

# AIR COMMANDO

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

# JOURNAL

**Eagle Claw  
Remembrances**

# COMBAT TALON

**Black Bird**



**Combat Talons  
in the Son Tay Raid**

**Fulton Recovery  
System (STARS)**

**Tharthar Palace  
Raid in Baghdad**

Fall 2013



Foreword by Norton A. Schwartz  
Gen (Ret) USAF, 19<sup>th</sup> Chief of Staff

Vol 2: Issue 4



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# FOREWORD

There are many Talon operators who are better equipped to pen an introduction to this issue of the *Air Commando Journal*. But, the editor was kind enough to approach me and of course I enthusiastically agreed to prepare this brief narrative. Allow me to assert at the outset that my service in our Air Force was profoundly influenced by that initial operational and four follow-on supervisory tours in the Special Operations community. Let no one suggest otherwise: had I not experienced the intensity of the mission, associated with an array of remarkable joint teammates, and earned a reputation as being a “SOF warrior,” I would never have had the opportunities to lead in our Air Force that I ultimately enjoyed.

I arrived at Hurlburt for Talon School in the fall of 1980 in the immediate aftermath of Honey Badger. I arrived as a reasonably well qualified C-130 tactical pilot. I knew the airplane (or so I thought) and basic airdrop tactics. How hard could this be? Well, it was hard as Bob Brenici, Jim Hobson or Jerry Uttaro can attest. The leadership of the 8th SOS accepted me, with some deserved reservations of course. The Talon business has always been a “show me” activity. At that time and hopefully for all time, performance trumped other considerations...but these notable Talon leaders and marvelous squadron-mates gave me a chance: Lee Hess, Tom Bradley, Ray Turczynski, Bob Meller, George Ferkes, Jerry Thigpen, Sam Galloway, Thom Beres, Bob Almanzar, Buff Underwood, Ray Doyle and Taco Sanchez among a number of others. How important it was to me not to disappoint them in any way.



I checked out and ultimately was assigned to Jerry Uttaro's crew...one of just five in those days. Jerry was also the crew commander for the initial mission and follow-on Credible Sport II effort to evaluate short take-off and landing and related avionics technologies that had matured under the earlier classified program, undertaken following the American Hostage rescue attempt in Iran. Ultimately, the leadership of that crew passed to me, with Sam Galloway, Chris Armstrong, Mike Dredla, Tom Daignault, Dee Newberry, Ken Bancroft and Dave Metherell and others as teammates.

The Credible Sport II crew worked for many months together at the Lockheed Marietta plant, evaluating and documenting those aspects of the Credible Sport I aircraft that should be incorporated in the then newly conceived Combat Talon II aircraft development program. Self-contained approach avionics was one such capability. I will never forget a Friday night sortie in the Sport aircraft inbound to Field 6 at 80 knots when all the instrumentation in the aircraft was “wired,” but looking outside on PVS-5s I apparently mumbled to myself: “This Doesn't Look Good”. Had we followed the internal approach guidance we would have landed well short. The moral of the story was that good instincts in the special operations aircraft cockpit will always be essential to managing the inherent risks of and accomplishing that very demanding (and rewarding) special operations aviation mission.

It is with genuine humility that I now defer to the authors of the accounts of Talon history you truly wish to read. I just close this introduction by expressing appreciation to all the Talon crews over the years, our “Heavy” program predecessors, those in each of the Talon squadrons (notwithstanding the focus on the 8th SOS above), and those who lost their lives (and in some cases their careers) in pursuing Talon excellence in special operations aviation. Only Talon families sacrificed more and are more deserving of our lasting respect.



NORTON A. SCHWARTZ  
General (Ret), USAF  
Former Chief of Staff



# CHINDIT CHATTER

This edition of *Air Commando Journal* (ACJ) focuses on the recently retired and highly venerable to the end, Combat Talon 1. More importantly, it highlights the men and women who flew and maintained it during its nearly 50 years of fantastic service to the nation. Perhaps its most memorable single mission occurred in April, 1980, in the wasteland of Iran at Desert One. The history of that mission, generally accepted as providing the impetus behind legislation that led to the creation of USSOCOM and AFSOC, is well known and documented. We asked some of the crewmembers to draft articles focusing not so much on the mechanics of carrying out that heroic feat, but on the visceral emotions and individual thoughts and highlights of making that historical attempt. The response was overwhelming and many of those articles are published here. We could not use all of them in this single edition or we would not have been able to discuss other capabilities and missions of this great machine. We will publish the remainder in future ACJs.



This obviously is not a complete history of the Talon 1. Rather, we looked at snippets through her history. One of our contributors, Col (Ret) Jerry Thigpen penned a very thorough look in *The Praetorian Starship, The Untold Story of the Combat Talon* Air University Press, Dec 2001. Readers should refer to it for a more in-depth look. Enjoy this edition of ACJ.



Dennis Barnett, Col, USAF (Ret)  
*ACA Vice President and Editor In Chief*



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## Summer 2013 ACJ Cover

The cover of our Summer edition elicited many to ask, "Who are those Air Commandos?" Thanks to Bob Dutton, the mystery has been solved. 50 years ago (from left to right) Ken Alnwick a RB-26 Navigator, Robert Dutton a B-26 Pilot, Fred Redeker a B-26 Navigator arrive in Saigon on 20 June 1963 on a C-135 for a 1st tour out of Bien Hoa with the 1st SOW, 6th Fighter Squadron.

## 606 SOS U-10

Reference page 49, Summer 2013 *Air Commando Journal*, there is no mention of the 606 SOS U-10s. I originally had orders to the 5th SOS, was subsequently transferred to the 606 SOS at Nakhon Phanom flying U-10s. We flew U-10s in Laos, Cambodia and Thailand. Leaflets, loudspeakers, infil/exfil, Hmong support, civic action, etc. Several links are available to provide background, I suggest the following site as a starting point: [www.aircommandoman.tripod.com](http://www.aircommandoman.tripod.com).

If anyone is interested I have several hundred slides of our aircraft and operations. I would appreciate it if the 606 SOS U-10 veterans could receive concurrent acknowledgement.

Thank you,  
Dennis Petersen, Member #5238

## Super!

The article Piston STOL and SOF (Summer 2013, Vol 2, Issue 3) is, in my opinion, a super example of the kind of contextual history that backs up the Air Commando story. Please convey to Dr. Hallion that I enjoyed reading it. I hope to see more of his work in the *Air Commando Journal* (ACJ).

Maj Scott E McIntosh, USAF  
USAFE HQ AIRCOM/A2

## Sir(s),

As always, thank you for bringing the organization to a new level! It has always been an honor to be an Air Commando, now it is a pleasure to share the great info you provide via the Journal, and the Reunions to build our force both professionally, and in comradeship. BZ!

My son-in-law is now an Air Commando at the 27th SOW, and it is wonderful to see that the Commando Spirit not only continues, but THRIVES! I am proud to see the community take care of my daughter and grandbabies while the Commandos continue to fight for freedom around the world.

Tim Hale, Goose 77/SG5  
Cabinet Secretary, NM Dept of Veterans Services

## Just a quick note to say,

GREAT summer issue of the *Air Commando Journal*! Just got it delivered the day after Labor Day... (Pony Express runs a little slow up here in Holt, FL). The article on John Grove was an eye opener, I knew a lot that he had done but there was still a lot to learn. Sam (Felix Sambogna), thanks for writing the article.

Jim Connors, Holt, FL

## Col Barnett,

Just want tell you what a great job the ACA Staff did on the Summer 2013 ACJ. Keep up the great work.

Sincerely,  
Gene Adcock , The Villages, FL

## Dick and Dennis,

I deeply regret I won't be able to attend this year's reunion. Tops a bad week losing Gen Vaught and Bagger both.

Best wishes for a great reunion and dinner. What an appropriate list of HOF honorees.

Reread my copy of Journal last night. You hit it out of the park. Thanks for the tribute to John Grove.

VR,  
Maj Gen (Ret) Robert Patterson

Submissions can be e-mailed to [info@aircommando.org](mailto: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. Thank you in advance for your interest in the *Air Commando Journal*.

