post war Air Force in Germany led to him setting up the initial Berlin Airlift and finally what he is most famous for: the stand up of the Air Force Strategic Air Command, in its time the most complex, combat capable air arm every fielded. He set the standards that caused the Communists to fear SAC like no other force, and yet his career long concern for the younger, less ranking airmen and their families comes through clear.

His victories and defeats as the Vice and then Chief of Staff USAF at the hands of Presidents and politicians is educational. A very worthy read, with many timeless lessons for airmen.



Congress to the Rescue:

Statutory Creation of USSOCOM



By James R. Locher III

From the ashes of the failed Iranian rescue mission rose the two most important defense transformations of the last sixty years. The debacle at Desert One during April 1980 revealed gross deficiencies in both joint warfighting and special operations capabilities. After entrenched interests in the Pentagon had frustrated internal efforts to fix these deficiencies, reformist military officers and defense civilians turned to Congress for help. After long, difficult struggles, historic laws -- the Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reorganization Act and Cohen-Nunn Amendment¹ -- mandated sweeping changes in both areas in 1986 -- six years after Desert One.

Congress drove both transformations, enacting far-reaching legislation over bitter objections from the Department of Defense (DoD). Goldwater-Nichols had a much broader scope, addressing the entire defense establishment. It also registered as the bigger clash between Capitol Hill and the Pentagon. Being addressed first, Goldwater-Nichols cleared a political path for Cohen-Nunn. In fact, Cohen-Nunn would not have been politically possible in the absence of Goldwater-Nichols. The broader defense reorganization work also provided powerful insights on how to effectively organize the special operations community.



Remains of a burned-out U.S. helicopter lie in front of an abandoned chopper at Desert One. (Associated Press photo)

Appeals to Congress for Help

Military officers played critical roles in sparking and informing congressional action. On Goldwater-Nichols, the most important officer was the sitting chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), General David C. Jones, USAF. At the start of his tour as chairman, he believed that the joint system needed drastic overhaul, but he was unable to gain support for his reforms from the other Joint Chiefs. Jones identified service separateness as the principal cause of the Iranian rescue failure, saying: "I saw terrible problems in the services' efforts to work with each other. . . No existing organization could run the operation. Everyone gave it their best, but the fact that we hadn't been ingrained in working and training together proved insurmountable."² Desert One convinced Jones that outside help -- either the president or Congress -- would be needed.

After awaiting the results of the November 1980 presidential election, Jones urged incoming Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger to undertake reform of the joint system. When Weinberger showed no interest and sat astride Jones's path to President



Senators Bill Cohen and Sam Nunn at a press conference in Seoul during January 1979. (Raymond H. Fogler Library, University of Maine)

Ronald Reagan, the JCS chairman appealed to the House Armed Services Committee to overcome crippling service parochialism. During a hearing on February 3, 1982, he launched with nine words a war over defense organization that would last four years and 241 days: "We do not have an adequate organizational structure today."³ In addition to Jones, many retired military officers and civilian officials testified and informally advised Congress on defense reorganization. A number of universities and think tanks undertook major defense reorganization analyses. Congress also benefitted from forty years of studies identifying problems in the structure and operations of the defense establishment.

For Cohen-Nunn, the sources of information were fewer and more informal. Desert One had galvanized current and former special operators and their civilian supporters, a group known as the SOF Liberation Front (also called the SOF Mafia)⁴, to press for policies and programs to revitalize Special Operations Forces (SOF). Members of this group provided Congress with key information to help it understand deficiencies in capabilities and misuses of SOF. The Pentagon had been quite tight-lipped about SOF, and classification obstacles kept Congress in the dark.

The SOF Liberation Front formed around a Directorate of Special Planning in the Office of the Assistant

Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (ISA). In 1981, ISA Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Noel Koch created the directorate to address counterterrorism and dual-hatted himself as its director. R. Lynn Rylander, deputy director for special planning, and Colonel George W. McGovern Jr., a recent 5th Special Forces Group commander and Koch's military assistant, became key figures in the SOF Liberation Front. Throughout the active and retired SOF community, the word spread that the Directorate of Special Planning was intent on "fixing SOF."⁵ The directorate recruited key SOF expertise, including Navy Captain Ted Lyon, Army Lieutenant Colonel Tom McHugh, retired Army Colonel George Olmstead, and Peter Probst.⁶

In another important initiative, Koch created the Special Operations Policy Advisory Group (SOPAG). In its report on Desert One, the Holloway Commission had recommended the establishment of such a group. Filled with highly respected, experienced special operators -- such as Lieutenant General Samuel V. "Sam" Wilson, General Robert C. "Bob" Kingston, and former CIA Director William E. "Bill" Colby -- the SOPAG provided an influential voice on SOF revitalization.

Koch and the Directorate for Special Planning did have modest success in increasing SOF budgets, but Pentagon opposition or disinterest blocked their other efforts. In March 1984, Koch characterized negative DoD attitudes: "I have discovered in critical areas of the Pentagon, on the subject of special operations forces revitalization, that when they [officials there] say no, they mean no; when they say maybe, they mean no; and when they say yes, they mean no, and if they meant anything but no, they wouldn't be there."⁷ To SOF supporters in the Pentagon, it became increasingly clear that little could be achieved through internal struggles. Attention shifted to cultivating congressional support.

Initial Efforts on Capitol Hill

The Capitol Hill battleground for defense reorganization and SOF revitalization was the Senate and House Armed Services Committees (SASC

and HASC) which had jurisdiction over DoD's organization. In the SASC, the same members and staff worked on both legislative efforts, but they addressed Goldwater-Nichols for several years before turning their attention to special operations (SO) and low-intensity conflict (LIC) reforms. In the HASC, different members and staff worked separately on these two pieces of legislation. Goldwater-Nichols greatly influenced SASC thinking on SO/LIC reforms. The absence of this influence in the HASC's SOF work eventually led to proposals that conflicted with the SASC's approach.

The leading House proponent, Congressman Dan Daniel (D-VA), had long been interested in SOF, well before Desert One, largely due to his close friend and constituent, Lieutenant General Sam Wilson.⁸ The Virginia congressman had visited Wilson in Vietnam and "had come to respect him as he did few other men."⁹ To pursue his interest in SOF, Daniel, chairman of the HASC's Readiness Committee, created a SOF Panel led by Congressman Earl Hutto



Senator Cohen and Chris Mellon in 1988. (U.S. Senate photo)

(D-FL). Daniel also relied extensively on a senior HASC staff member,¹⁰ a former Special Forces officer, who became a strong, effective, tireless advocate for SOF revitalization. Daniel, Hutto, and their top staffer deserve great credit for their early and persistent attention to the need for SOF revitalization.

For thirty months beginning in the summer 1983, the SASC staff under my leadership undertook a comprehensive study on DoD's organizational problems, their causes, and a range of

potential solutions. The need for this study arose from forty years of conflicting analyses and testimony on the principles for organizing the defense establishment. Through case studies (including the Bay of Pigs, Vietnam, Pueblo, Mayaguez, Desert One, bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut, and Grenada), the SASC staff examined where the U.S. military was experiencing setbacks. It was found that while the Pentagon was focused excessively on preparing for global war with the Soviet Union, the predominant form of conflict activity was indirect aggression that largely occurred in the developing world. With the military mistakenly treating these low-intensity conflicts as lesser-included-cases of large-scale conventional conflict, ad hoc responses led to repeated failures or setbacks. From this analysis, the SASC study concluded, "There is a substantial need to create a strong multi-service, multi-functional, organizational focus for low-intensity warfare and special operations."¹¹ It proposed the establishment of an office for low-intensity warfare and special operations in the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD). From the beginning, the SASC staff argued for strengthening both SO and LIC capabilities. Key contributors to the SO/LIC portion of the staff study were SASC staffer George K. "Ken" Johnson Jr., a former member of the 5th Special Forces Group, and Christopher K. "Chris" Mellon, of Senator William S. "Bill" Cohen's (R-ME) personal staff.

While this study was underway, Benjamin F. "Ben" Schemmer, editor-in-chief of *Armed Forces Journal International* (AFJI), was mounting a media campaign in support of SOF revitalization. Schemmer was well-informed about defense matters and widely respected in the defense community, especially on Capitol Hill. From February 1985 to April 1986, AFJI published forty-five articles or letters on SOF reform. These included an interview of Koch and articles by Cohen and Daniel. According to Mellon, a telephone call from Schemmer to Cohen actually sparked the senator's interest in SOF revitalization.

Despite deep concern about DoD's inadequate SO and LIC capacities, it was decided not to attempt these reforms as part of what became the Goldwater-Nichols Act for three principal reasons. First, the SO/LIC reforms could easily be lost in the larger defense reorganization battle; they could be watered down or negotiated away as part of the resolution of key issues. Second, supporting senators were then few in number. Last, available information had not permitted rigorous organizational analysis. The SO/LIC reforms would have to wait for a more favorable legislative opportunity, possibly that year's defense authorization bill, the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year (FY) 1987.

After the SASC completed marking up its version of Goldwater-Nichols on March 6, 1986, and the staff prepared the accompanying report by April 14, it was possible to give increased attention to SO/LIC issues. At Cohen's request, SASC Chairman Barry Goldwater (R-AZ) put me in charge of SO/LIC reform. Ken Johnson and Chris Mellon were key participants in the effort along with Jeffrey H. "Jeff" Smith and Richard D. "Rick" Finn Jr., SASC staffers who had joined me to form the nucleus of the Goldwater-Nichols effort. As this work

progressed, William V. "Bill" Cowan from the staff of Senator Warren Rudman (R-NH), joined our team. Cowan, a former Marine, had served as a deputy commander of a clandestine special operations unit. Throughout work on SO/LIC reforms, this staff group worked closely with Senators Cohen and Sam Nunn (D-GA), the SASC's ranking Democrat, who had formed a bipartisan partnership with Cohen on this issue.

Having by this time spent more than three years examining DoD's organization and preparing a 645-page staff study, this small team was well-prepared to formulate effective proposals for revitalizing SO and LIC capabilities. Our initial ideas focused on creation of a unified command for SOF, an assistant secretary of defense for SO and LIC, and reforms at the National Security Council to integrate all instruments of national power in low-intensity conflicts. Although we were convinced that these approaches had great merit, prescribing them in law ran counter to two key principles from Goldwater-Nichols. First, Congress had never prescribed a unified command in law. In fact, the Senate version of Goldwater-Nichols would remove restrictions in law that had prevented the creation of the U.S. Transportation Command and assignment of the Alaska Command as a subordinate unified command of the U.S. Pacific Command. Second, a central tenet of Goldwater-Nichols was to reduce Congress's tendency to micromanage DoD's organization. One area of concern was that Congress had designated many of the assistant secretary of defense positions, denying the secretary of defense flexibility in how he used senior subordinates.

The staff proposed and Cohen and Nunn concurred on an approach that used the threat of legislation -- which Chris Mellon took the lead in drafting -- to motivate the Pentagon to propose effective SO/LIC reforms. As a first step in that strategy, on May 15, 1986, Cohen (with Nunn as a cosponsor) introduced S. 2453, "a bill to enhance the ability of the United States to combat terrorism and other forms of unconventional warfare." S. 2453 had four major features: (1) establishment of an assistant secretary of defense for special operations and low-intensity conflict; (2) requirement for establishing a unified command for SOF; (3) establishment of a Board for Low-Intensity Conflict within the National Security Council; and (4) Sense of the Congress regarding the appointment of a Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs for Low-Intensity Conflict. Cohen and Nunn gave long statements on the Senate floor in support of the need for strengthening SO and LIC capabilities.¹²

Congressmen Daniel and his senior staffer had been equally busy. On June 26, Daniel introduced H.R. 5109, "to establish a National Special Operations Agency within the Department of Defense to have unified responsibility for all special operations forces and activities within the Department." The bill had twenty-eight cosponsors, including many powerful HASC members. Creation of the National Special Operations Agency was the bill's central feature. Other key provisions would require the agency's director to be a civilian and position him in the chain of command from the secretary of defense to all SOF assigned to the agency. One novel idea would give the director responsibility for preparing, justifying, and executing the budget for the agency. Another would require funding for



Senator Barry Goldwater, Jim Locher, and Senator Sam Nunn celebrate passage of the Goldwater-Nichols Act, October 1986.
(U.S. Senate photo)

all activities and elements of the agency to appear in a separate major force program category in the Pentagon budget. Last, the Daniel bill defined two important terms: Special Operations Forces and Special Operations Activities.