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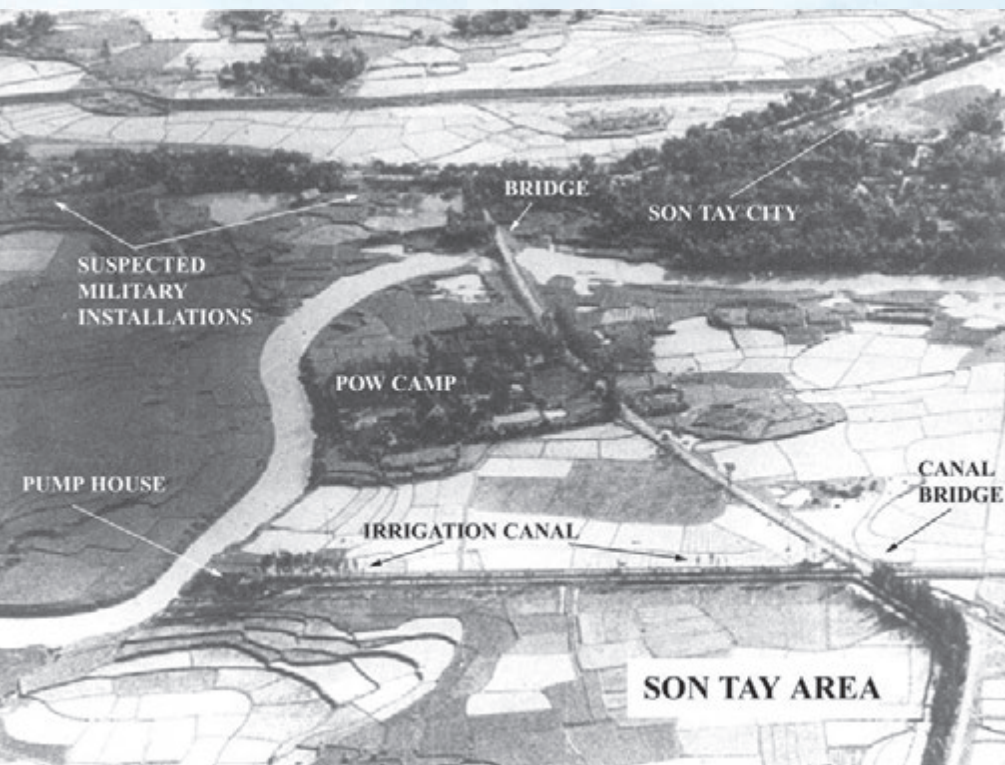




# COMBAT TALONS IN THE SON TAY RAID

ASSAULT FORMATION  
Daytime "Assault Formation"  
training with Cherry 01 leading  
HH-3 Banana and HH-53 Apples.

By Col (Ret) John Gargus



Our 1970 attempt to rescue American POWs from Son Tay in North Vietnam started out as a small joint ground and air special operation that grew into what, up to that time, became the largest nighttime air battle of the Vietnam War. To appreciate how this event evolved, we need to recall the aircraft capabilities of that day.

#### POW CAMP PHOTO

Low altitude Buffalo Hunter photo of the Son Tay POW Camp.



North Vietnam had the most formidable air defenses of that time and we were losing many aircraft in our daytime bombing missions. Son Tay POW camp was well inside this heavily defended air space, just 23 miles west of Hanoi. A daytime rescue attempt would have been suicidal. For the raid to succeed it had to be done at night with undetected intrusion into North Vietnamese airspace.

Stray Goose Combat Talons had been sneaking into North Vietnam supporting Military Assistance Command Vietnam – Studies and Observation Group (MACV-SOG) at night since the first Combat Spear aircraft (Pacific Combat Talons) had deployed to Southeast Asia (SEA) in 1966. For four years they had been executing a variety of clandestine missions on the periphery of this formidable defense umbrella without getting shot down. The Combat Talons had the sophisticated terrain following/terrain avoidance, navigation, and electronic countermeasures equipment,

**Stray Goose was the Air Force program to convert 14 C-130Es into an unconventional warfare capability for long range infiltration, resupply, and exfiltration. Delivered from 1966 to 67, these original Combat Talons were equipped with TF/TA radar, a defensive electronic warfare suite, and the Fulton surface-to-air recovery system.**

while the crews had the unique planning skills and experience to do this with a single aircraft employing terrain following tactics that avoided early warning radar detection. Together, these men and their machines always managed to accomplish their targeted goals before the enemy responded to their surprising presence in their well-defended and lethal air defense zones.

Our search and rescue capabilities during the 1960s and early 1970s were conducted by Jolly Green Giant helicopters and supporting Skyraider fighters. The Sikorsky HH-3E Jolly

Green Giants were being replaced by longer range, more powerful, and faster Super Jolly Green Giant HH-53s. The A-1E Skyraiders were not air refuelable, but they had sufficient long range with loitering endurance, and flew at speeds compatible with the helicopters and C-130s. Neither the helicopters nor the Skyraiders had the navigational capability or the electronic countermeasures needed to fly into enemy territory at night while avoiding detection by enemy radars. By themselves, they were not survivable in the formidable North Vietnamese airspace. To carry out a successful rescue, the entire force would have to get into North Vietnam undetected, find the Son Tay prison camp, rescue the prisoners, and then run for the hills toward Laos, out of the air defense hornets' nest they would surely provoke.

Consequently, the initial plan presumed that a Combat Talon MC-130 would have to fly as a pathfinder for the Jolly Greens and the Skyraiders. Because the joint task force planners wanted sufficient back-ups for everything, they opted for two Combat Talons. This way one could escort the helicopters at about 105 kts with the second escorting the Skyraiders at about 145 kts. This configuration would allow two formations flying at different airspeeds. That basic plan appeared simple enough.

Secrecy around this daring rescue plan was of utmost importance. A joint task force had to be assembled and trained in the USA and inserted into Southeast Asia for the execution of the rescue mission. The obvious place for training without causing any undue attention was Eglin AFB where experimentation of all kinds was always on-going. There was already a Rescue wing in place with Jolly Green Giants and HC-130 helicopter refuelers, and plenty of isolated training areas. So, that was where the Joint Contingency Task Group, headed by Brig Gen Leroy Manor, commander of the USAF Special Operations Force, assembled.

One Combat Talon, #64-0558, came from the Detachment 2 of the 1st Special Operations Wing at Pope AFB. The other Talon, #64-0523, was from the 15th Special Operations Squadron at Nha Trang, SVN. The Nha Trang aircraft was already in California at Lockheed

Air Service undergoing modification. The 15th SOS in Vietnam was simply informed that the on-going modification

**Heavy Chain aircraft were C-130Es that were used as testbeds for Combat Talon upgrades and modifications.**

needed more time to complete. The Combat Knife (stateside Combat Talons) Detachment from Pope AFB provided one volunteer crew and a complement of maintenance people. The Combat Arrow (European Combat Talons) squadron from Ramstein AB in Germany provided another full crew. The Heavy Chain unit from Norton AFB in California, that had the same navigation and electronic countermeasures in their special mission C-130s, was tasked to provide 12 maintenance personnel for this unique equipment. Pulling people and aircraft from a variety of units lessened the burden on the squadrons and on-going programs, and also helped minimize risks to operational security.

General Manor briefed selected members from both Talon crews who became the air operations planners. From the Pope AFB crew they were: Lt Col Albert (Friday) Blosch, aircraft commander; Capt Harry Pannill, first pilot; Maj John Gargus, navigator; and Lt Col Cecil Clark, EWO. The Ramstein AB crew was represented by aircraft commander Maj Irl (Leon) Franklin and navigator Capt Tom Stiles. Both Gargus and Clark had served as mission planners during their tours in Vietnam, and because they had flown as regular crew members, while also serving as their unit's mission planners, they were well experienced with the capabilities of North Vietnam's air defenses.

The very first thing they concluded was that the terrain following option for sneaking into North Vietnam was out. The AN/APQ-115 radar could not operate at speeds below 160 knots. At the slow speeds required to escort the helicopters, the radar could be used only for mapping and for terrain avoidance operations. In order to lead the extremely slow formation, the Talon would have to fly in a nose high attitude that would



#### STRIKE FORMATION

Daytime "Strike Formation" training with Cherry 02 leading A-1E Peaches.

exceed the antenna tilt even for the terrain avoidance flight. The navigators would have to compensate for these limitations, knowing that terrain at or slightly above the flight level and also dead ahead of the aircraft would not be seen by the radar, and that terrain to the left and right would be shown higher in relation to the aircraft's true horizon.

The limitations of the radar was not the biggest problem faced by the Combat Talons. The biggest problem was caused by the requirement to escort the helicopters at slow speeds. The Combat

planned as the sixth helicopter. Because of its smaller size, the Huey was intended to carry the team of raiders, call sign Blueboy, who would land inside the prison compound to help protect the POWs from the prison guards and give the other elements of the raider force time to breach the walls and take down the prison compound.

The maximum airspeed of that Huey at the anticipated altitudes and atmospheric conditions encountered in Southeast Asia was 87 knots. The only way the Huey could have been escorted to Son Tay was if it had drafted off the C-130's left wing. This was an emergency procedure for the faster Jolly Green Giants (used if needing to refuel single engine). During testing we proved that the Huey could draft off the MC-130 if the Herc flew at 105 knots with nose up 10 degrees and with 70% flaps. The Huey would drop down just aft of the left wing and flew at 5 degrees nose down attitude in order to stay in position and gain 20 knots of air speed. While possible, this was very difficult, strenuous, and hazardous flying that was finally abandoned after the first dress rehearsal. The 11 combat-ready men who were crammed inside of the small Huey for more than 3 hours also found they were in no shape to execute the swift attack needed to subdue the guards inside the prison.

We then had to consider inserting the Blueboy raiders by HH-3 with its 14 ft larger rotor diameter. The intelligence

analysis indicated that HH-3 would have to chop down some tree limbs as it landed inside of the prison courtyard. The good thing, though, was that HH-3 could cruise at 120 kts, it was air refuelable, and had room for the assault team, as well as the specialized equipment Capt Dick Meadows and the Blueboy force would need during that initial assault. Because we did not know until the very end if we would get an HH-3, we decided to stay with the 105 knot air speed for the helicopter formation. This uncertainty was caused by the programmed withdrawal of the few remaining rescue HH-3s from Da Nang to Okinawa. We had a UH-1H flown to Thailand in a C-141 as a possible back up if we ended up without an HH-3.

The Combat Talon that led the helicopter formation was called Cherry 1. The HH-53s were Apples 1 through 5. The HH-3 call sign was Banana. The whole Cherry 1 entourage, bringing in the ground troops, was the "Assault Formation". Extensive nighttime flying training with helicopters was necessary. At that time in the war, helicopter operations, including air refueling, were conducted only in the daytime. Night helicopter refueling was just entering its initial training phase at Eglin AFB. There were no night qualified HC-130 tanker crews in Southeast Asia. The raid would employ the first night operational refueling of helicopters.

Formation flying with the A-1E Skyraiders was not a problem. We flew at 145 knots. Our only problem was that we had to make very gentle heading changes to ensure that the Skyraiders in the V formation did not lose sight of our guiding wing tip lights that were visible only from above. Call sign for the Combat Talon leading the Skyraider "Strike Formation" was Cherry 02. Skyraiders were Peaches 1 through 5. They would be needed to provide air cover for the ground operation. The whole 13 aircraft ensemble was called "the Fruit Salad."

We tried hard to keep flight plans for each type of aircraft as simple as possible even though we had to orchestrate a pretty complex and carefully timed arrival into the objective area at different air speeds and altitudes. Everything depended on the open ended arrival

**Editor's comment: Reader's will note that Jerry Uttaro points out that the challenge of formation flying came up again ten years later when the Combat Talons preparing for Eagle Claw had to develop "new" formation flying procedures in order to lead the EC-130s into Iran.**

Talons had been designed for single-ship, covert penetration of defended enemy airspace. The radar was not designed to provide obstacle clearance for a formation.

The original plan called for five HH-53 helicopters to carry the raiding force in and also have room to extract the raiding force and the prisoners, some of whom were expected to be on litters. A Bell UH-1H Huey was originally



time for the Assault Formation into the objective area. Arrival times and altitude separations of others had to be based on that critical time. The assault time was based on the prison guard shift change that occurred regularly at 2:00 AM. The ideal attack should take place 15 minutes later when the new shift was just getting ready for a boring, monotonous night and the retiring one was getting to bed. We also needed to establish a critical distance from the prison where the formations would break up and each aircraft proceeded on its own to complete the mission. With all that, each aircraft would still have a very simple fixed flight plan to follow that would fit in into a more complex objective area scenario.

Both formations would fly the centerline of 6-mile wide corridor that gave them 1,000 ft. clearance above the terrain. This wide corridor was required due to the possibility of a helicopter formation break up, in which case the helicopters would spread out and the C-130 would make a circle coming back under the helicopters and reestablishing the original formation. If Cherry 1 lost an engine or could no longer continue leading the Assault Formation, Cherry 2 would abandon the Skyraiders and speed in to take over leading the helicopter formation. In order to do this, Cherry 2 had to be not more than 10 minutes away at the start of the dog-legged, low level flight and 2 minutes away at the initial point of entry into the Red and Black River Basin. Because the Assault Formation flew at 105 knots and the Strike Formation at 145 knots, the two routes had to cross each other a few times in order to keep them that close to each other without the faster Strike Formation overtaking the slower formation. Keeping this up in flight was a navigational challenge for the Strike Formation. No matter what kind of timing problem happened to the Assault Formation, Banana's arrival time at the prison was the time to which all had to adjust their objective area orbits and work.

There were many new innovations we planned to use in the raid. Some involved the Combat Talons. We were concerned about positive identification of our formation turning points to ensure

that we remained in the center of our corridors. To accomplish this, we had the only two existing experimental forward looking infrared instruments (FLIRs) installed at Lockheed Air Service in California on both aircraft. These two devices had been tried before by the Heavy Chain unit from Norton AFB. The FLIRs more than compensated for the mapping inadequacy of our terrain following radar. A 12x10 inch television screen turned the night imagery into day and we were able to see landmark features, especially those of rivers and creeks that were concealed by the jungle

mission planning. Lt Col Bud Neville, who had used the FLIR at Heavy Chain, was summoned from his assignment at the Tactical Airlift Center at Pope AFB to come to Florida to give us instructions on its use.

We also experimented with the first sets of night vision goggles that were being developed at Ft. Belvoir. They also turned night into day, but one had to move his head slowly because of excessive image smearing during scanning along the horizon. These early NVGs were unusable in the cockpit because of their tunnel vision and the



**LOW LEVEL ROUTE TO SON TAY**  
Routes of the "Fruit Salad Formations" over the mountains of North Vietnam showing exposure sector to Na San early warning radar.

foliage. Contrast between the water and foliage temperatures made them easily discernible. This new technology ensured that Cherry 01 would be able to see the Son Tay prison and guide its flight directly over the camp. The FLIR monitor was installed to the right of the navigator's console in the space occupied by one of the cockpit passenger seats. It required another navigator to operate it. Because the Ramstein crew came in with a spare navigator, there was no problem. A recently returned navigator from Nha Trang was brought in from Pope AFB. He was Capt Norman Mazurek, who was promptly added to the mission planning staff because of his recent work in

glare from the instrument panel lights. The six pairs of NVGs we got were used successfully, though, by the helicopter crews on the ground to scan the terrain around them for any enemy movement in their direction. Capt Jim McClam, the Army marshaling officer used the goggles to locate and identify the late returning team that provided security at the canal bridge. We were the first ones to use these prototype goggles in combat. They are now standard issue to our troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Next, we employed ground acquisition responder/interrogator (GAR/I) beacons on Banana and two other helicopters during formation break







ups. These transponders were normally used for ground target identification by bombing aircraft or on a drop zone to assist the navigator during blacked-out airdrops. The Talon's terrain following radar would trigger them to send back coded signals that would be displayed on our radar scopes.

We also turned our C-130s in to bombers. Normal napalm bombs dropped by fighters would spread out the jellied gasoline across a wide area, which only burned for a few minutes. As our plan called for no more than 30 minutes on the ground by the raider force, we needed a way to provide illumination and mark the holding points for the Skyraiders. By using a special cradle to deploy the napalm bombs and adding a drag chute, the napalm canisters landed in a confined area which concentrated the napalm. The resulting fire provided up to sixty foot high flames for at least an hour. We had no idea what kind of local electrical lighting would be available, so we brought in our own lighting that was very distinct from anything that might be burning on the ground that night. Also, our loadmasters dropped improvised battle simulators (large suitcase size Styrofoam boxes imbedded with firecrackers and cherry bombs) to make the enemy on the ground think that a much larger raiding force was attacking areas at some distance from the prison. In addition, we dropped improvised railroad flares on the hillsides to start conspicuously red burning fires that would have to be checked out by the confused enemy troops. The Skyraiders were equipped with electronic warfare equipment to jam the radio frequencies used by the MiG ground controllers. We wanted to create as much enemy confusion on the objective area as we

could deliver.

The two formations had to fly higher than the Talons normally flew when operating normally as a covert single-ship. We had to sacrifice some altitude to ensure that the width of the corridor we had to have would keep us at safe levels during possible formation break ups. The higher altitudes made it impossible to avoid detection by the North Vietnamese early warning radar at Na San, west of the infiltration route. During mission planning we calculated that our exposure would be just over four minutes for the Assault Formation and about three minutes for the Strike Formation. If everything went as planned, this exposure to the Na San radar would occur while the formations were between 39 and 26 minutes away from Son Tay. Our plan was to distract the radar operators by having the Navy simulate an attack against Hanoi and Haiphong by fighters from Task Force 77, which had three US aircraft carriers in the Gulf of Tonkin.

In addition, we had USAF F-4s and F 105s from Thailand converging on the air refueling tankers southwest of Na San, over Laos. The hope was that the combination of threatening fighter-bombers over North Vietnam's two most important cities and on the aerial tankers where they would normally begin assembling before attacking targets in the North, would be enough of a distraction to allow the Assault and the Strike Formations to slip past the Na San radar.

The F-4s were provided in case the North Vietnamese sent MiGs to intercept the formations and the F-105s were Wild Weasels used to suppress any surface-to-air missile (SAM) and



anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) sites. The F-4s and F-105s, were scheduled to be over Son Tay by the time we descended from the mountains into the Red and Black river valley basin. They were to remain on station, keeping the enemy defenses focused on their high altitude intrusions until we exited the valley about 45 minutes later. The Green Berets had trained to accomplish the prisoner rescue in under 30 minutes. Hopefully, high altitude jets would draw all the SAM and AAA fire and divert attention from the low level flyers.