In preparing this bill, the senior HASC staffer worked closely with members of ISA's Directorate of Special Planning, where turnover had produced a new crew to work with Rylander and Probst: Air Force Lt. Col. Thomas E. "Tim" Davidson, Army Lt. Col. William "Bill" Lowry, Navy Commander Robert "Bob" Mabry, and retired Army Lieutenant Colonel George T. Talbot, a LIC expert. Rylander and Davidson and Air Staff Majors Gary Weikel and Joe Valimont helped Daniel's senior staffer draft H.R. 5109, gathering at the staffer's house for this covert effort.¹³

Pentagon Counterproposals

By the time Cohen and Nunn had introduced S. 2453 and Daniel had submitted H.R. 5109, the Senate had approved its version of Goldwater-Nichols by a vote of 95-0, despite continuing DoD opposition. Recognizing that its influence on organizational matters was minimal, the Pentagon was motivated to formulate serious proposals on SOF reform. In late June, Secretary Weinberger wrote to Daniel to report that the JCS had recommended creation of a Special Operations Forces Command (SOFC), headed by a three-star officer. SOFC would have "advocacy responsibility in the Defense Resources Board for SOF funding programs" and "full responsibility for training, readiness, doctrine, and SOF-related professional military education."¹⁴ The Pentagon's proposal represented a dramatic shift from earlier positions but fell short of the changes envisioned on Capitol Hill.

During the summer, the SASC staff and DoD representatives negotiated on various elements of SO/LIC reforms. Often this involved Rylander and others from ISA's Directorate of Special Planning and Captain Richard D. "Rick" DeBoges, the legal and legislative advisor to the JCS chairman. These sessions were quite difficult for Rylander and his Special Planning colleagues; despite their personal beliefs, they were required to defend the Pentagon's proposal. Fortunately, Rylander -- who I knew from our work together in the same OSD office -- and I were able to arrange informative private discussions.

Also during this period, I had numerous meetings with active-duty special operators. These meetings, arranged as clandestine gatherings away from Capitol Hill, introduced me to special operations tradecraft.

Given the Pentagon's high-level of interest, sometimes Richard L. "Rich" Armitage, the assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs, would represent DoD in negotiations with the SASC staff. Armitage was familiar with Navy SEALs, having served three combat tours in Vietnam as a riverine advisor to South Vietnamese forces. Admiral William J. "Bill" Crowe, USN, JCS chairman, also met separately with Cohen and Nunn. Crowe and Armitage offered to personally ensure that the Pentagon's proposal would achieve the SOF revitalization that Cohen and Nunn had in mind. The two senators, however, were not prepared to rely on personality-dependent arrangements for reforms that would take many years. They wanted reforms that could stand on their own to drive and sustain the required transformation.

Decisive Action in the Senate

Although these negotiations narrowed the gap between Senate and Pentagon thinking, serious differences remained. In early August, 1986, with floor action on the FY1987 NDAA approaching, Cohen and Nunn considered four options formulated by the staff: Option 1 -- do nothing; plan on stonewalling the Daniels bill in conference; Option 2 -- offer a Sense of the Congress amendment that conforms to DoD proposals; Option 3 -- offer a Sense of the Congress amendment that reflects the more comprehensive SOF reforms favored by the two senators; and Option 4 -- offer an amendment, similar to their original bill, that would force SOF reforms. Cohen and Nunn selected Option 3, largely based on the following staff argument: "Forcing legislation would run counter to the principles established in the defense reorganization bill. It may be that the Congress will need to violate those principles to correct serious SOF problems. Such a decision, however, should be carefully considered."¹⁵

I reformulated S. 2453 as a Sense of the Congress resolution. It was elaborated by nine additional ideas developed by the staff and approved by Cohen and Nunn.

To set the stage for offering this amendment on the Senate floor, Cohen arranged a hearing of the Sea Power and Force Projection Subcommittee that he chaired and that had jurisdiction over SOF to address SO/LIC reform. On August 5, two panels appeared: first, Crowe and Armitage, and then Major General Richard Scholtes, recently retired Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) commander, and Professor Richard H. Shultz Jr., a LIC expert and SOPAG member. To take classified testimony from Scholtes, the subcommittee reconvened in a closed session during which Scholtes focused on the misemployment of SOF during the Grenada operation. His testimony shocked Cohen, who requested a private meeting with Scholtes later that day, attended by Nunn and Senators John W. Warner (R-VA) and J. James Exon (D-NE). The ensuing discussion convinced Cohen and Nunn that the full force of law with detailed prescriptions would be required to bring about the necessary SO and LIC transformations. They decided in this case that they needed to violate the principles of Goldwater-

Nichols. Cohen declared, “By God, we’re going to have this in the law.”¹⁶ I quickly redrafted the language from a Sense of the Congress resolution to forcing legislation for Cohen to offer on the Senate floor the following day.

The new amendment was robust and far-reaching. Beyond the original provisions for an assistant secretary of defense, a unified command, NSC Board for Low-Intensity Conflict, and a recommendation for a deputy assistant to the president for LIC, the amendment included the nine additional staff-generated reforms. Key among these was specifying a four-star grade for the commander of the SOF unified command; assigning all active and reserve SOF (except JSOC forces) in the United States to the command; detailing nine responsibilities of the commander; requiring the commanders of the European and Pacific theater special operations commands to be general or flag rank; and requiring the creation of a Five-Year Defense Plan major force program for SOF (paralleling a provision in the Daniel bill).

Key to the thinking behind the new amendment offered by Cohen and Nunn was a desire to create SOF and SO/LIC organizations that would be integral parts of DoD. A unified command for SOF would make it a major component of DoD’s operational dimension, with its four-star commander reporting on operational matters to the secretary of defense, with communication through the JCS chairman. The Senate’s version of Goldwater-Nichols would greatly strengthen the unified commanders, an important change that would add to the SOF commander’s clout. Not wanting to leave important details for the Pentagon to decide, Cohen and Nunn’s new amendment prescribed in detail the SOF commander’s duties and forces to be assigned to the command. A SOF unified command would preserve important connections to the three services with SOF: Army, Navy, and Air Force. These connections would be critical to operational integration and support on resources and other administrative matters. The new amendment also sought to give increased visibility to SOF resource issues.

The amendment provided an important civilian partner for the SOF commander. The assistant secretary of defense for SO/LIC would be an OSD policy official but would also represent DoD on SO and LIC issues in subordinate groups of the National Security Council. Because SO and LIC depended extensively on interagency partners and coordination, representation in NSC interagency committee deliberations would be critical. Unlike the Daniel bill, Cohen and Nunn had never envisioned placing the assistant secretary in the operational chain of command.

The Navy strongly objected to the Cohen and Nunn’s amendment, which had twenty-six cosponsors. When Cohen offered it on August 6, two former Secretaries of the Navy, Senators Warner and John Chafee (R-RI), spoke against the amendment. Their objections were brushed aside, and, on a voice vote, the amendment became part of the Senate version of the NDAA.

Resolving Senate and House Differences

Cohen, Nunn, and their staffers viewed the central features of the Daniel bill to be ill-advised and unworkable. A separate agency could be isolated and ineffective. It would have no role in the unified command system, policymaking and other

key OSD activities, or in the NSC system. Moreover, it would separate SOF from the services and conventional forces. The HASC was quite firm in support of its approach. Given the SASC’s equal determination to gain approval of its concept, the two committees were headed for a major confrontation in the conference to resolve the differences between the House and Senate versions of the NDAA.

The Senate completed its work on the NDAA on August 9; the House, on September 18. Because both bills contained provisions dealing with SOF reform, it was certain that Congress would mandate changes to DoD’s organization for SO and possibly LIC. The key question was: What would the compromise legislation prescribe? But first, attention shifted back to the Goldwater-Nichols Act. From August 13 through September 16, the SASC and HASC conducted a conference committee to resolve differences in the two chambers’ versions of the defense reorganization legislation. This was a draining experience for the staff, requiring fifteen-hour days every day for almost four weeks. But one great advantage was knowing exactly what changes would take place in the broader defense reorganization upon which the SO/LIC reforms would need to build.

The Senate-House conference committee on the NDAA began on September 24. Because of the expected acrimony, work on resolving the differences in the SO/LIC provisions was slow to start. The first staff-level discussion included Daniel’s senior staffer from the HASC and Mellon, Johnson, Cowan, and me from the SASC. The session, described as “tense and somewhat acrimonious,”¹⁷ lived up to the expectations of SO/LIC reform being a contentious issue. The HASC senior staffer

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Senator Cohen, the third ranking Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee.



Senator Nunn, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee.

defended the House provision as the best solution for providing the required SOF capability and properly employing it. The SASC staffers argued for their Goldwater-Nichols-grounded approach.

In the midst of this acrimony, the White House weighed in with a strongly worded letter objecting to the SO/LIC reform legislation. Signed by Vice Admiral John M. Poindexter, the assistant to the president for national security affairs, the letter called the legislation “unnecessary” in light of the administration’s efforts to strengthen U.S. capabilities for special operations and low-intensity conflict. Poindexter argued, “I urge you to reconsider the need for restrictive detailed legislation on this sensitive issue. If the Conference agreement contains mandatory language, it would present potential constitutional problems because it would impermissibly limit the President’s authority as Commander-in-Chief.”¹⁸ This letter with its hollow promises and constitutional

threat was not taken seriously by members or staff.

In a highly fortunate move, Congressman Daniel asked Lieutenant General Sam Wilson to join the negotiations as a consultant to the HASC. At the first session with Wilson in attendance, I made a detailed presentation on the thinking behind the Senate’s provision, emphasizing the advantages of having a unified command and an assistant secretary and the disadvantages of an agency approach. The logic impressed Wilson, and he urged the top HASC staff member to be open to the Senate’s arguments. With a keen intellect, gracious manner, and distinguished career that began in “Merrill’s Marauders,” General Sam, as he was known, was the calming, constructive influence the negotiations needed. Fruitful discussions followed, prodded by Wilson’s thoughtful questions. Eventually, the HASC senior staffer accepted the main features of the Senate provisions. In return, the Senate yielded to the House provision giving SOF their own “checkbook.” Related to this budgetary authority, it was decided to add the responsibility of “developing and acquiring special operations-peculiar equipment” to the list of responsibilities for the SOF commander already specified in the Senate provision. It was also agreed to include the House’s important definitions of SOF and SO activities.

Because the Senate provision would be the basis of the conference agreement, I was permitted to prepare drafts of the compromise language which the two staffs rigorously reviewed at regular intervals over a ten-day period. The proposed compromise had greater potential than either the Senate or House bill. It raised new organizational concepts that needed to be carefully considered. The addition of budget and acquisition authority added new dimensions to the roles of the SOF commander and assistant secretary and new connections between them. One-third of the SOF commander’s duties would be like a traditional unified commander; the other two-thirds, a service chief for SOF. The assistant secretary would principally be an OSD and interagency policy official, but he would also be like a service secretary for SOF. Given that his principal duty would

be “the overall supervision (including oversight of policy and resources) of special operations activities . . . and low-intensity conflict activities of the Department of Defense,” the assistant secretary would be in the administrative chain of command from the secretary of defense to the SOF commander. Both the commander and assistant secretary would be uniquely empowered. If they worked well together, they would have great potential.

Cohen, Nunn, and Daniel, who had closely monitored and instructed the staff work, were pleased with the outcome, which was quickly accepted by the conference committee. The White House did not share congressional pleasure with the resulting provision. After signing the NDAA on November 14, President Reagan declared in a signing statement: “I am also extremely disappointed that the Congress saw the need to legislate the reorganization of the Special Operations Forces, particularly in mandating the creation of a unified command, which has heretofore been the exclusive prerogative of the President as Commander in Chief.”¹⁹

How did a handful of members and staffers bring about this historic legislative victory? After Goldwater-Nichols, the Pentagon’s credibility on organizational issues was near zero on Capitol Hill. In this vacuum, a few powerful, respected, and knowledgeable members had enormous influence. In the Senate, after a two-year battle over Goldwater-Nichols, the SASC was quite unified with considerable goodwill for its notable success. In particular, Nunn and Cohen had played major roles in the Goldwater-Nichols legislation, and Goldwater was willing to fully support their initiative on SO/LIC reforms.