The initial point for the Assault Formation was over a small dam on the Black River that was 10.9 miles away from the POW camp. At this point the helicopter formation would descend to 800 ft. and head straight for the camp. At 3.5 miles out, Cherry 01 would abandon the helicopter formation, accelerate and climb to its flare drop altitude of 1,500 ft. Two helicopters, Apples 04 and 05, would follow Cherry 01 as back-ups for the flare drop. Cherry 01 would drop four flares precisely over the compound and begin a slow teardrop turn dropping one battle simulator over a highway intersection, another one over a river bridge that any Vietnamese counterattack force would have to cross. This was followed by a napalm bomb drop between the ammo storage and SAM training school.

After the Assault Formation broke up, the helicopters would re-form in trail behind Apple 03, which served as the gunship. Banana and Apples 01 and 02 were to follow at reduced airspeeds, giving themselves enough separation for sequential landings. Apple 03 would fly over the camp, use its mini-guns to take out the guard towers and then attack the guard barracks before turning left to land in a nearby rice paddy. Banana would land inside of the courtyard as soon as Apple 03 was clear. Apple 01 and 02 would land outside the camp and secure the area.

Cherry 01 was planned to fly to the Laotian border from where it would provide direction finder steers for the Apples and Peaches returning from the raid. Apple 04 and 05 would land on the island in a large lake nearby and respond to the events as needed.

The Strike Formation was planned to reach the same initial point two minutes

behind the Assault Formation at 3,000 ft. This was also the initial orbiting altitude for the Skyraiders. They were to fly the final heading toward the flares over the camp on their own. Fire from the napalm bombs would provide them with orbital points once the flare light was gone. Cherry 02 would descend to 1,500 ft. and at 4 miles out execute a slow right hand turn back to the initial point. During the turn and continuing after, it would drop two fire simulators, two napalm bomb markers and several railroad flares. After crossing the initial point it was planned to establish an orbit and record all radio transmissions (relay any of them if necessary) and monitor exit of the raiding force across the Black River. Once everyone was out and across this river, Cherry 02 was to proceed to the Skyline TACAN and monitor everyone's exit toward Thailand.

In our early planning we hoped that we could get the US Navy from the Gulf of Tonkin to create a diversion for us so that the enemy's focus would be toward the east while we approached Son Tay from the west. We didn't get a commitment from the Navy for this until Gen Manor and Col. Simons visited the Task Force 77, in the Tonkin Gulf, two weeks before the raid. The aircraft carriers began launching aircraft at 1:00AM and provided a hell of a show with three attack tracks dropping flares around the port of Haiphong. Much to the Navy pilots' disappointment, they were restricted from dropping bombs on or near Hanoi and Haiphong.

Ten minutes after Banana landed inside the compound, Capt Meadows informed that there were no prisoners in Son Tay. Less than 30 minutes after the initial assault, all the raiders and the 5 HH-53s were airborne and heading back to Thailand. Cherry 02 was the last aircraft out of the objective area, jamming the North Vietnamese ground controller frequencies and being available to direct the rescue forces should any aircraft be shot down. Cherry 02 was prepared with three Fulton recovery kits on board.

Once the assault force had cleared the area, Cherry 02 departed west and followed. Over the Plain of Jars in northeast Laos, Cherry 02 picked up the survival beacons of the F-105 crew that had been hit by the SA-2 over Son

Tay. Col Blossch, the aircraft commander orbited over the Wild Weasel crew and began to run the Fulton recovery checklist. It proved to be unnecessary, though, as Apples 04 and 05 refueled from an HC-130 and returned to join Cherry 02 orbiting over the downed crewmen. At first light Apple 04 picked up the pilot and Apple 05 recovered the EWO. Cherry 02 and the two helicopters then returned to Udorn RTAFB.

We started in Florida planning air operations for 13 "Fruit Salad" raiding aircraft. We knew that more support aircraft would be added to the force once we got ready for the raid in Thailand. We didn't think that it would escalate to 57 Air Force aircraft that eventually participated in the raid. We never envisioned that the Navy would also respond by using 59 aircraft. Consequently, it turned out to be the biggest nighttime operation of the Vietnam War up to that time. Twenty SAMs were fired against the Navy. Sixteen against the USAF. That was also the biggest missile battle up to that time. We started it all believing that we could do it all with only 13 "Fruit Salad" aircraft lead by 2 Combat Talons.

Both Talons executed their well-rehearsed role flawlessly. If the POWs had not been relocated, our Jolly Green Giant helicopters would have returned with at least five dozen freed American POWs. In retrospect, the mission was not a disastrous failure because it resulted in improved treatment of our imprisoned colleagues. We can now say that we accomplished our secondary goal by sending a clear message to the North Vietnamese that we dared to conduct a rescue effort by invading their homeland and by letting our POWs know that they were not forgotten.



*About the Author: Col. (Ret) John Gargus served in all Combat Talon units, Spear, Knife and Arrow, mostly as an instructor navigator. While at Pope AFB he participated in flight testing of Mod 70 Talons and wrote needed manuals and training aids. In the 7th SOS he ran the Mod 70 ground school and with Cherry One pilot Bill Guenon checked out all their crews. He authored the book "Son Tay Raid - American POWs in Vietnam Were Not Forgotten" and was inducted into the ACA Hall of Fame in 2003.*



# STARS

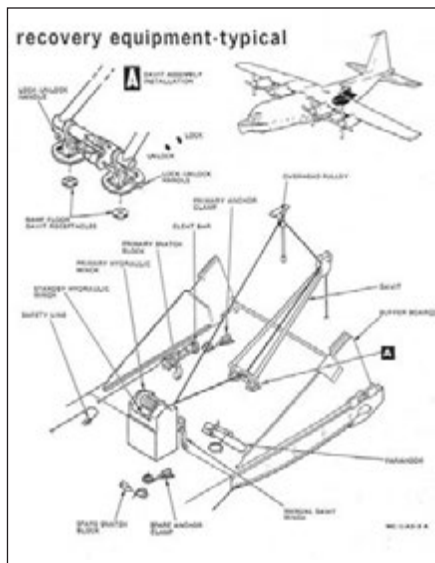
## MC-130E SURFACE-TO-AIR RECOVERY SYSTEM

*By Col (Ret) Jerry Thigpen*

**I**t was in August of 1978 when I first came to Hurlburt Field for initial checkout in the Combat Talon weapons system. I had spent a short tour flying EC-130Es in SEA followed by four long years in West Texas instructing mostly middle-easterners on how to fly the T-37 aircraft, and then two very challenging years in Air Force Recruiting Service. While in SEA, my path crossed with an odd looking C-130 aircraft that I later learned was a Combat Talon.

In 1977, I had taken a trip to the Military Personnel Center at Randolph AFB, Texas and had an assignment session with then Maj Jim Hobson, who was in charge of filling Air Force Special Operations personnel requirements. From that meeting, I secured my first assignment to the MC-130E. I would spend the remainder of my 30 year career in special operations flying this very special aircraft.

The Combat Talon was unique in



**Recovery Equipment-Typical Illustration Fulton 1.0**

its appearance as it sat on the Hurlburt Field flight line that afternoon in 1978. It was painted nearly all black with just a bit of dark green camouflage, and the nose of the aircraft had a distinctive radome with 'whiskers' folded back. From my first day at Hurlburt Field, I was totally enamored with the Combat Talon aircraft, its mission, and most of all, the people who flew and supported it. Of all the capabilities found in the MC-130E, perhaps the most famous was the Fulton Surface-to-Air Recovery System (STARS), famous in part because of an early James Bond movie featuring a Fulton recovery sequence and enhanced later by a John Wayne film titled, 'The Green Berets'. To be a part of a Fulton aircrew or a member of the ground party supporting the operation was something very special. To this day, I still have some of my most treasured 'war stories' associated with the Fulton recovery system. Over the years, two questions have repeatedly surfaced: What exactly is the Fulton recovery system? And how does it work? Taken primarily from my book titled, *The Praetorian STARShip: The Untold Story of the Combat Talon*, published by Air University Press in 2001, the following is a not-so-short answer to those two questions.

### What exactly is the Fulton recovery system?

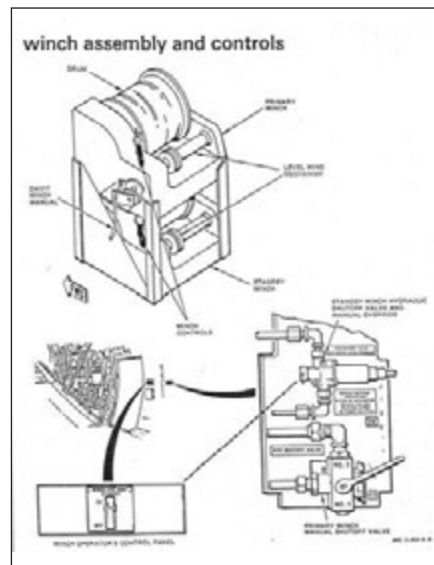
In 1965, the C-130E was the newest model aircraft in the C-130 series

and marked a significant increase in capability over the earlier C-130A and C-130B model aircraft. A removable tubular V yoke tested on the earlier model aircraft was redesigned by Lockheed engineers and transformed into a fully retractable, hydraulically operated unit mounted permanently on the nose of the aircraft. The configuration required redesign of the nose radome, which resulted in the characteristic nose found on early Combat Talons. Fulton equipment located in the cargo compartment was removable and installed on the aircraft dependent on mission tasking.