Although the legislation moved relatively easily through Congress, the battle over SO/LIC reform was far from over. It just moved to the battlefield of implementation. Observers described the Pentagon’s implementation approach as malicious.²⁰ Fortunately, the two Armed Services Committees remained engaged, and the SO/LIC community showed incredible perseverance in the face of fierce and time-consuming bureaucratic infighting.

It was in the midst of this implementation struggle that section 1311 of the FY1987 NDAA became known as the Cohen-Nunn Amendment. In May 1989 -- nearly three years after enactment -- I accepted the nomination to serve as the first permanent²¹ ASD (SO/LIC). While awaiting my October confirmation by the Senate, I saw firsthand the magnitude of the Pentagon's resistance to both the Office of the ASD (SO/LIC) and U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM). One encounter exemplified the degree of opposition. When I saw General Alfred M. "Al" Gray Jr., the Commandant of the Marine Corps, whom I had known for ten years, in a Pentagon corridor, he took me to a dark corner and revealed: "I just came from a JCS meeting. The Chiefs are completely fed-up with the SO/LIC reforms. They made three decisions this morning. One, they want to get rid of you, Mr. Locher. Two, they want to get rid of OASD (SO/LIC). And three, they want to disestablish USSOCOM." Gray concluded his warning with the following advice: "If I were you, young man, when

you walk the halls of the Pentagon, I would keep my back to the wall. They are out to get you."

As evidence of opposition mounted, I decided I needed to pull powerful Members of Congress as close to our implementation efforts as I could. Naming the amendment for them would be a constant reminder of congressional support. Daniel had died; so the choice was easy: the Cohen-Nunn Amendment. I put Cohen first because he had worked the issue longer and harder. However, with Nunn's stature as SASC chairman and Mr. Defense on Capitol Hill continuing to increase, USSOCOM decided several years later to rename it the Nunn-Cohen Amendment. A few years after that, when Cohen became secretary of defense, USSOCOM tried to revert to the original title, but Nunn-Cohen has stuck with more people.

The Cohen-Nunn Amendment was profoundly insightful and visionary. Looking at the conflicts of the 1970s and 1980s, its formulators drew nontraditional conclusions about current and future security challenges and

military capabilities required to meet them. Three years later, the end of the Cold War led to increased instability and a multitude of unconventional challenges and magnified the importance of SO and LIC capabilities. The 9/11 terrorist attacks finally awakened the defense establishment to the dramatically changed security environment and nature of new threats. It was only then that the Pentagon permitted the SO/LIC reforms to flourish. When this happened, Cohen-Nunn provided the organizational basis for unprecedented accomplishments.

SOF has come a long way from Desert One. It is now providing the nation with decisive capabilities and expertise in a complex, turbulent, challenging era.



About the Author: The Honorable James R. Locher III was a professional staff member on the Senate Armed Services Committee from 1978-1989. He served as the first permanent Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low/Intensity conflict from October 1989 through June 1993. Locher is also the former president and CEO of the Project on National Security Reform.

1. When enacted, the SO/LIC reforms were simply "Sec.[tion] 1311. Special Operations Forces" of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1987. It was not until three years later that legislation became popularly known as the Cohen-Nunn Amendment. Moreover, despite repeated references to the SO/LIC reform legislation being an amendment to the Goldwater-Nichols Act, it was a stand-alone provision in the NDAA for FY1987. It did amend sections of title 10, United States Code, that were amended by Goldwater-Nichols, but it did not amend the act itself.
2. David C. Jones quoted in James R. Locher III, *Victory on the Potomac: The Goldwater-Nichols Act Unifies the Pentagon* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2002), 48.
3. Locher, 34.
4. Members of the SOF Mafia from the Air Staff included Colonel John Roberts; Lieutenant Colonels Dave Sims, Jim Hobson, Bob Brenci, Rusty Napier, John Arnold, Ron Kelly, and Scott Stephens; and Majors Gary Weikel, Joe Valimont, Thom Beres, T.J. Doherty, Charlie Williamson, and Greg Colvin. List provided in an email from Thomas E. "Tim" Davidson to the author, March 30, 2012.
5. John H. "Scot" Crerar, Appendix F: "The Road to USSOCOM" in James H. Kurtz with John H. "Scot" Crerar, *Military Roles and Missions: Past Revisions and Future Prospects* (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2010), F-7.
6. Thomas E. Davidson, email to author, March 30, 2012.
7. Noel Koch quoted in Susan L. Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare: Rebuilding U.S. Special Operations Forces*, (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1997), 107.
8. Crerar, F-10.
9. William G. Boykin, "The Origins of the United States Special Operations Command," 6.
10. Much to the author's regret, the senior HASC staff member has asked that his name not be used in this article for reasons related to employment.
11. Congress, Senate, Committee on Armed Services, Defense Organization: The Need for Change: Staff Report to the Committee on Armed Services, 99th Cong. 1st sess. S. Prt. 99-86, Oct. 16, 1985, 103.
12. Congress, Senate, Senator Cohen of Maine and Senator Nunn of Georgia speaking on a bill to enhance the ability of the United States to combat terrorism and other forms of unconventional warfare, 99th Congress, 2nd sess., Congressional Record (May 15, 1986): S 5971-76.
13. Davidson email.
14. Marquis, 138.
15. Jim Locher, Chris Mellon, Jeff Smith, and Ken Johnson, Memorandum for Senator Cohen and Senator Nunn, "Amendment on Special Operations Forces," August 4, 1986, Private papers of James R. Locher III.
16. Quoted in Marquis, 144.
17. Marquis, 144.
18. John M. Poindexter, Letter to Senator Nunn, October 1, 1986, Locher private papers.
19. Ronald Reagan, "Statement on Signing the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1987," November 14, 1986.
20. See Marquis, Chapter 8, entitled "Malicious Implementation?"
21. At the direction of Congress, Secretary of the Army John O. "Jack" Marsh Jr. served as acting assistant secretary (SO/LIC) from December 4, 1987 to July 12, 1988. President Reagan appointed Ambassador Charles S. Whitehouse on July 13, 1988, to serve as the first assistant secretary (SO/LIC), a position he held for exactly one year. Because he was appointed less than four months before the presidential election in November 1988, Ambassador Whitehouse saw himself as a caretaker and pursued a modest agenda.

A Match Made by Pinatubo

A Case Study in Jointness

*By Col (Retired) Brian Maher, US Air Force
and Col (Retired) Bob Leicht, US Army*

This piece captures a moment in time when natural events and operational decisions resulted in the co-location of significant elements of Army and Air Force special operations units on the Japanese island of Okinawa. These were serendipitous events that created an environment, a melting pot, where jointness was enabled and flourished in a peacetime setting. While the Global War on Terror over the past 10 years has presented myriad joint and combined opportunities for special operators to demonstrate their value to the Nation, ARSOF and AFsOF co-location on Okinawa enabled the PACOM Commander to achieve his objectives in an efficient and capable manner for a decade before 9-11.

Today, the 353rd Special Operations Group and the 1st Battalion, 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne) are stationed on Kadena Air Base and Torii Station respectively – but it was not always so.

Upon the activation of the Army's 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne) in 1957, Okinawa became the springboard for Special Forces (SF) operations throughout Asia in support of Theater objectives. It became especially important as U.S. national policy dictated support of governments threatened by Communist insurgencies in Southeast Asia. Headquartered at Kadena Air Base, the 1st SFG sent Operational Detachments-A (ODA) TDY to Viet Nam throughout the '60s and into the '70s. With the drawdown of the war and resultant re-focus of national intent on NATO and the USSR, SF was drawn down from seven Groups to three, and the 1st SFG was inactivated in 1974. Similarly, Air Force Special Operations units and elements were either inactivated or retrograded to CONUS. With the exception of an advisory ODA ('Det K') in Korea, and a SEAL command and control unit in the Philippines, Special Operations Forces left their permanent bed down sites in Asia.

Ten years later with a renewed concern for foreign policy issues in Asia, the 1st Group was reactivated at Fort Lewis, Washington, with its 1st Battalion forward deployed to Okinawa under the operational control of Special Operations Command, Pacific (SOCPAC). 1st Battalion (1-1) was housed in an old Army Security Agency facility (a.k.a. the 'Box') on Torii Station. It was the largest remaining U.S. Army installation on the island, on the beach side of the old Yomitan Airfield. For the rest of the decade and beyond, airlift throughout the Theater, as well as training support was provided by a myriad of Air Force and Marine aviation units; but there were few if any habitual support relationships with which to create SOPs and the personal relationships of trust and confidence that that

come from shared experiences.

In the late '80s, as it had done earlier in the decade with Army SF, the Theater and National Command Authorities decided to re-introduce Special Operations aviation to the Pacific AOR. In April 1989, the 353rd Special Operations Wing activated in the Philippines to train for unconventional warfare and special operations activities. This Wing was built upon the 1st Special Operations Squadron and the 31st Special Operations Squadron, both recent tenants on Clark AB. Like their Special Forces partners in the Pacific Area of Operations, these units played significant roles during the Vietnam era assigned to various headquarters and with different air assets. The 353rd was created as the US Special Operations Command was just taking shape and adapting a more global special operations focus that was unknown when SOF were under the exclusive purview of the military services. The concept was to provide a balanced set of forward deployed Air Force Special Operations capabilities to the theater commander and brought the various capabilities of the 1st SOS, the 31st SOS, the 17th SOS with its HC-130 aircraft, which was derived from the Okinawa based 33rd Air Rescue Squadron, and Combat Control and Pararescue capabilities with the 320th Special Tactics Squadron. The wing maintained both rotary and fixed wing aircraft, providing infil/exfil/resupply capability, helicopter air refueling, airfield and drop zone operations. They supported humanitarian and disaster relief operations, as well as some search and rescue and aeromedical evacuation missions as required. It maintained these capabilities by aggressively participating in joint/combined and other theater exercises and an array of training opportunities throughout the region.

As Mount Pinatubo erupted in June 1991, the 17th SOS (the only 353rd SOW unit on Okinawa) was already programmed to move to Clark AB and consolidate the wing in the Philippines. However, the widespread destruction of Clark AB during the volcanic eruptions plus the tense political situation with renegotiating the status of forces agreement with the Philippine Government, soon led the Wing to temporarily operate from bases on Okinawa. They officially received Government of Japan approval to permanently relocate there in February 1992. The single exception to this was the 31st SOS, which was temporarily located on MCAS Futenma, with a subsequent relocation to Osan AB, South Korea in March 1993. This decision was made cooperatively with Pacific Command and the US Forces—Korea, and provided the 31st SOS expanded training opportunities that were not available

on Okinawa. By agreement, they were to remain a theater wide asset, and thus were available for many of the exercises and training opportunities available to special operations forces in the Pacific. The 353rd was re-designated the 353rd Special Operations Group in December 1992 as the USAF adapted its “Objective Force” organizational construct, but continued operations as before.

In the 1992-94 timeframe the SOF commanders were as follows: 353rd commanders were Colonels Bob Stankovich and Jerry Thigpen, with Colonels Jack Holbein and Dave Schantz their Deputies. While designated a wing, Col Terry Casteel was the Director of Operations, and later, Col Brian Maher, was assigned as a second deputy whose primary duty was to lead air force special operations forces in joint exercises and deployments for training. The squadron commanders were Lt Col Dave Reinholz in the 1st SOS; Lt Col Dennis Barnett in the 17th SOS; Lt Col Gene Correll in the 31st SOS at Osan; Lt Col Gordy Ettenson took command of the newly-created Operational Support Squadron; and Maj Craig Rith commanded the newly-re-designated 320th STS. On the Army side, LTC Bob Leicht commanded the 1st Battalion, 1st Group, with Majors Len Dodd, then Rob Zaccardi as XO, and Majors Mark Haselton and then Jim Mong as S-3.

However, even with co-location on the island, ‘tribal’ sentiments were a salient feature of human psychology, between ODAs of the same unit, aircrews, battalions and wings, and between Services. For instance, to non-aviation units and troops, crew rest is quite often a concern, the Catch 22 that must be accounted during unified or timely action. A Talon or Shadow would deliver an ODA to some distant shore, after which the aircrew would repair to a hotel, while the SF guys would billet with the indigenous unit with some soldiers complaining about ‘them damn prima donnas’. These attitudes were something that the collocation and resulting personal relationships could attack head on; as a wise old Colonel once told an uppity Army type, “If a pilot loses it ‘cuz he wasn’t physiologically ready, the guys in the back will die milliseconds after the aircrew if an aircraft augers in.” Good lesson, well learned.

On the other hand, the AFSOC guys brought quite a bit of capability to the joint mission and often complimented the Special Forces unique skills. There was one situation in Thailand during a nighttime airfield seizure of a mixed Thai Commando and 1st Battalion assault forces using 353rd Combat Talons. The ground commander adamantly refused to allow a special tactics team to control the airfield, stating that this was “a simple airfield operation” and well within the SF range of tactics to employ. The prudent air boss that day refused to yield, holding a “No Special Tactics--no Aircraft” position. As it turned out, the primary SF radioman was hurt in the airdrop and unable to continue the mission. Not only did the STS team control airfield operations, but they provided backup communication with the Thai forces and rendered medical care to the injured soldier. The joint lesson reinforced to all was that there is no such thing as a simple airfield operation, and to use all capability available—it’s a team sport!

The 1-1 and 353rd commanders decided it would be prudent to exchange hostages – liaisons – to each other. The


1-1 was fortunate to get superb special operators who helped it understand air planning and operations from both garrison and deployed locations. Captains Loannis Koskinas and ‘Otto’ Pernotto performed well in supporting both planning and operations, and one hopes their time in a ground unit served them well in their subsequent careers.

The 1-1 also enjoyed the assignment of a Special Operations Weather Team (SOWT), led by MSgt Mike Gilbert. They provided extraordinarily precise and timely support, and as true special operators, did anything else necessary to accomplish the missions on which they deployed with ODAs. In fact, in 1993, 1-1’s SOWT was named the best in the Air Force. By any measure – Army or Air Force, these airmen defined excellence in action.

Formal events – Dining ‘Ins’ and ‘Outs’ - were opportunities to recollect that many of the traditions spring from a common ancestry; there was many a night at the Kadena Club when the guys from both units and their ladies shone. And then there was the 1-1 ‘Field Dining In,’ to which the participants were trucked to and fro, and for good reason. Suffice it to say that while the proprietaries were observed, it was a good thing that camera phones hadn’t been invented yet.

Theater contingency exercises proved the wisdom of joint basing. The Ellipse series tested everyone, from planning through execution and recovery with as realistic a live fire ‘in extremis’ mission as the SOCPAC planners could imagine. Having the lift platforms on the same island as the ground force meant that the ‘tyranny of distance’ that is the Pacific Theater wasn’t as large a factor as in other situations; the aircraft wouldn’t have to travel from Point A to B to pick up an element, and then deliver it to Point C. The time savings could be significant, even life saving if the capability were ever called upon for an actual event. Staffs benefitted from being able to jointly plan the mission, enabled by the relationships and familiarities developed by working and playing together on Okinawa.

Similarly, Theater exercises and JCETs (Joint/Combined Exchange Training) provided numerous opportunities to plan, deploy, and execute routine training and operations in the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, Guam, and Korea. The 1-1 was also fortunate to work with the Paves of the 31st SOS – the Nomads of the Pacific - either in the ROK or when the aircraft occasionally travelled to Okinawa.

All told, an assignment on Okinawa provided an ideal laboratory to jointly learn, practice, enhance, and create answers to the challenges that were faced, all the while attacking the human and organizational issues that sometimes divide. 

About the Authors: The authors served together during the period from roughly 1992 to 1994.

Col (Retired) Brian Maher retired in 2000 as Commandant of the USAF Special Operations School after 30 years service. He continues to serve today as President, Joint Special Operations University, MacDill AFB, Florida.

Col (Retired) Bob Leicht retired in 2001 after 27 years of service in Infantry and Special Forces assignments in CONUS and Asia. He resides in Oak Ridge, Tennessee.



PAVE

LOWNS

Deploy to Jacobabad for Operation Enduring Freedom

By Darrel Whitcomb

*An excerpt from: On a Steel Horse I ride: A History of the MH-53
Pave Low Helicopters in War and Peace By: Darrel Whitcomb
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Hurlburt Field

In response to the horrible events of 9/11, President Bush decided to take decisive actions. As he was making the case for offensive operations in Afghanistan, operational deployment orders were streaming to US military units around the world for what had initially been labeled Operation Infinite Justice but had subsequently changed to Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). Initial planning directed that elements from the CIA and various special forces units would be inserted into that country from both the north and south. They would work closely with an armada of fighter and bomber aircraft to destroy al-Qaeda and its supporting Taliban allies in Afghanistan. The air campaign was being rapidly developed. A key component would be the inclusion of aviation elements capable of providing CSAR support from both the north and the south. Defense Secretary

Rumsfeld and the CJCS, Gen Hugh Shelton, were in agreement that the air campaign would not be initiated until CSAR forces were in place and capable of responding. Both feared that the initial capture of an American aircrew member could negatively impact support for the operation.

At the 20th SOS, the commander, Lt Col Michael Kingsley was ordered to prepare his initial six aircraft, six

crews, and a support package for deployment to an unspecified destination. He handed control of the squadron and remnants at Hurlburt to his operations officer, Lt Col Brad Webb, and on 21 September, he and his Airmen and an element from the 8th SOS departed Hurlburt on C-17s. Several hours later in the middle of the night, they landed at the British air base on Masirah Island, off the coast of Oman—the same airfield from which the ill-fated mission to Desert One had been launched over 21 years

prior. Kingsley knew the history of that event and the impact that it had had on special operations forces in general and Pave Low in particular.

He and his Airmen were greeted by the British troops who were conducting an exercise, the Omani base commander, and a representative from the American Embassy who informed Kingsley that he had no place to billet them. Kingsley spotted an empty warehouse and received permission to bed down his troops there in the sleeping bags that they had brought with them. The next day, he met a retired USAF chief master sergeant who was working for a local contract support company and had access to a large repository of equipment specifically pre-positioned for such operations. He allowed Kingsley and his small task force to draw tents and equipment that they used to set up as a separate camp. The facility steadily grew in size as more and more elements from the 16th SOW and other USAF units continuously arrived. De facto, Kingsley was the commander of a growing expeditionary force.

The US Navy also operated a small detachment of P-3s on the airfield, and Kingsley was able to work with them to establish a secure communications link. He utilized that link to contact Colonel Harmon, who was serving as the head of the special operations liaison element within the CAOC for the combined forces air component commander (CFACC), CENTCOM—Lt Gen Chuck Wald (USAF), located at Prince Sultan Air Base (PSAB) in Saudi Arabia. That headquarters would be responsible for conducting the air campaign in Afghanistan and its surrounding countries. Harmon gave Kingsley his operational tasking. “You guys are the CSAR force to start this mission in Enduring Freedom,” he explained to Kingsley through the secure telephone unit (STU)-III telephone. He added that Colonel Frank Kisner, the 16th SOG commander, would be deploying to an airfield in Uzbekistan to serve as the overall air component commander for special operations aviation forces deploying to the theater. Kisner would be receiving elements from the 160th SOAR and would directly support a large task force from the US Army 5th SFG, which was deploying to insert its ODAs

“

You guys are the
CSAR force . . .
in Enduring Freedom!

— Col Paul Harmon

”

into Afghanistan. Kisner would be Kingsley's direct, if distant, operational supervisor.

With that mission guidance, Kingsley put his aircrews to work to develop a CSAR plan for Afghanistan from Masirah Island. The maintenance crews built up the Pave Lows, and the flight crews flew some local sorties and practiced higher altitude refuelings with the 8th SOS MC-130Es required over the high mountains of Afghanistan. At the same time, as the senior USAF officer present, Kingsley had to deal with the multitude of problems inherent with the arrival of the ever-expanding USAF contingent at this remote base. His incessant requests for support from the British and Omanis quickly began to strain relations between him and his local counterparts. Fortunately, he had within his task force a cadre of excellent senior NCOs who effectively took over the running of what was literally growing into "Camp Kingsley." In one of his many STU-III telephone calls to Colonel Harmon, Kingsley implored him to work with the CFACC staff to get a USAF colonel to come to Masirah and take over as the de facto base commander so he could focus on his mission.

Kingsley had reason to be concerned about the operational tasking. Masirah was just too far from Afghanistan. Even with in-flight refueling, it would take several hours for his crews to reach those areas where aircrews might be shot down. He needed to get his forces closer to the action. At one point, General Wald visited Masirah and gave Kingsley a direct and stern admonition. "You've got CSAR in your hands. Don't screw this up." "Got it," Kingsley responded and then directly asked Wald for a USAF O-6 to take over as the Masirah base commander so he and his Airmen could tend to their operational assignment.

One of the options that Kingsley and Harmon considered was the possibility of placing at least two Pave Lows aboard a US Navy ship that could then move much closer to the Pakistani coast. An entire amphibious ready group with a USMC contingent was already operating in the Arabian Sea, and plans were developed to put the Pave Lows aboard the USS Peleliu (LHA 5). Kingsley was notified that permission had been obtained from the government of Pakistan for him to move his entire contingent to a combined civil/military airfield near Jacobabad in central Pakistan, just 200 nautical miles from the Afghani border. Kingsley ordered Maj Tom Dermody, serving as the 20th SOS-deployed operations officer, to lead the Pave Lows aboard the ship. While aboard, he was to be prepared to perform CSAR and figure out how to get the aircraft and crews to Jacobabad. Dermody complied and led four Pave Lows aboard the Peleliu. The remaining two Pave Lows at Masirah would proceed later to Jacobabad.

On 7 October, Kingsley loaded the rest of his task force aboard C-130s for the flight to Jacobabad. He had also been assigned Lt Col Steve Hadley, a USAF pilot-rated ophthalmologist, as his deputy. As they were leaving, Kingsley happily passed responsibility for the growing USAF complex at Masirah to a newly arrived USAF colonel and then turned his attention to what lay ahead.


The task force arrived at the airport at Jacobabad and parked their C-130s on a ramp at midfield in front of an old

hangar. The Pakistani officer greeting them said that they could use the hangar as a mass billet. That made sense from a security perspective. However, the hangar was old, dirty, and long unoccupied. In fact, it had birds and various critters—including a colony of bats up in the rafters—all of which had deposited sizeable droppings throughout the hangar. Additionally, the building had just one primitive latrine with four Arab-style toilets—literally just holes in the ground—for what was going to be a troop component of several hundred individuals. Kingsley had to put his troops to work to make the facility fit for habitation. Sergeant Brian Cessop was on one of the first crews to arrive. As bad as it was, though, he knew that really tired troops could sleep anywhere. He also knew that the Airmen arriving could handle such arrangements because they already knew how to respect one another's privacy.

Again, Kingsley was the senior USAF officer present. He met with the Pakistani base commander to facilitate the bed down of forces. The commander was responsible for overall base security and had a sizeable Pakistani army force for that. Additionally, Kingsley received a 250-person contingent of US Marines for an internal security perimeter directly around their immediate area.

Also on 7 October, 1st Lt Mike Holder led the four Pave Lows off the USS Peleliu to fly to Jacobabad. They were supposed to be joined by two MC-130s from Masirah for in-flight refueling. Unfortunately, the MC-130 crews received the wrong rendezvous coordinates and time. Consequently, the second two Pave Lows, commanded by Maj Tom Dermody and Captain Pereira, had to return to the ship. They and the two remaining aircraft would be flown to Jacobabad the next day.

To save fuel, Holder and the second aircraft commanded by 1st Lt Frank Lazzara had to land at a remote site in Pakistan until the MC-130s could join them. They then relaunched with only 700 pounds of fuel remaining and were able to take on the fuel they needed to fly directly to Jacobabad.

Just a few hours after Colonel Kingsley had arrived, Holder and Lazzara landed. As they shut down their engines, Kingsley was there to meet them. He knew that they had done their initial CSAR flight planning into Afghanistan. When he determined that the aircraft were mission ready, he directed the two crews to assume CSAR alert. He then called Col Paul Harmon at the CFACC CAOC and reported, "I have my crews here. We are ready to go." Harmon dutifully reported that status up the chain of command, and President Bush directed the air campaign to begin that night. Within hours B-1s, B-2s, and B-52s were joined by swarms of carrier-based F-14s and F-18s, and cruise missiles launched from US and British ships. They struck al-Qaeda and Taliban positions and forces across Afghanistan to avenge the dastardly events of 9/11 and initiate what has become our nation's long and on-going combat operations in that country. 

About the Author: Darrel Whitcomb is the author of: The Rescue of Bat 21 (1998), Combat Search and Rescue in Desert Storm (2006), Call Sign - DUSTOFF: A History of US Army Aeromedical Evacuation from Conception to Hurricane Katrina (2011), and On a Steel Horse I Ride: A History of the MH-53 Pave Low Helicopters in War and Peace (2011).