More than 75 USAF C-130 aircraft, including the 14 original E model Combat Talons, were eventually modified with the Fulton system. The Combat Talon Fulton system consisted of a yoke assembly, sky anchor, davit assembly, manual davit winch, two hydraulically operated winches, ramp air deflectors, ramp guards, parahooks, miscellaneous recovery equipment, recovery kits, control panels, and fending lines (See Recovery Equipment-Typical Illustration Fulton 1.0). The yoke assembly was designed to fold back along the fuselage of the aircraft when not required for Fulton operations. The sky anchor, located at the apex of the yoke, was mounted internally in the upper nose section of the aircraft. The davit assembly was a V-shaped boom mounted on the cargo ramp floor; it provided a means of raising the retrieved package over the aft end of the ramp and lowering it to the ramp. Two hydraulically operated winches were included in the Talon configuration. The winches were mounted, one above the other, on the cargo compartment floor just forward of the ramp hinge and were designed to retrieve the lift line after the sky anchor secured it to the nose of the aircraft (See Winch Assembly and Controls Illustration Fulton 1.1). The top winch was the primary winch, and the bottom winch was the standby. To decrease windblast around the ramp area during recovery operations with the ramp lowered, a buffer board was mounted on each side of the cargo ramp. Three protective guards were attached to the aft end of the ramp to provide protection for the lift line during recovery. The yoke was controlled from the yoke panel at

the pilot's station. The sky anchor was controlled from the sky anchor control box just forward of the left paratroop door. The winches were operated by control handles on the winch platform. To retrieve the line, a torpedo-shaped parahook was provided. The parahook, which closely resembled a conventional iron bomb, had a hook on each side and was used to hook and retrieve the lift line. The parahook was attached to a recovery line, which passed through a portable pulley assembly mounted above the ramp in the cargo compartment of the aircraft. After passing through the pulley assembly, the recovery line was attached to the standby winch. The parahook and recovery line were deployed to retrieve the lift line trajectory beneath the airplane and had to be maneuvered until the lift line was hooked. Airspeed of the aircraft directly affected the trajectory of the parahook, with higher airspeeds and heavier packages requiring a heavier parahook. One 30-pound and one 75-pound parahook were provided for lift-line recovery. When not in use, the parahooks were stowed in the retrieval equipment stowage box located on the aircraft.

Miscellaneous recovery equipment included in the Fulton recovery kit consisted of a cleat bar, portable pulley assembly, snatch blocks, pilot's hooks, anchor clamp, and personnel restraint harnesses. All the miscellaneous



**Winch Assembly and Controls Illustration Fulton 1.1**

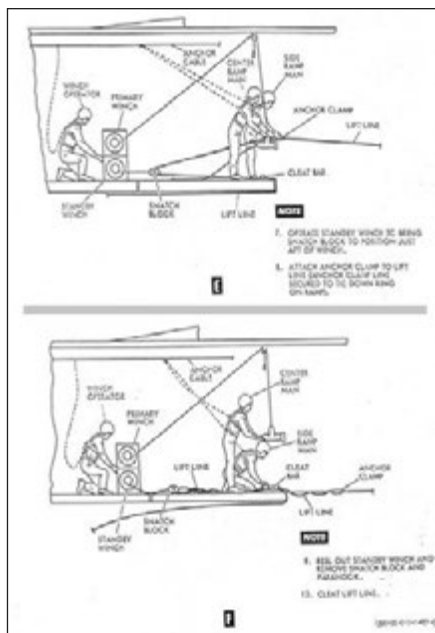


The anchor kit consisted of ground anchor stakes, anchor tie-lines, shovels, sledgehammers, and operating instructions for the use of the ground anchor equipment. Two types of ground anchor stakes were provided in the kit: one, with movable spades, was used for normal, compacted soil; the other, a shorter stake with a sharp spike, was used for ice and frozen ground. The ground anchor components were placed in the drop kit when forecast surface winds were more than approximately 20 knots and were air-dropped with the recovery

Two propeller guard cables, known as fending lines, were provided to protect the lift line from striking the propellers head-on in the event the pilot missed the line with the yoke. The fending lines also protected the pickup package from movement in the event of a miss. Early fending lines did not have cutter knives installed; rather, they relied on the aircraft's propeller to cut the line in case of a miss. These early fending lines placed the lift line in an optimum position so that it could be properly cut by the propeller without danger of having the line ingested into the engine. A later modification installed cutter knives on the fending line to cut the pickup line automatically if missed by the yoke. The fending lines were attached to the outboard end of each wing tip and to a point just aft of the sky anchor and were stowed in the cargo compartment when the airplane was not configured for recovery operations. An aerial sight was provided for the pilot to align the airplane with the lift line during lift-line engagement. The intercept sight was a portable optical instrument that attached to a mount located over the pilot's forward windshield. The sight contained a two-position toggle switch and a rheostat that controlled the brilliance of the reticule projected on the reflector plate. When the sight was not in use, it was stowed behind the pilot's seat.

## How does it work?

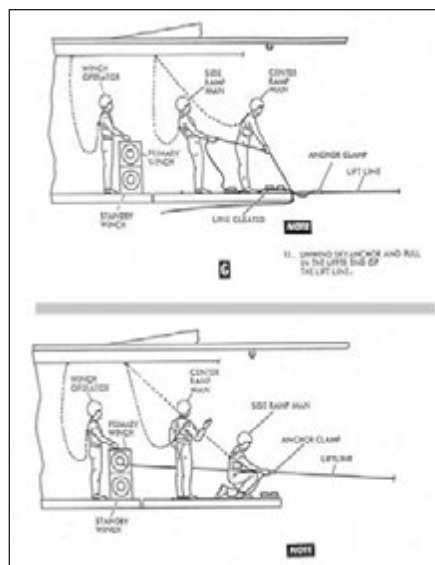




**Recovery - Sequence of Operation, Plates E and F Fulton 1.4**

available, the lift line was tied to the cleat bar (See Recovery - Sequence of Operation, Plates E and F Fulton 1.4).

The parahook, overhead pulley, primary winch drum, and the snatch block were removed and carried forward past the ramp hinge to clear the working area on the ramp. An empty drum was then installed on the primary winch (See Recovery - Sequence of Operation, Plate G Fulton 1.5). With the lift line positively locked to the aircraft by the cleat bar and the anchor clamp, the sky anchor

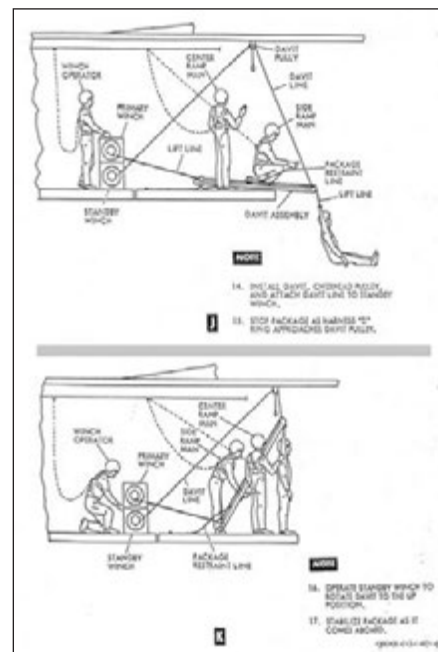


**Recovery - Sequence of Operation, Plate G Fulton 1.5**

was released. When the sky anchor had been released, the lift line was pulled through the sky anchor from the ramp (See Recovery - Sequence of Operation, Plate H Fulton 1.5). Once the loose end of the lift line was retrieved by the ramp crew, a knot was tied in the end of the lift line, and it was inserted into the detent on the primary winch drum. The slack lift line was then fed on to the drum. Just before the primary winch assumed the load, the lift line was untied from the cleat bar. The primary winch continued to reel in until the anchor clamp could be removed from the lift line. After the anchor clamp had been removed, the lift line was reeled in at maximum speed until the davit was ready to be installed, at which time the reel in was stopped. The davit was moved under the lift line, and the pip pin was installed over the line. The davit was locked to the ramp floor, and the lift line was forced under the forward davit roller. After the davit was installed and the lift line was forced under the roller, the primary winch was reengaged and operated at maximum speed until the package approached the ramp. Concurrently, the davit rotation line was attached to the standby winch. As the package neared the ramp, the primary winch was slowed gradually and was stopped when the package harness reached the davit roller (See Recovery - Sequence of Operation, Plate J Fulton 1.6). The standby winch was then reeled in to rotate the davit, and the ramp crew stabilized the package and attached the retention line to the D ring on the package harness. The primary winch was then reeled out, allowing the package to descend to the ramp with excess slack in the lift line. The package was then moved forward of the ramp hinge line where it could be safely detached from the lift line and retention line (See Recovery - Sequence of Operation, Plate K Fulton 1.6).