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The Year of the Dragon

Part I

By Lt Col Rob Masaitis

After seven years of sustained combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the sheer number of AC-130 gunship hours flown at heavy weights and in harsh desert environments far exceeded what had been originally planned for the aircraft's service life. Fleet wide airframe and center wing box refurbishments had to be moved earlier, and HQ AFSOC searched for an interim solution to take some of the strain off the fleet. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates directed HQ USSOCOM to fulfill the combat mission need for an interim gunship solution and field a multi-mission system with Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR); precision strike; and mobility capability to support special operations forces in the CENTCOM AOR. Such a move would also support the expansion of Special Forces Groups—already occurring to meet the demands of counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. The plan originally called for acquisition of the C-27J “Spartan” to be modified with a medium caliber side-firing weapon, small precision-guided weapons, advanced airborne sensors, and the electronic architecture to tie them all together. It was to be the AC-27J “Stinger II.”

Meeting the Combat Mission Needs Statement (CMNS) became USSOCOM's number one priority. However, in the DoD budget request for FY 2013-2017, the Air force cancelled the C-27J program as a cost-saving measure. In the absence of being able to purchase, modify, and field a new aircraft quickly enough to influence the current conflicts, the only practical option was to convert an aircraft that was already fielded.

As Admiral Olson testified before the House Armed Services Committee in early 2009: Special operations forces require a family of precision strike systems to address current and future static and mobile targets. The current inventory and capabilities of AC-130 “gunships” and smaller manned and unmanned platforms are insufficient to meet our need for guided munitions that minimize unintended deaths and damage. I intend to fill this capacity gap by installing a platform neutral Precision Strike Package on our existing MC-130W aircraft, and to field them as soon as practical. I will accept short term risk in SOF's aerial refueling fleet in order to do this quickly, recognizing that a future program will be required to address the resultant shortfall.

To best posture for the effort, USSOCOM leadership did something original: instead of relying on the command's established acquisition processes, they borrowed a page from the operator's playbook and built a mission-oriented Task Force specifically designed to field the new capability. In June, USSOCOM established the Joint Acquisition Task Force (JATF) Dragon Spear, an ad-hoc group of experienced acquisition and government team leads, all under the command of Colonel James "Hondo" Guerts, the JATF Commander. The JATF construct provided headquarters-level oversight, but was primarily focused on synchronizing and enabling five separate Combat Acquisition Detachments (CADs) at the different military service's product centers around the country. Each CAD would be responsible for multiple aspects of designing, manufacturing, integrating, or testing a portion of the new capability, and each CAD's team leader would report directly to the JATF.

The JATF's approach to meeting the accelerated timeline was to leverage mature technologies and existing government expertise to facilitate rapid integration with minimum risk. Thus, the JATF's practical function was to facilitate communications between the CADs, deconflict activities, and ensure the commander was constantly apprised

of performance and issues requiring command decision. The day-to-day coordination and progress tracking fell to the JATF program manager (PM), which in practice meant ensuring the CADs adhered to the JATF Commander's standing instructions:

- "Make it Happen" leadership at all levels with a sense of urgency
- Execute rapid delivery of capability without compromise
- Maximize acquisition and operational entrepreneurship
- Maximize synergies but do not become hostage to them
- Plan for future enhancements but not at the expense of on time delivery

Programmatically, events that would normally be accomplished in sequence would have to be done in parallel. Design, acquisition, modification, and test efforts would necessarily overlap. The key to staying on schedule would be the JATF's organizing and coordination function required to keep the disparate task force members informed, focused, and all moving out toward the correct objective.

USSOCOM's willingness to accept the temporary gap in helicopter air-refueling capability provided by the MC-130W fleet as the cost of fielding an interim gunship capability meant the 73rd Special Operations Squadron (SOS) and its sister training unit, the 551st SOS

would undergo radical transformations. Ironically, at the same time the MC-130W was selected to be converted into a weapons delivery platform, the 73rd SOS was preparing for its first deployment to Afghanistan...as a mobility unit. The squadron had been reactivated in 2006 to field the MC-130W Combat Spear, a replacement for the several MC-130s destroyed since 2001. The program was officially called the combat loss replacement (CLR, pronounced "clear" in the acquisitions staff vernacular). The squadron's original mission tasks included helicopter air refueling (HAR), airdrop, night vision goggle (NVG) low-level, infiltration/exfiltration of SOF, and forward area refueling (FARP).

As a result, Project Dragon Spear automatically inherited a healthy dose of mobility capabilities, four of which were retained in the program's concept of operations: FARP, NVG airland, infiltration/exfiltration, and High Altitude Low Opening (HALO) and High Altitude High Opening (HAHO) airdrops. The thinking went that a single aircraft with flexible capabilities could perform multiple missions for a supported SOF task force, and crews would be able to execute ISR, CAS, and mobility mission events during a single sortie when required. While the additional hardware would not be truly roll on/roll off, the palletized portions could be removed



Dragon Spear crew members deploy in support of contingency operations.

with a day's worth of work if required.

In the same month two MC-130Ws, three crews and their associated maintenance package deployed for the first time to Afghanistan, the first MC-130W to be modified with the precision strike package (PSP)—the suite of sensors, weapons and avionics that would form the heart of the Dragon Spear effort—was delivered to Eglin Air Force Base to undergo fit checks and start the modification process. “Dragon 1” would spend the better part of the coming year at Eglin AFB undergoing modification and testing in an iterative process that would come to be known amongst the team as “fly, fix, fly.” Meanwhile, the five personnel who would later form the core of the initial cadre team stayed behind to become systems experts and provide operators’ perspective to the developmental effort.

While the government-led team at Eglin (CAD-E) concurrently modified and tested the first prototype aircraft, the remainder of the CADs provided contract vehicles, components, and expertise. The Navy’s Surface Warfare Center, Dahlgren Division (CAD-D), better known for its years of work designing fire control systems for surface ships, had been involved with gunship fire control systems since Vietnam. CAD-D leveraged its pre-existing work with small precision-guided munitions and developed the Dragon Spear’s fire control architecture, including hardware and software, as well as tested all the system components in its systems integration lab. The engineering required to modify the existing aircraft structure and systems was performed by specialists from CAD-R, Warner Robins Air Logistics Center (WR-ALC). CAD-R even provided a team of aircraft battle-damage repair specialists for the purpose of modifying the aircraft to accommodate the side-firing 30mm cannon.

Other CADs ensured the necessary components were purchased and ready for the modification to the remainder of the fleet. The SOF Systems Program Office at Wright-Patterson AFB, CAD-W, as well as another Wright-Patterson-based acquisition group put contracts into place to procure enough avionics consoles, radios, sensors, guns, and integrating software to modify the

remaining 11 MC-130Ws. Under the direction of the JATF, the synchronized efforts of the CADs produced two fully combat-capable MC-130W Dragon Spear-modified aircraft in less than 10 months.

The first two aircraft and three qualified crews were to provide the supported SOF commander with a true multi-mission capability that included a portion of the unit’s previous mobility tasks, but also fulfill the theater requirement for additional armed over watch. With fewer weapons and a lower gross weight than existing AC-130s, the MC-130W could operate higher and for longer durations than its pure gunship counterparts. It employed high-definition sensor systems, numerous video uplink/downlink options, hard-mounted signals intelligence antennae, and the capacity to employ 10+ small, low-yield precision guided weapons. The first two prototypes, called CR-2D (“Capability Release 2, Deployable”) did not, however, include the 30mm gun.

Rapid acquisition does not automatically translate into rapid combat capability without thoughtful preparation and a focused training effort. The challenges to the operational squadron were numerous, but fell broadly into three categories: providing operator feedback during developmental test events; validating and documenting tactics, employment procedures, and regulatory guidance for the new systems; and learning the intricacies of the added mission sets (ISR, interdiction, and Close Air Support).

The 73rd SOS returned home from Afghanistan in September, and by then the rest of the initial cadre members had been selected. Several crewmembers found themselves right back on the road, temporary duty to Eglin to begin work figuring out how best to field the weapon system. The initial cadre instructors borrowed concepts, ideas, and documentation from communities already employing the particular weapons, systems, and mission set. Eight prior AC-130 instructors infused the cadre with weapons employment and CAS experience: four instructor/evaluator pilots, two Electronic Warfare Officers, one navigator, and one Fire



The MC-130W’s nose houses a AN/APN-241 Low Power Color weather/navigation Radar and a AN/AAQ-38 forward looking infrared (FLIR) pod in a chin turret.

Control Officer. The cadre spent four months between Eglin and Cannon AFB, learning the newly-configured aircraft systems, figuring out how best to use the new capabilities, and building a training plan for the rest of the squadron. They brought in outside experts to teach systems and missions. Their end goal was to produce “in-house” expertise, capable of teaching the rest of the squadron how to employ the weapons system in combat.

In March, the unit began sending its remaining crews through a mission conversion course to build a unit full of Dragon Spear qualified crews. The conversion course was a hybrid of systems, ISR TTP, and AC-130 mission academics, and was taught by a combined team of contractors and vendor-provided instructors. A specially-constructed mission training device (MTD) was part of the JATF’s acquisition strategy, and was built within eight months of the program start. The MTD provided the procedural training and conceptual understanding to reduce the number of required training flights—instructed by the active-duty initial cadre—to produce qualified crewmembers.

To aid the transition away from mobility, USSOCOM also provided funding for ISR and limited CAS full-mission profile training conducted by Fulcrum, LLC, a contract company started by former 160th SOAR and SOF operators. The training was structured to expose crewmembers to the mindset of the supported SOF units by taking them through tactical ground mission planning, preparation and execution, as well as to integrate the aircraft capabilities into those events. By July 2010, three full



A GBU-39/B Small Diameter Bomb shown mounted under the right wing of an MC-130W.

crews had completed Dragon Spear mission conversion as well as the Fulcrum-led course. They were deemed ready by the squadron commander and eagerly awaited the order to deploy.

While crews were undergoing conversion, so were the remaining aircraft. The L3 Corporation ran a speed line conversion facility at Waco, Texas, where three MC-130Ws underwent simultaneous modifications. Once operating at full speed, L3 completed one aircraft every month. The conversion line would eventually modify the entire fleet in 15 months from start to finish.

Before the squadron could deploy again with the new aircraft capabilities, an operational test and evaluation was needed to ensure the capabilities procured lived up to those specified in the requirements statement. The operational test event was conducted by the 18th Flight Test Squadron, and was innocuously titled the Limited User Test, or “LUT.” Executed in June, the LUT was designed to evaluate the multi-mission capabilities, but emphasize the new mission events: ISR, CAS, and interdiction. The test exposed weaknesses in training and equipment that needed to be remedied before the squadron could deploy the first two prototype aircraft. While the initial cadre felt the LUT was unfairly conducted, it served to focus both

the JATF and the operational squadron on the priority fixes needed before fielding the weapons system in combat.

For the remainder of summer, the squadron continued to prepare the initial three crews for deployment, though the location, date, and command and control arrangement would not be finalized until just weeks prior to departure. Crews used this time to hone their skills during CONUS training events and small exercises. During one such event, the squadron trained with 22nd Special Tactics Squadron JTACs, who, unbeknownst to all involved, would become a primary supported unit the following year. During a separate event, the squadron borrowed instructors from the USAF Weapons School to conduct advanced CAS training scenarios and provide “weapons school standard” feedback on crew performance. While the crews had come a long way, the Weapons School instructors demonstrated there was always room for improvement.

The squadron finally received the green light to deploy in October, and left CONUS for Joint Base Balad, Iraq on October 27, less than 16 months after the first aircraft was delivered to Eglin AFB to begin the modification process. Once in place, the deployed commander executed a deliberate spin-up plan: crews would first fly observation flights with

the U-model gunship crews of the 4th SOS. Next, 4th SOS crewmembers flew observation flights aboard the MC-130W. Finally, the MC-130W crews integrated into CAS/ISR stack with a U-model below them. The squadron occasionally transported passengers and cargo on nights without ISR or CAS requests.

Though the crews and new aircraft systems performed well, the inaugural deployment was not without problems. During one nighttime mission, the kevlar-reinforced gun “boot” pressure seal failed catastrophically, resulting in a rapid decompression and a shaken but ultimately unharmed flight engineer. The FE had come off the flight deck to investigate the high-pitched noise coming from near the gun boot (no gun was installed), which in retrospect turned out to be cargo compartment air escaping through a tear in the boot. The structural frame that functioned to keep the boot attached to the aircraft without a gun barrel stayed intact and prevented the FE from exiting the aircraft. The crew composed themselves and recovered to base, but the event prompted a fleet-wide restriction on pressurization until an interim solution could be designed.

Not everyone was happy to have the MC-130Ws in theater. Due to inherent systems limitations, after what was intended to be a 45-day combat evaluation, the MC-130W was never fully accepted as a replacement for the AC-130U in the ISR/CAS stack.

Though the deployed crews continued to support multiple SOF components, the ops tempo was relatively low. A review of the missions flown during the first two months shows the average sortie duration was just a little over three hours. By December, theater leadership was discussing alternative uses for the aircraft. The decision was made at the end of 2010 to move the MC-130Ws from Iraq to Afghanistan to provide multi-mission support to the CJSOTF’s village stability line of operations. US and coalition Special Forces established fixed outposts in remote villages where the Taliban previously had freedom of action. The partnered SOF units conducted Afghan-led daytime security patrols on foot through Taliban strongholds and tactical ground movements through neighboring

villages. These operations exposed the ground force to significant risk.


It took less than a month from the time the squadron arrived in Afghanistan until crews were called upon to deliver their first ordnance, expending precision munitions onto Taliban fighting positions. Soon after, crews found themselves supporting multiple teams for maximum duration missions, some longer than 10 hours, and primarily during the daytime. The squadron filled a critical vulnerability period for the SOF teams, who previously had to rely either on remotely-piloted aircraft with limited weapons payload, fast-jet CAS with limited station time, bomber CAS with limited situational awareness, or non-lethal ISR assets, such as the MC-12W. CJSOTF's only complaint was there weren't enough MC-130W's to cover all the units in the field requesting them.

Many of the operators found it easy to get absorbed in the new mission. High-definition color sensors meant crews could occasionally pick out improvised explosive device (IED) locations before a team on patrol approached the kill zone. Others gained great satisfaction delivering precision-guided weapons onto Taliban machine gun and sniper positions. While technically a multi-mission capable aircraft, ISR and CAS defined the Dragon Spear future.

The crews made a deliberate effort to educate and build rapport with the supported JTACs through pre-mission coordination, post-mission debrief phone calls, and hosting visits when the opportunity arose. Spending hours overhead isolated teams conducting dangerous daytime patrols made it easy to empathize with their JTAC counterparts, and the training workup proved essential to successful engagements. The primary mission quickly evolved into the protection of friendly forces—the essence of the mission in Afghanistan.

The deliberate steps for releasing precision-guided weapons developed during testing as well as the specific procedures adopted from the AC-130 community for keeping situational awareness of friendly forces and the training on the required 9-line information from the teams were key aspects to safely delivering ordnance. This was proven to be an essential component of the CAS mindset required during rapidly evolving troops-in-contact situations, where the crews felt added pressure to release weapons as quickly as possible.

Meanwhile, in the US, the JATF kept the aircraft conversion going, tracked the needed fixes and improvements coming in from combat after action reports, and planned the future capabilities of the weapons system. The team at CAD-E continued developing and testing the next crop of weapons, the GAU-23/A 30mm cannon and the GBU-39/B Small Diameter Bomb, as well as improved versions of the Griffin missile. At Cannon, the 73rd and 551st SOS produced Dragon Spear-qualified aircrew as fast as the competing demands of test flights, aircrew currency, and the never-ending series of technical interchange meetings/teleconferences allowed.

By the end of 2011, the MC-130W had passed its one-year mark in theater. Its effects on the battlefield had been measurable, even if not exactly what had been originally envisioned by the acquisition team. The squadron had supported 66 declared troops-in-contact events and numerous encounters with Taliban fighters with great success. Crews had provided over 2,400 hours of coverage to exposed and at-risk coalition forces, which translated into increased freedom of action and the expansion of their regions of influence. And up to that point, the MC-130Ws had augmented but not replaced the AC-130s...yet. 

About the Author: Lt Col Rob Masaitis is Operations Officer of the 73 Special Operations Squadron at Cannon AFB. He is currently in training converting to the U-28 aircraft.



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Air Commandos Support Education in Honduras: *The John Grove Memorial Fund*

By: Karen S. Hubbard, Founder, Bless the Children, Inc.

In 2006 it was history in the making. Now, six years later we count our blessings and give tribute to our dear friend Major John W. Grove (RET) and his friends of the Air Commandos. On behalf of the many impoverished children in the Mico Quemado mountain region of Honduras who have been helped by this partnership, we thank you.

In Honduras in 2006 our friend and partner, John Grove helped us establish the very first high school in the Mico Quemado mountain region, “Colegio John Grove Fuerzas Vivas”. Now it is his legacy and yours.

Bless the Children has been helping the poor of Honduras with programs in health, education and nutrition since 1995. John had been a partner for several years through his work with the McCoskrie Threshold Foundation wherein they collected and shipped three to four 40 ft. sea containers of medical equipment and supplies, building materials, school equipment, clothing and household goods each year to Bless the Children’s projects in Honduras. John was very familiar with our programs in the mountains where much of the clothing and household items from the shipments were distributed. John had also contributed funds for purchasing livestock including chickens, “an old goat”, as he called it, and a cow which he jovially named after his mother, Doris.

The high school project began when I had a telephone conversation with John after returning from Honduras. While in the mountains where we help support four elementary schools, many children came up to me asking me to help them further their education. There was no education available to them beyond the 6th grade. After telling John about the situation he said he would help. John’s very words were, “To help these people out of the cycle they are in, generations of poverty, an education is necessary. It is my plan to help with the



Our dear friend John Grove with a student at the JGHS – June 2007 – His legacy lives on in the children.

effort.” I told John that if he helped us build the school we would name it after him. We both laughed and that was exactly what happened. I called George Mealer (retired US military), our Director in Honduras and asked him to find a plot of land for the high school. George was very happy that with this teamwork we could provide an opportunity to help further the education of the children in the mountains. The project began and George went to work.

John donated the funds to purchase the property and to transform a small shack that was on the land into a three-room school building. From these humble beginnings the education of the first 40 high school students began. John continued to help the school by donating funds for the textbooks, school supplies and hiring a qualified teacher. For two years, John supported the school’s financial needs himself.

In December 2008, we suddenly lost John to a heart attack. We were personally devastated and threw ourselves into saving the school by immediately creating the program, the John Grove Memorial Fund, to support the effort. Learning of the possible plight of the school John’s friends, the loyal contingent of the Pave Low brothers and several other commandos joined forces to support the school. Every step of the way they have been key to this effort. Dave Freeman, Major, USAF (Retired) immediately came forward, picking up the baton after losing such a good friend. He had the heart and the great loyalty to John to take it upon himself to rally the troops around the call

to service to save the school. The motto, "Keeping the Spirit Alive," evolved. Everyone worked hard. Now six years later, the school continues to actively educate 35 to 42 children each year with an average of 6 to 8 graduates each year.

The John Grove High School is a three-room school with one teacher whom the children lovingly and respectfully call "Professor Oscar". The children are provided a high school education (by Honduran classification), agricultural classes, computer education, English language classes and physical education. The school is free of charge to children from the villages of Buenos Aires, Fuerzas Vivas, Las Crucitas One and Las Crucitas Two. The families in these villages are very poor. Many of the children are provided money for transportation from the farthest villages so that they can attend the high school. In addition, the children are provided their textbooks, school uniforms, school supplies, backpacks and a daily lunch. The teacher's salary and expenses are paid for as well as his transportation. John also donated the funds to purchase a motorcycle for the teacher to drive up and down the mountain every school day. (To get to the John Grove High School, one must travel 10 miles from the town of El Progreso and then another 10 miles of rugged mountainous turns up an ungraded dirt road. During the dry season this trip can take up to two hours.) In addition, the repairs on the motorcycle (which are many because of the treacherous road conditions) are paid for through the John Grove Memorial Fund.

The mountain children's education is also supported by paying for their transportation two days a week to go to the town of El Progreso for English classes and computer lessons at Bless the Children's English Language/Computer Lab. The lab was established especially for the purpose of educating poor children. The John Grove Memorial Fund sponsors the high school students to attend. In 2011 the lab was moved to a nicer and more convenient area of town which will be a great benefit to the children.

Because of John's friends and fellow Air Commandos as well as other donors, in 2010 we were able to

provide electricity for the John Grove High School. In March 2011 the school building was renovated including raising the roof for better ventilation, rotting wooden walls replaced with new siding and a new latrine was installed. The old cement floor was dug up and a new one was laid. The labor was provided by members of our home church in Richmond, Virginia while the building supplies were purchased with funding from the John Grove Memorial Fund donated by fellow Air Commandos.

In 2010 the students built cement steps from the road up through the property to the front of the school building. With this addition, the children no longer have to walk through mud to get to the school. Each year the school is provided funds for the students to plant and grow vegetables on the school property. A fence was built to protect the crops.

The Honduran government only provides education through the 6th grade. Poor children in rural communities have virtually no access to education beyond the 6th grade. Once they complete elementary school their education stops. Only 30% of all Honduran children go to High School. The John Grove High School is vital to the communities it serves.

Honduras is the second poorest country in Central America and is among the very poorest in all the Western Hemisphere. Its education indicators are among the lowest in Latin America and the Caribbean regions. Only 51% of registered children complete primary school. More than 90% of the students need to repeat grades. The average time it takes a child to finish first through sixth grade is 9.4 years. The average education level for a Honduran is the fourth grade.

One of the key reasons for such low statistics is that parents are trying desperately to ensure their families survive. Their poverty forces them to take their children out of school at a young age, usually permanently, to help maintain the family plot of land. Parents do not value education because they are living a hand-to-mouth life. They are struggling to provide the most basic necessities for their family and the concept of long-term planning for

the child's future through education is a luxury most can not afford.

"In our work during the past 17 years in Honduras we have learned first hand that when we invest in the children's education their parents gain a new appreciation for sending their children to school. After introducing a feeding program in the mountain schools attendance rates doubled; when school supplies are given parents are relieved of that expense and the children can attend school. In other situations too we have found that when we generate community involvement towards more children attending and staying in school, families work to ensure their children are in attendance. The John Grove High School gives the children and their families hope for more education and a better future." Rebecca Smith, Vice President, Bless the Children.

Participation in this project is valuable in that caring for poor children and their education creates more than just a promise of a better future; it helps to ensure that a better future will exist. The children of the mountains and future generations have no opportunity for any positive change in their lifestyles of hand-to-mouth existence without education. Education is the key to reducing poverty in Honduras.

In addition to helping Bless the Children establish the high school in the



George Mealer BTC director in Honduras with a JGHS graduate.

mountains, John helped us spearhead a program to teach poor children a trade. John donated funds to sponsor two young ladies (graduates of the John Grove High School) to go to cosmetology school in the town of El Progreso. In November 2008 the girls finished their first year of cosmetology at the top of their class. When I told John of their success he said "They are poor and from the mountains so they know they have to work harder". He was very proud of his girls. When John passed away just a month later, we were concerned if we'd be able to help the girls finish school. But never fear, our heroes, John's Air Commando friends came through by providing the funds for the girls to finish their second year with a certification in cosmetology. And they maintained their status at the top of their class.

"Give a man a fish, and he can eat for a day. But, if you teach a man to fish then he can feed himself for a lifetime." Bless the Children's programs are humanitarian in nature and yet our underlying goals are in establishing economically independent individuals and communities. According to George, "uneducated and unskilled laborers in Honduras have no opportunity for a future without extreme poverty." Over the past three years since John's passing, his Air Commando friends have also provided a two-year degree in cosmetology to another young lady who graduated from the John Grove High School. A young man who graduated with honors from the high school has just completed his first year of college, fully paid for by John's Air Commando friends. And a young single mother has just completed her first year of a two-year nursing training program. Again, her sponsorship is provided by one of John's

Air Commando friends.


But that's not all, in 2010 MTF (whom John was a board member) donated funds through their Christmas Wish program for Bless the Children in Honduras to purchase electrical tools including several sanders, saws, screwdrivers, a welder and sewing machines for a local trade school for poor children in the El Progreso area. They also donated funds for a washer and dryer for a school for handicapped children and toys for an orphanage. For the 2011 Christmas Wish program MTF donated funds to build playground equipment for 4 orphanages and 3 kindergartens as well as to provide nearly 300 toys for poor children in Honduras. This donation has brought joy to so many children.