Multiple recoveries were possible and were usually made during training. Pilots, Flight Engineers, and Loadmasters all had semi-annual requirements, which were usually filled during 'Fulton Week' scheduled for two or three times a year. In the early years, requirements were so demanding that, according to Russ Darden, pilots became so proficient

that they challenged themselves by engaging the lift line without extending the yokes. There was about six inches to play with (three inches either side of dead center) where the lift line would enter the skyanchor hub resulting in normal operation of the system. When one crew just missed and had the lift line take off a pitot tube, Russ recalls an FCIF restricting STAR engagements only when the yokes were full extended.



**Recovery - Sequence of Operation, Plate K Fulton 1.6**

There are many other stories, some funny and some not so much, of adventures involving the STAR system. When we get together in the fall or in the spring for our Combat Talon reunions, these stories are told and retold. It has always amazed me how stories change over the years, but the basic facts remain the same.



*About the Author: Col (Ret) Jerry Thigpen spent 31 years in special operations, flew over 1000 combat hours in SEA and later served as the commander of the 8 SOS and the 353rd SOG. He was a primary aircrew participant during the workup and execution of Operation Eagle Claw and participated in post-Desert One activities during Operation Honey Badger. He authored the book "The Praetorian Starship: The Untold Story of the Combat Talon".*

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# OPERATION RICE BOWL: A Crewmember's Perspective

*By Col (Ret) Robert L. Brenci*



**Aircraft on the ramp at Masirah Island - preparing for the mission.**

It was just another bright, sunny afternoon in Masirah, an island just off the Arabian Peninsula. Combat Talon MC-130E (#64-0565) was taxiing out to begin a mission that would eventually contribute to a major evolution of US Air Force special operations. The aircraft commander taxied the aircraft into position on the runway. Preparing for takeoff, under strict radio silence, he asked the flight engineer, MSgt Bubba Almanzar for the usual takeoff data. "I don't have that information," he replied. "The flight manuals were left behind to lighten the load."

"What's takeoff speed?" queried the pilot.

The flight engineer answered, "Just check the engines at max power, release brakes and when we get to the end of the runway – rotate!"

There was really no need for the takeoff data, since the charts did not cover extreme weight of this bird—estimated at above 190,000 lbs. Maximum gross weight for the C-130 is 155,000 lbs, and even the Emergency War Plan (EWP) max gross weight is 175,000 lbs. So, we pushed the engines to the firewall, released the brakes, and rolled and rolled and rolled down the runway. Finally, the Combat Talon leapt into the air as the runway disappeared under the nose. It was 24 April 1980, and the attempt to rescue 49 hostages held by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard at the US Embassy in Tehran – Operation Eagle Claw – had begun.

The vast majority of current and former special operators are quite familiar with what happened that night at Desert One and the tragic immediate consequences and aftermath of the mission. So, this is not an attempt to recount those specifics, but rather to give the various perspectives from a few of the crewmembers who were involved. The intent is also to share information on some of the procedures and techniques during the five months of preparation for the mission.

The story of Eagle Claw actually began a few months before members of the Revolutionary Guard stormed the US Embassy in Tehran and held American citizens hostage (4 Nov 1979). In August of 1979, the annual Combat Talon Management Review (CTMR) conference was held at Hurlburt Field. During the CTMR, aircrew personnel from the 1st SOS at Kadena AB, Okinawa, presented a briefing on the feasibility of using night vision goggles (NVGs) for fixed wing, blacked-out approaches and landings. The conclusion drawn at the time was that although NVGs were successfully being used by helicopter crews, NVG landings were not possible with fixed wing aircraft.

In mid-November 1979, I was the Chief Pilot at the 8th SOS. Lt Col Les Smith, the Operations Officer, contacted me at Hurlburt Field via secure phone and told me to go to the command post for a secure call. Les had been dispatched to the Pentagon with two other mission

planners on the 16th of November and was busily working the difficult problem of infiltration and exfiltration routing for Operation Rice Bowl. This was the cover name for the mission to rescue the hostages from the embassy in Iran.

It may seem strange in today's age of advanced technology and widespread secure communications equipment, but in 1979 the command post was the only location on base that had a secure communications capability. Picture a telephone "booth" within the command center—that was it. During that phone call I was directed to select two crews and begin training that evening utilizing NVGs. Our task was to develop appropriate cockpit procedures for blacked-out landings. It had already been determined that the MC-130E Combat Talon was the appropriate airframe for this mission because it offered the combination of inflight refueling, terrain following radar, defensive countermeasures, and precision navigation capabilities needed for the operation. This was also before GPS systems were standard aircraft equipment, so we used a suction cup to mount an antenna for a commercial GPS to the window over the pilot's head. The Talon crews also had the necessary training in blacked-out, short field takeoffs and landings.

That first training sortie was an adventure. Initially, the copilot in the right seat, wearing NVGs, would fly the aircraft using visual cues and receiving

# Desert One Loadmaster Challenges

By CMSgt (Ret) Taco Sanchez

One of the major requirements we needed to solve was how to refuel the helicopters at Desert One. The USMC RH-53s were not equipped for aerial refueling.

In the months before the hostages were taken, we had finished testing the procedures to airdrop 5,000 lb blivet to the SEALs in order to refuel their boats in the open ocean. We found that two G-12D parachutes and a 15 ft extraction chute as a pilot chute worked well.

Col Foley and his Army team from the Airborne Board designed a system where a single C-130 could airdrop five blivets, each mounted on a 463L pallet, and a package of pumps, hoses, and filters. They determined that the G-11A parachute was better suited for the operation.

They attached the system to the airplane anchor cable via simultaneous release static lines. Although the experienced Talon loadmasters totally disagreed with this procedure, we were told they were the experts. Our tests using a single blivet showed the fuel could be delivered safely and accurately.

In January, three Talons deployed to Davis Monthan AFB for a full rehearsal. We rigged the aircraft for simultaneous release per the instructions from the Airborne Board, but asked to substitute intermediate release gates in order to separate the blivets as they exited the aircraft. The testers determined that a delay system was not required.

All three aircraft suffered damage during the airdrops. The left anchor cable was snapped in two at the troop doors on my aircraft. The second Talon had both aft anchor arms torn from the aircraft. Number 3 had one anchor cable torn in two at the wheel well and the other aft anchor cable arm ripped from the aircraft. And, most of the fuel blivets streamed into the ground and were destroyed.

After landing, we debriefed and the

airborne radar approach (ARA) directions from the navigators. The idea was for the aircraft commander in the left seat to take over control at the final portion of the approach and make the landing without using NVGs. After a few very hard landings by the initial trainees and problems with depth perception, we changed the procedures and the aircraft commander in the left seat began wearing the goggles. The copilot still flew the ARA on the instrument gauges down to the minimum approach altitude. Once the aircraft commander located the runway, he took over visually and landed the aircraft. This technique proved to be the safest and most sensible solution, and it became the standard procedure for all aircrews.

Due to the highly classified nature of Operation Rice Bowl, the initial cadre of operators and planners were required to maintain strict secrecy which resulted in some early difficulties. The NVGs available were the first generation PVS-5s. The only NVGs at Hurlburt Field were the property of the 20th SOS, our helicopter-flying, sister squadron. We managed to borrow a handful of sets from them, which raised a few eyebrows since a few months earlier it had been determined that NVGs were not compatible for fixed wing flight.

Also, the squadron commander, Lt Col Roland Guidry, had been recently assigned and was still going through the MC-130E upgrade program. Due to newness, he was unfamiliar with the crewmembers' individual skills. As he was not yet mission qualified he not been briefed on any of the Rice Bowl training plans or operational information. Fortunately, he accepted that we were "involved" in something and did not pursue the issue. The same situation was true for our wing vice commander, Col TWA Stuart, who had also not been briefed on the operation. The wing commander, Col Dick Dunwoody, had been dispatched to Guam with the AC-130 gunship contingent

(Editor's note: this deployment was covered by Lt Col Jim Lawrence in *Air Commando Journal*, Vol 1, Issue 4, Summer 2012).

This awkward situation was a problem during the first week of our training – we were flying at night and crew resting during the day, thus the pressure to maintain operational security (OPSEC) was considerable. I finally requested that the Pentagon brief my immediate bosses in order to relieve me from being questioned about our activities. Once this was accomplished, it made life easier for everyone.

As a group, we expected a deployment to somewhere at any moment, but once it was realized that training and planning would drag on, it became necessary to brief an increasing number of personnel. Amazingly, OPSEC was strictly maintained for the next five months.