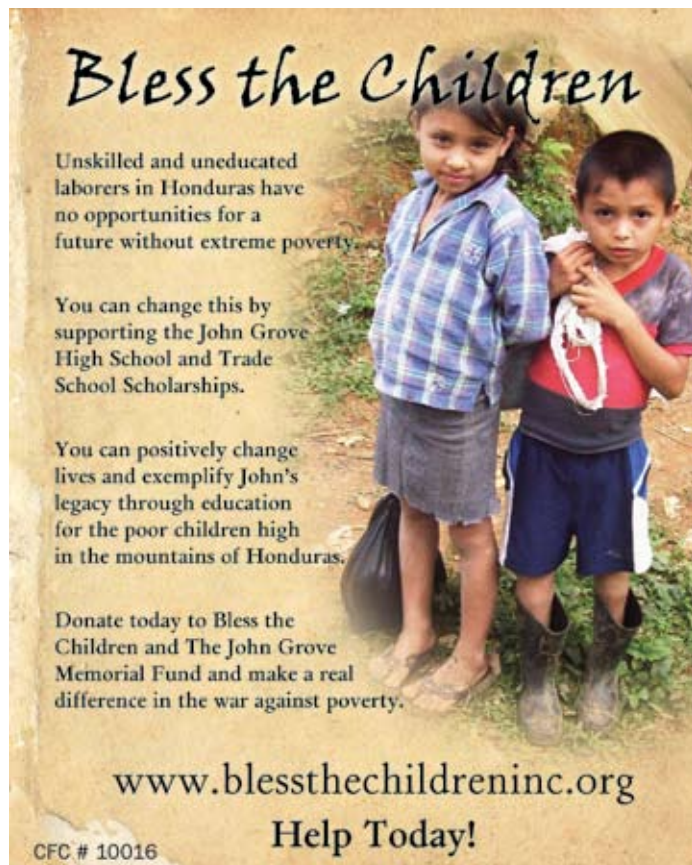
Together we have helped to dramatically change the lives of hundreds of poor children. We have the opportunity to positively change the lives and futures of many more desperate children in Honduras. Because of Bless the Children's dedication to utilizing all available resources including partners, community members and donated services we have found ways to greatly reduce the cost of projects. We take pride in our 21-year history of providing miracles to the poor through teamwork and partnerships. We have a commitment to excellence that is driven by integrity and is accomplished through teamwork. This program increases the quality of life and education for these poor children and their communities.

If you are supporting this program we thank you with all our hearts. You are making a profound difference in the lives of these children. We have come a long way together over the past few years and many children have a brighter future because of it. You are our heroes and you are "Keeping the Spirit Alive".

If you are not already supporting this program, we humbly ask on behalf of the children that you do. Funding is needed to replace the teacher's motorcycle this year and to make more improvements at the high school. We also need to provide a high school education to more children. On average, there are 400 to 450 children attending the elementary schools we support in the mountains. We are only able to serve up to 45 students at the high school due to size and having just one teacher. We need to do more. We also need to support more children for trade school. The need is so great for education in the region. Many children are waiting.

We ask that you contribute to this project because the children we serve in Honduras have no opportunities to create a better life than the ones we help to provide them. They are vulnerable and their future, without support, is grim.

Keeping the Spirit Alive is the motto of the John Grove Memorial Fund...the spirit of education, something John, the supporters of the John Grove Memorial Fund and we at Bless the Children believe in strongly. You are our Heroes. This is your legacy. Thank you sincerely for your support. 



Bless the Children

Unskilled and uneducated laborers in Honduras have no opportunities for a future without extreme poverty.

You can change this by supporting the John Grove High School and Trade School Scholarships.

You can positively change lives and exemplify John's legacy through education for the poor children high in the mountains of Honduras.

Donate today to Bless the Children and The John Grove Memorial Fund and make a real difference in the war against poverty.

www.blessthechildreninc.org

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 Indicate the John Grove Memorial Fund



Air Commando still says “Send Me”

By Randy O'Boyle

JGHS renovation team and students - proud of their school, hard work and new cement floor.

I'm bouncing along a Honduran mountain road, with ruts that have swallowed up whole vehicles, thinking this is just like being on the SEALS Mark V combat vehicle when they are trying to show off and torture the AF guy by knocking your spleen and liver together a thousand times while testing the resilience of the disks in your back. Of course George, our retired SF partner, 20 yrs my senior, with a gun on his lap, seems oblivious. I'm not listening as much as I should because I'm trying not to pee my pants or fuse my vertebrae. In fine Air Commando style, when George asks how I'm doing I say, "Great". Banana trees, coffee bushes and smiling faces amidst poverty, they all love George – he brings light to the dark places with the funds you great folks help provide.

It's almost just like another TDY in some forsaken place we've all been called to a million times. Except this wasn't a government TDY. No per diem, no cases of cervesas (well maybe a few six packs) and it turned out to be far from forsaken (economically stressed, but not forsaken). This trip proved to be certainly worth the journey. I was traveling up the mountain with my new best friend George to see what's been accomplished for the kids on the mountain by your generous donations. I wondered, why Honduras? Why me, Why us? Good questions, also asked by my wife – "you're not one of those old guys, with nothing to do" – it may have been the nicest thing she said to me in 2010. She's kinda right (still not giving lots of ground I guess, maybe that's why the couch and I are such pals). I've got my own kids, my own challenges, and a business to run, yet here I am – I guess I can't explain it other than to say I was called. By who – maybe Connelly calls me when

I'm sleeping, maybe it was John Sprouse, maybe I'm getting Alzheimer's. But probably it's the same person who got you to read this article?

I knew John Grove and he was no Jack Kennedy (ha ha, sorry), in fact he was more incredible. He was a "pirate" with a Cornell education and an enormous sense of humor. I have no real idea what got John to embark on his quest until I started talking to Rebecca and Karen from Bless the Children (BTC) and I went up the Mountain. John did what most of us sit in our chairs and think we should do before we look to see how the next game is going. But if you knew John, you know he never stopped until that final time. He changed a small part of the world and we are continuing to do so. John, he was a doer, in all things. Now many of us will laugh, because some of his doing maybe shouldn't have been done – but they sure sounded fun at the time. Maybe this was John's own penance – I never thought he was a particularly religious guy – which made his quest and the results of it all the more impressive.

If you are a religious person and you met these kids it's all the easier to make the case I suppose – but it doesn't take a religious person to see the goodness of this quest. I saw it everywhere I went on the mountain. There are many wonderful, decent, God-loving, joyful people living on the mountain. They are challenged everyday trying to feed their families. They pool their resources and do whatever they can to see their kids to school, feed them, and survive another day. As Karen from Bless the Children told me – when there is food at the schools (they pay to feed them lunch) the attendance is very high – what's that tell you? – yes, there is a need.



Professor Oscar with motor cycle John donated funds to purchase.

On my ride up the mountain with George, we stopped at small masonry schools handing out a few piñatas for the “kids day festivities” – stuffed with candy we brought – not US Halloween style, just hard candy, a few tootsie rolls, lollipops, etc. How thankful they were. At one school George and I just handed out candy to the kids because we were out of piñatas. In the US there would have been a mob, pushing, shoving – “gimme, gimme, gimme” – but not here. They were quiet, thankful, and orderly. I was reaching in to get another bag of candy when I saw one little 12-year old girl, late to the event, trying to find a way over to George, a little disappointment in her eyes at the potential of being too late. I smiled and handed her a few of the candies. Beaming, she said, ‘gracias’, and then walked away. The difference between the mountain kids and the city kids was evident. The city kids (including our own kids) would have circled back around and stood in line to get more (this would include most Pave Low crewmen (I should know)). This is why the parents are so desperate to keep their kids on the mountain as long as possible, while still giving them the hope of a better life through school.

After a few stops we got to the John Grove High School. It’s not impressive unless you put it in context. THE teacher is “Teacher of the Year” every year. He’s incredibly dedicated – we brought him a motor bike to ensure he can get over the mountain from where he lives. It’s so far to his own family he stays during the week and goes home on weekends. But he’s a beacon. He is great with the kids. The class room is open air, we need some technology for them, a satellite dish, some computers and the money to pay the bills – it wouldn’t be much. We need to enclose the other side and finish it off. Our teacher needs a place he can sleep when he stays overnight. I’m working on fixing the well. It won’t take much. The money we send gets spent judiciously. All told it isn’t that much to us, but it’s everything to those kids who want a better life, free from inability to feed their families. Most of these kids, if successful at the JGHS and able to continue with a few of BTC’s and

George’s other programs, and will get jobs but they won’t be far from the mountain. Their success breeds other successes.

The little villages we passed up and down the road are not the kind we might be used to seeing – it seems like every plot of land is owned. The houses are packed away from sight but they are all around. The only central spots are a few cinder block churches and a few school buildings. People travel up and down these brutal, and somewhat challenging, roads to the nearest market or to work. They are piled into the back of small pickup trucks for a fee. Some walk the 2 -5 miles up the hill, lugging milk, food and essentials with them. I could go on of course, but the image I want to leave you with are these are good, decent people we’re helping. Why? I suppose each of us has our own reasons. Some knew John and are helping in his honor – a one eyed pirate, with a lion’s heart, and bigger than life. Some of us help because as aging Air Commando’s we know the value of these simple, decent kind of people. And, having seen enough ugliness in the world that we are happy to spread a little sunshine where it is appreciated. I’m sure there’s also a few of us that probably think it might not be a bad thing to even out the ledger by gratuitously helping someone we’ll probably never meet.

This is a great project and worthy of your precious treasure and support. There is much good that has been done. Those containers John used to ship and with Dave Freeman’s help and many others we were able to continue for a while after John’s passing were worth gold. Everything we throw away is a treasure down there. I went to the prison with George to hand out a few things. He used to take the leftover stuffed animals from the containers to the prisoners so they could give them to their children when they visited. The old swing sets found their way onto the prison grounds so there could be a little quality time with their families. Everything found a wonderful home. We ought to find a way to send out our best scavengers and send a few more that way. Keep the faith. Keep helping, and when you hear the call just answer again, ‘Here I am, send me’. 🐦



Renovation on the school – BTC volunteer teaching JGHS student to drill.

Airman First Class William H. Pitsenbarger



*“That others may live”
the motto, the man.*

By Harry J. Bright

**AIR FORCE CROSS
MEDAL OF HONOR**

On 8 August 1965, Airman William H. Pitsenbarger arrived at Bien Hoa Air Base, near Saigon, South Vietnam with just over one year remaining on his four-year enlistment. He was a pararescue specialist (PJ) assigned to Detachment 6, 38th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron (ARRS). The helicopter they used for their missions was the HH-43F Kaman Huskie, more affectionately known as “Pedro.” The twin-rotor Pedro was capable of hovering in place over downed pilots and wounded soldiers to either extricate them with the jungle penetrator, a specialized lifting device designed to go through double canopy jungle and offer the survivors a seat for hoisting, or the Stokes litter (a body-shaped basket device made of light metal bar and chicken wire).

On 7 March 1966, a South Vietnamese soldier strayed into an old mine field while trying to extinguish a fire. He stepped on a land mine, lost a foot, and found himself surrounded by old, unstable mines. The call for help went

to Det 6 and Amn Pitsenbarger was part of the crew that flew out to rescue the soldier. Because of the active mine field, the helicopter could not land and there was a danger of setting off other mines from the rotor wash. Disregarding the danger of exploding another mine, “Pits” as Pitsenbarger was called, chose to ride the jungle penetrator down, grabbed the soldier, secured him to the penetrator, and then they were both lifted out of the mine field and back onto the helicopter. Once inside the Huskie, Pits administered medical care to the soldier and the rescue mission was completed without further incident. For his actions in this rescue, Amn Pitsenbarger was posthumously awarded the Airman’s Medal, the Vietnam Medal of Military Merit, and the Vietnam Gallantry Cross with Bronze Palm.