At this point, I need to speak to the prevailing attitudes among all the crewmembers in the 8th SOS during this initial training phase. After a few days of unusual activity in the squadron, together with the headlines in the media, people were putting two and two together. As the acting ops officer, hardly a day went by without one or more individuals popping into my office to volunteer (and practically beg) to become involved with "whatever the hell is going on." And, of course, as time passed, the need to train more crews was recognized. Those initial two crews evolved over the next few months to become five crews.

Together with the three crews of the 1st SOS, under the command of Lt Col Ray Turczynski, this made up the final fixed wing contingent that would eventually fly the Eagle Claw mission in April. The desire to become involved in this operation, no matter the risk, was – and remains today – a hallmark of all special operations personnel.

Now, how did we go about training to develop helicopter refueling procedures? In order to



achieve the objective of refueling helicopters at a designated location, it was initially decided to airdrop 5,000 lb blivets loaded on pallets. The initial attempt of a one blivet drop was successful. Next, we needed to increase the load to five blivets in order to carry enough fuel for the rendezvous helicopters to complete the mission. In the early weeks of December 1979, training deployments to Arizona tested the concept and it was a failure. During a two-ship airdrop at Yuma, as the multiple pallets exited the aircraft, the acceleration forces caused spacing problems and the pallets literally piled up, resulting in parachute deployment failure. The fuel blivets ruptured upon ground impact. In order to remedy the problem, a gate system was devised by the loadmasters and this allowed enough spacing between the individual pallets to permit safe exit from the aircraft. Using this revised procedure, the next airdrop mission was successful. However, a new problem arose. Upon ground impact, the blivets were so far apart that it took significantly more time for the Army Ranger team already on the ground to move the blivets into position to refuel the helicopters. Air-dropping blivets proved to be a feasible approach to refuel the helicopters, but only as a last resort.

Another possible option was to land a C-130 with the required amount of fuel in bladders onboard the aircraft and use ground refueling equipment to refuel the helicopters. This would ensure the security of the fuel, however a suitable landing/rendezvous location would have to be located. The decision was made to use EC-130E aircraft from the airborne battlefield command, control, and communications squadron at Keesler AFB, MS, because they could be refueled inflight and had the necessary hardware in the cargo area to transport the fuel bladders. The expanded numbers of fixed wing assets provided the flexibility to

carry both the necessary fuel load and the required ground forces (Special Forces, 1/75 Rangers, and CCT) needed for mission success. Ultimately, airlanding the fuel and troops to rendezvous with USMC helicopters at the Desert One landing site became part of the final plan.

The months of December 1979 and January 1980 were taken up with numerous training deployments – typically on the weekends – to various locations in the US Southwest. We were developing and refining techniques for blacked-out NVG landings, inflight refueling without communications, airfield seizure, helicopter refueling, and infiltration and exfiltration procedures. This training continued into the spring and by now, the 1st SOS and 8th SOS crews were working closely on all exercises with the Special Forces, the Rangers, and the KC-135 and C-141 crews to develop Day One and Day Two procedures. The two-night plan had been approved in Washington.

In mid-April, three MC-130 and three EC-130 aircraft manned by 8th SOS crews were secretly deployed to Wadi Kena (called the Alpha location) in Egypt. Meanwhile, their sister unit, the 1st SOS, was departing Kadena AB with three MC-130s on a clandestine journey through Diego Garcia and final join-up at Wadi Kena. In preparation for Day One, the largest portion of the force transited the Red Sea and set up camp on Masirah Island, Oman. Operation Eagle Claw was about to commence.

As suggested at the start of this article, Dragon One's takeoff roll from the Masirah airfield was longer than usual. Rotation at the end of the runway. Silence! We staggered off and climbed at an unusually low rate due to the heavy gross weight of the aircraft. It was just past 1800 local time. There was no chatter in the cockpit as we leveled off at 1,000 feet. As we crossed the Gulf of Oman, it remained quiet – any engine problems at this point and we would be in trouble. Since it

loadmasters developed the intermediate gate system that is still used today for heavy CDS. The next night, the new procedures worked perfectly—all blivets were successfully delivered without incident.

The other problem we needed to solve was how to rapidly offload the Rangers and Combat Controllers with their vehicles and equipment.

In Nov 1979, there were no procedures for these tactics. We used standard airlift practices and equipment: 10,000 lb chains and locking devices to restrain the gun jeep on the ramp and 5,000 lb cargo straps for the motorcycles. We used the standard ground loading ramps for all onload and offload operations. At first our light configuration was to just dim the white lights. We then switched to red lights. Finally, we settled on just the flag unlock lights for the cargo door as the other lights produced too much light. No one in the cargo compartment was using NVGs when we first started.

During the flight the Rangers were seated on the bare floor or in the jeep. We flew for a week or so in this configuration which was both uncomfortable, as well as dangerous.

We taught the Rangers to remove the tie-down devices once the ramp was horizontal. During these operations we had numerous incidents of tie down devices and ground loading ramps being inadvertently thrown out of the aircraft or becoming unhooked. I spent a lot of time policing up equipment on the runway while avoiding other landing aircraft and the lost Rangers wandering around the airfield.

The loadmasters at Hurlburt got together and came up with an innovative solution to the rapid offload problem. We used 5,000 lb tie-down straps for all vehicles and attached the hook end to the aircraft and the ratchet end at the vehicle so that they stayed connected to the aircraft. We also drilled holes in the attaching points of the ground loading ramps and used safety ties to keep them in place.

To improve the conditions for the Rangers sitting on the floor for hours and hours during the infil, we procured old mattresses from DRMO and used tie-down straps to secure them. We called this the "Sealy configuration."

There is better equipment today, but the procedures we developed that winter are still being used today. 🐉



**“The Guts to Try” by James Dietz - US Army Ranger rapid off load at Desert One.**

was still daylight, numerous types of ships, boats and other sailing vessels were visible below. Finally, after an hour or so, everything seemed to be going as planned so the crew began to relax a bit, but we had plenty of surprises ahead.

En-route to Desert One, we flew a modified terrain following profile, varying from 1,000 to 3,000 feet above the ground. This allowed us to conserve precious fuel and also remain clear of the numerous Iranian observation towers that dotted the country. Official darkness came and all was operating smoothly for the next few hours. That’s when we entered the “haboob” – a severe type of dust storm peculiar to the Middle East and Africa. Would we be able to arrive at our landing zone in the clear? For a while, it seemed we might not be able to rendezvous with the helicopters at the Desert One landing site after all. About half an hour from destination, everyone breathed sighs of relief as we popped out into the clear. We were okay.

Five minutes from our objective, the infra-red (IR) landing lights which had been set up weeks before by the “Father of USAF Special Tactics,” Maj John Carney, were remotely switched on from the cockpit.

The covert, IR landing lights illuminated and we lined up for a runway clearing pass. On the road to the left of the landing zone, we spotted a truck. In order to remain unobserved, we maneuvered to stay well clear and behind the vehicle and it eventually moved out of sight. During our next attempt to make a surveillance pass, we were in too close and executed a “go-around.” The area seemed clear of obstacles. On the next pass, we

landed – an extremely hard landing that took my breath away – and possibly loosened some teeth. I was hoping that the MC-130E would remain in one piece at the completion of the landing roll. It was and I called “Go” – the signal for all the troops in the cargo compartment, Col Charlie Beckwith and his Special Forces and the 1/75th Ranger Battalion airfield seizure team, to exit the aircraft. Looking to my left from the cockpit, on the parallel dirt road, the roadblock team was stopping and surrounding a civilian bus. They quickly secured the vehicle and the 44 (terrified I’m sure) Iranian citizens on board.

As we slowly made a 180° degree turn with Dragon One, it confirmed that the nose wheel steering and nose gear were still intact and working properly. What we did not realize at that moment, was that although the aircraft itself was still flyable, the SATCOM secure communications capability had been disabled due to the hard landing. This would prove to be consequential later.

We taxied into position for the ensuing takeoff and departure down the Desert One “runway” in the opposite direction from which we had landed. Suddenly, directly ahead of us an immense fireball lit up the sky. An approaching truck had been observed on the road to the west and had been promptly destroyed with an anti-tank weapon. It was a fuel truck and the desert sky was lit up like a giant bonfire blaze. As the remaining fixed wing aircraft began to arrive in the landing area, there was initially some thought that the fireball was due to an aircraft crash. Quickly, they realized through secure

communications that Dragon One was safely on the deck.

Once all three Dragon birds (MC-130s) and the Republic (EC-130) tankers were safely on the ground and while awaiting the arrival of the RH-53s, a decision had to be made on how to handle the captured bus passengers. It was initially decided that the passengers would be flown out of the area and back to Masirah Island on board Dragon One. Preparations then began to load them up on the Talon. At this point, we had been on the ground for well over an hour so we were carefully monitoring our fuel status. Our requirement was to have enough fuel at takeoff to make it to a pre-determined rendezvous with a KC-135 tanker on the return flight. Before we could load the frightened civilians, however, a search of the cargo compartment was ordered. What now, I thought? Apparently, one of the two Iranian generals who had been accompanying the Special Forces team had suddenly realized he no longer had his loaded revolver in his possession. Perhaps it had been misplaced somewhere on our aircraft? A rapid search of the cargo compartment did not locate the weapon. Rather than risk having one of the Iranian civilians find the loaded pistol, and with time constraints reaching a critical phase, the plan changed to placing the passengers on another C-130. Dragon One was then cleared for takeoff – without the 44 Iranians.