Operation Abilene

On 11 April 1966, Easter Monday, “Pits” had been in

country for 275 days. During those 9 months he had flown more than 300 rescue missions. The previous day, 10 April 1966, the US Army's 1st Infantry Division, the Big Red One, had gone into the jungle between Saigon and Vung Tua in search of enemy forces. Alpha, Bravo, and Charlie companies of the 1st ID's 2nd Battalion, 16th Infantry, were searching for portions of a 400-man Viet Cong battalion. Charlie Company became separated from the other two companies near Cam My due to the terrain. From time to time sniper fire was directed at the men of Charlie Company. An artillery round from the Army artillery emplacement firing in support of Operation Abilene landed short and exploded in the jungle canopy overhead Charlie Company (the jungle was a triple-canopy with three layers of growth, trees 100 to 150 feet tall, and shrubs up to 30 feet tall). Falling shrapnel killed 2 and wounded 12 other men of Charlie Company. Sgt. James Robinson, the platoon leader, had his men begin clearing a landing zone for the incoming medevac helicopters. At the same time the enemy started firing on Charlie Company, the enemy command post being well hidden in the dense jungle only yards away from where Charlie Company was working clearing an area for the landing zone.

Charlie Company's strength was normally 4 platoons of men totaling 291 soldiers. That day, the company strength was down to only 134 men, and they were completely cut off from the other 2 companies. Surrounded by a force of approximately 400 enemy soldiers firing machine guns, mortars, and small arms, Charlie Company's casualty count was rising rapidly. The situation was rapidly devolving into a massacre. Before the battle ended the next day, 106 of the 134 men would be wounded or killed, including the company medic. Army UH-1 'Dustoff' medevac helicopters could not land in the dense jungle foliage. The nearest landing site suitable for the Dustoff operations was about four miles away. The only hope for evacuating the wounded was with the Air Force Huskie choppers.

The 38th ARRS, received the call for help at 1507 hrs. By 1530 hrs, 2 Pedros were airborne and enroute to locate and assist Charlie Company. Pedro 97 was piloted by Capt. Ronald Bachman. The back-up helicopter, Pedro 73, was piloted by Capt. Harold Salem. The copilot was Maj. Maurice Kessler, the detachment commander. In the rear were A1C Gerald Hammond, the crew chief, and Amn Pitsenbarger. In approximately 30 minutes, the two helicopters arrived at Charlie Company's location. A hole in the jungle canopy large enough for the Stokes litter was located. Pedro 97 made the first casualty pick up and moved away to allow Pedro 73 to make the next pick up. After overcoming some problems, Pedro 73 moved away and Pedro 97 made one more pick up. Both helicopters then flew to the Army hospital at Binh Ba, about eight miles to the south.

When the Huskies returned to extricate more injured soldiers, Pitsenbarger volunteered to be put on the ground to help load the wounded onto the Stokes litter. The soldiers were having trouble properly securing their wounded comrades into the litter. Pitsenbarger's reasoning was that it would be much faster if an experienced airman was doing the loading, thus more people could be loaded onto the helicopters. Capt. Salem discussed this with the crew and agreed. Once on the

ground Pits was able to send people up on both the Stokes litter and the forest penetrator. He moved from one injured soldier to another, treating their wounds and triaging the casualties as best he could in order to get the injured quickly loaded onto the helicopters. The two Huskies made a total of five flights to Binh Ba, removing nine wounded when Pedro 73 returned to the location and started to lower the Stokes litter to Pits. The helicopter was hit by automatic weapons fire and began to sink slowly to the ground. The pilot was able to regain control before hitting any trees or the ground and A1C Hammond signaled Pits to grab onto the Stokes so they could pull him up and into the chopper. Pitsenbarger continuously waved them off, choosing to stay with the wounded. The Stokes litter was tangled in the trees so the pilot had to cut the cable and release the Stokes litter. Once free of the tangled Stokes litter, the pilot flew the helicopter out of the area, saved the aircraft, and slowly returned to Binh Ba. Viet Cong forces were firing mortar shells into Charlie Company and daylight was rapidly changing to darkness. Because of this, Pedro 93 was held at Binh Ba and told to wait for daylight before continuing the mission.

Pits was now stranded on the ground and in the heat of the battle. When the order came for the soldiers to move to another location, Pits cut tree saplings to make stretchers in order to move the wounded that could not walk. He then went from one dead soldier to another, gathering up all the weapons and ammunition clips he could carry and delivered them to the soldiers still in the fight. Pits was treating the wounded, returning enemy fire, and delivering ammunition to the men who had none. He did whatever was needed to help with the battle. On at least three different occasions, Pitsenbarger placed himself in direct line of enemy fire in order to move wounded American soldiers to cover and save their lives.

One of the wounded Pits helped was Army SGT Fred Navarro, a squad leader for Charlie 2/16. After treating SGT Navarro, Pits placed a dead soldier over SGT Navarro to protect him from getting hit again. Seven of Navarro's ten man squad had been killed. Later, after treating other wounded, Pits returned to SGT Navarro and took a defensive position there. They both were firing back at the enemy forces. At approximately 1930 hours, Amn Pitsenbarger stopped firing his M-16. After being wounded three times, the PJ had been killed. Once darkness fell, at about 2030 hours, American forces began firing artillery shells every fifteen seconds to a perimeter within 25 meters of Charlie Company's position. This was the only real defense they had—it lasted until 0700 the following morning.

At daybreak, Alpha and Bravo Companies readied themselves for a rescue attempt. Along with the Army's CH47 helicopters that arrived to extract Charlie Company was an Air Force Husky from Detachment 6. On that Husky was a friend of William Pitsenbarger, PJ Harry O'Berne. That Husky was the first to land, and O'Berne went from one soldier to another, treating the wounded and preparing them for medevac. When he came to an Army captain, he was told that one of his airmen was over there, dead. A1C William Pitsenbarger had been shot four times. Pits was still clutching his medical bag in one hand and his M-16 in the other.

The Medal Of Honor

The Air Force Cross

The Medal Of Honor



Operation Abilene with a HH-43F Kaman Huskie, more affectionately known as "Pedro."

Several days after the night of Pits' death, SGT Navarro gave the Air Force a taped statement of the actions of William Pitsenbarger. Capt Hal Salem, the pilot of Pedro 73, nominated Amn Pitsenbarger nominated for the Medal Of Honor. Col. Arthur Beall, the commander of the 3rd Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Group, submitted the nomination. Few survivors of that battle were able to make statements on Pits' behalf. The following is part of a letter from the Air Force Decorations Board, downgrading the Medal of Honor request to the Air Force Cross.

23 AUG 1966

Subject: Disapproval of Recommendation for Award of the Medal of Honor- A1C William H. Pitsenbarger

To: CINCPACAF (DPDP)

"The Secretary of the Air Force has directed that I transmit to you the decision of the Air Force Decorations Board concerning subject recommendation. The Board, which acts in behalf of the Secretary, is composed of senior officers of the Air Force Personnel Council who have had extensive staff and command experience. After full consideration of the recommendation, it was the decision of the Board that the services would be more appropriately recognized by award of the Air Force Cross (Posthumous)."

In September of 1966, Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. John P. McConnell presented A1C William H. Pitsenbarger's parents the Air Force Cross, posthumously. The Pentagon had agreed with Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. But for those that knew of the actions of Airman Pitsenbarger, this would never fully honor his memory. Fellow PJs and others would not give up the appeal for the upgrade. After many years of awards, buildings, streets, and memorials being created in

his name, the Air Force Sergeants Association started another appeal for the upgrade in 1998.

Three requirements must be met for an upgrade to the MOH. Those requirements are new information, recommendation from someone in the chain of command, and submission by a member of Congress. This started with the Airmen Memorial Museum documenting the events of April 11, 1966, in great detail from eyewitnesses. They obtained letters of support from seven surviving members of Charlie Company. Included were letters from two of the four platoon leaders. Former Lieutenant Johnny Libs wrote "I felt at the time, and still do, that Bill Pitsenbarger is one of the bravest men I have ever known."

The second requirement was satisfied when Hal Salem, the helicopter pilot, and Maj Gen (ret) Allison C. Brooks, made a new nomination for the Medal Of Honor to be awarded to Pitsenbarger. Gen. Brooks had been the commander of the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service. The first and second requirements for the upgrade had been satisfied. For the third requirement, in early 1999 Rep. John A. Boehner from Ohio, Pitsenbarger's home state, asked the Air Force to upgrade the award.

Hearing of the case from Pitsenbarger supporters, Secretary of the Air Force F. Whitten Peters took a special interest in the case. He and the Air Force Review Boards Agency director, Joe Lineberger, gave their full support to the appeal. This avoided any delay by the various offices of the Pentagon that would be involved in the review.

On December 8, 2000, 34 years and 8 months after Operation Abilene, the Medal Of Honor was finally awarded posthumously to A1C William H. Pitsenbarger at a ceremony at the Air Force Museum in Dayton Ohio. Secretary of the Air Force, F. Whitten Peters, presented the Medal of Honor to Pits' father, William F. Pitsenbarger. In attendance were over 300



PJs, the Air Force Chief of Staff, survivors of the battle, and a representative of Congress. As provided for by act of Congress for all MOH recipients, promotion to the next highest rank (Staff Sergeant) was also presented, posthumously.

A1C William H. Pitsenbarger, born July 8, 1944. Piqua Ohio. KIA April 11, 1966 near Cam My, Vietnam. Awarded the Medal Of Honor, December 8, 2000.

Lesser Known Facts

- William H. Pitsenbarger was 21 years old at the time of his death. He was his parents' only son.
- William Pitsenbarger became so interested in the medical field that he had applied to Arizona State for medical training in the nursing career field after completion of his Air Force enlistment.
- His name can be found on the Vietnam Wall, Panel 06E, Line 102
- The State of Ohio designated State Route 48 as the "U.S. Air Force Pararescue Memorial Highway" in honor of four Pararescue men from Ohio that had died in the line of duty. Sgt Jim Locker from Sidney; MSgt William McDaniel II, from Greenville; A1C James Pleiman of Russia; and A1C William Pitsenbarger of Piqua. Route 48 runs along Miami Memorial

Park Cemetery, north of Covington, Ohio. All four PJs are buried there. William H. Pitsenbarger is buried at plot 43-D, #2.

- The US Navy christened container ship T-AK 4638 in his honor. The MV A1C William H. Pitsenbarger is used to preposition Air Force ammunition at sea near potential war or contingency sites.
- Wright-Patterson AFB, OH, Beale AFB, CA, Spangdahlem Air Base, Germany, Randolph AFB, TX, and Sheppard AFB, TX, have all buildings or complexes named in honor of William H. Pitsenbarger.
- Piqua, Ohio named a recreational park in his honor.
- The AFJROTC Drill Team of Martinsburg High School, Martinsburg West Virginia, is known as the "Pitsenbarger Rifles".
- The Community College of the Air Force gives a \$500 scholarship to the top 5% of each graduation class enrolled in a Bachelor's Degree Program, in the honor of William H. Pitsenbarger.
- The Edison Community College of Piqua, Ohio gives scholarships to two full time students needing financial assistance, in the name of William H. Pitsenbarger.
- A1C Pitsenbarger was also awarded the Airman's Medal, four Air Medals, and the Purple Heart, posthumously, for actions on other missions in Vietnam.
- Airman Pitsenbarger was the first enlisted airman in history to receive the Air Force Cross, posthumously. He is the second of three Air Force enlisted airmen to receive the Medal of Honor. His medal is on display at Kirtland AFB, NM. 🇺🇸

Sources of information for this article:

- Congressional Medal of Honor Society
- World Wide Web, Home of Heroes
- Wikipedia
- Air Mobility Command Museum, Dover Delaware



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6 SOS

COMBAT AVIATION ADVISORS *REUNION* & ROTARY-WING STAND-DOWN CEREMONY



A 6th Special Operations Squadron reunion and stand-down ceremony for rotary-wing operations will be held on 28-30 September 2012 at Hurlburt Field, Florida.

Planned events:

- Rotary-wing stand-down ceremony
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- Aviation-foreign internal defense discussions
- Past successes and ideas on future direction
- BBQ and Family Day

The centerpiece of the weekend will be a ceremony terminating rotary-wing operations at the 6 SOS. The divestiture of the rotary-wing mission will mark the end of a proud chapter in the squadron, and all 6 SOS members, past and present, along with their families, are invited to attend.

For more information on the reunion or the ceremony,
please contact Diane Beck at diane.beck@hurlburt.af.mil

As my brothers and sisters before me, I am proud to step into history as a member of the Air Force Special Operations Command. I will walk with pride with my head held high, my heart and attitude will show my allegiance to God, country and comrades. When unable to walk another step, I will walk another mile. With freedom my goal, I will step into destiny with pride and the Air Force Special Operations Command.



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