As we rolled down the runway, all seemed normal. The copilot, Capt George Ferkes, was calling out the airspeed at 10 knot increments. At about 90 knots, the calls slowed – we were not going to achieve computed takeoff speed. Apparently, the consistency of the sand at Desert One was causing us to bog down and it felt as if we were glued to the surface. As the last IR landing light passed out of sight, and blackness enveloped us, I yanked the nose wheel off the ground and we staggered into the night.

Once airborne, we headed back to base, unaware that we did not have secure communications capability. As a result, we did not realize until we had landed that the Eagle Claw mission had been aborted because not enough helicopters had made it to the Desert One site to



# Secret Preparations for EAGLE CLAW


By Col (Ret) Tom Bradley

The MC-130Es (Combat Talon) assigned to the 7th Special Operations Squadron (SOS) were involved in the Desert One mission from the very beginning of 1980. From early January until mid-April, 3 of their 4 assigned aircraft deployed from their base at Rhein Main Air Base, Germany, to Wadi Kena Air Base, Egypt, designated Operating Location Alpha, (OLA), for the operation.

During that time, the necessary flight routes overflying France and Italy, transiting Naval Air Station Sigonella, and undetected and clandestine routes between Sigonella and Wadi Kena down adjoining air control boundaries between Greece and Northern Africa were investigated and developed. With 7th SOS personal representatives in Italian and Egyptian Ministry of Defense and Civil Aviation Administration headquarters, these flight routes were established for the future use for the positioning of the Air Force Component forces in Desert One.

Daily flights out of Wadi Kena from January through April, 1980, provided the signature for “normal” air operations required for operations security and communications security to cover future Desert One air activities.

One specific and extremely sensitive mission involved a 7th SOS Combat Talon equipped with the Fulton Surface to Air Recovery (STAR) system. On 30 March 1980, the aircraft was flown from Wadi Kena to Seeb International Airport in Northern Oman. On the night of 31 March, a joint CIA/USAF three-man team, consisting of Jim Rhyne, Bud McBroom and John Carney flew a civilian DHC-6 Twin Otter into central Iran to find and prepare the landing site for Phase 1 of Desert One. The Combat Talon and crew, with a small support team sat strip alert, for the possible rescue of these three in the event of mechanical or other problems involving the Twin Otter. The 7th SOS crew and aircraft were prepared to fly to the location in Iran, drop a two-man and a one-man STAR kit and recover the personnel back to Seeb.

The Twin Otter and crew safely returned to Seeb on the morning of 1 April having successfully completed this critical and clandestine mission, and the 7th SOS crew returned to Wadi Kena. 

accomplish the Day Two objective. What happened afterwards, the unfortunate catastrophe that occurred when Marine Helicopter 3, while repositioning to refuel, collided with Republic 4. Eight crewmembers were lost. Three Marines and five airmen made the ultimate sacrifice.

Considering that we had very nearly departed the scene with the bus passengers on board, a “what if” might be in order. What if the lost revolver had been recovered or located and the 44 Iranians had landed with us at Masirah? Would the United States have suddenly been involved in a political stalemate, accused of taking “hostages” to counter the 53 Americans held in Tehran? Would President Carter have allowed the immediate release of the Iranians with no concessions? Or would he have kept them as bargaining chips, demanding the release of the American hostages? Interesting questions to ponder, but no one will ever know the answers.

Enroute to Masirah Island, we rendezvoused with the KC-135 tanker using the no comms/blacked-out procedures. Since at that point we had enough fuel on board to safely recover, we elected not to hook up. At this point in the mission, I remember feeling completely exhausted. The adrenaline rush had long since worn off. This was obvious when we began our long descent for landing. The copilot, George, had to continually remind me that I was drifting left on final approach. We made an uneventful landing and taxied to our parking spot. It was early morning and still very dark on the ramp. Expecting to hear some loud exuberance from the ground personnel when the crew door opened – we were safely back and the next portion of the mission was to commence that evening – I was disappointed. It was very quiet and somber. It was then, when our loadmaster Duke Wiley announced in the cockpit that there had been a terrible accident.

We spent the next few hours awaiting the recovery of the remaining aircraft. When Republic

6, flown by Maj Jerry Uttaro arrived, they offloaded the injured survivors from Republic 4 and Helicopter 3. Lt Jeff Harrison with minor injuries appeared in shock. The severely burned radio operator, SSgt JJ Beyers, was in critical condition, as were the surviving helicopter crewmembers. It was dawn and the C-141 that had been dispatched to evacuate the injured was landing. The wounded personnel were quickly transferred and soon they were on their way to medical facilities in Europe.

Perhaps the most poignant moment that day was when the 8th SOS commander gathered the crews in our tent facility and had an obligatory roll call. As individuals responded with the standard “here” or “present” there was silence five times – Hal Lewis – Lyn McIntosh – Rick Bakke – Tom McMillan – Joel Mayo. Now everyone knew officially that we had lost some of our own. Tears flowed and sadness filled the room.

The next few days were a confusing blur of emotions. Our crew was the first to return stateside.

Col Tom Wicker, 1st SOW/DO and one of the on-scene commanders at Desert One, had accompanied us on Dragon One during the mission and was with us headed home. International headlines were rampant with stories of the failed rescue attempt and the catastrophic disaster. Flags were at half-mast and our nation mourned. A day after arriving back at Hurlburt Field, I had the unenviable task of accompanying Col Wicker on an official death notification. The saddest moment of all.



*About the Author: Col (Ret) Robert L. Brenzi, is the former commander of the 8th Special Operations Squadron. He is a graduate of the USAF Academy, class of 1963. In April 1980, he was aircraft commander of Dragon One, the lead aircraft for Operation Eagle Claw, the mission to free American hostages held in Iran. Although Rice Bowl/Eagle Claw was unsuccessful, the mission paved the way for future innovations and tremendous growth and expansion of USAF Special Operations Forces.*



Abandoned Soviet aircraft hangar at Wadi Kena, Egypt used as Ops Center for Eagle Claw.

# Reflections on Rice Bowl/Eagle Claw THE NIGHT TWO PLAN

*By (then) Capt Bob Meller*

It was April 1980, and my crew was at Wadi Kena, Egypt, waiting for word of how the Night One insertion of the joint task force (JTF) into the Desert One site was going. I asked Col Bob Pinard, 1st SOW Chief of Maintenance and my former 1st SOS squadron commander from Okinawa, where he had found a glass of bourbon on this arid Egyptian night. He stopped, turned to me and the majority of my crew and said, “Bob, here’s a toast to a successful mission. They’re airborne out of Masirah.” Operation Eagle Claw, after almost six months of intense, exciting and truly innovative preparation, had finally begun.

After a fitful night of attempted sleep, occasional trips to the JTF Command Center, I watched the sun rise out of our eastern exposure and noticed Maj Gen James Vaught’s radio operator walking out of the command post bunker with all his gear. He had bunked with our crew and was going to fly with us that second night as General Vaught’s radio operator. He would be an integral

part of the crew of Dragon One, the lead Combat Talon on Night Two. We would be the first in and the last out. I asked him why he was taking all his gear and he just kept walking towards a truck where Maj Jack Launder, one of my navigators, was standing. Jack yelled that Hal Lewis’ EC-130 refueler and a helicopter had had an accident, that there were eight dead, and the Night Two mission was scrubbed. We were in shock. Col Pinard came into the hangar and officially told us the tragic news that Hal, Lyn McIntosh, Rick Bakke, Tom McMillan, and Joel Mayo were dead. He also said that JJ Byers was in real bad shape and Jeff Harrison was injured. Even though I had lost close friends, my first thought was, “... we FAILED”.

## Introduction:

I was the Stan/Eval Chief and Combat Talon pilot for the 1st SOW in Nov 79. I was fortunate enough to be chosen as one of the first aircraft commanders for the Iran Hostage Rescue mission. It was,

without a doubt, the most rewarding, exhilarating, and fulfilling time in my entire 24-year, Air Force career. And, it was also the worst. The things we did and the procedures we developed, literally “on the fly,” are still being used today.

My crew, with the exception of my loadmasters TSgt Dave Chesser and SSgt Ron Thomas, who flew on Capt Russ Tharp’s aircraft, did not fly to Desert One on Night One. Our job was to lead the recovery of Special Forces, Rangers, and hostages on Night Two. The plan was for Chesser and Thomas to rejoin us at Wadi Kena for the Night Two mission.

To quote Charles Dickens, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...”

## Reflections/Observations:

Sympathetic aborts: In 1979 the Air Force was using peacetime operating procedures. The tankers back then belonged to the old Strategic Air Command (SAC), which is where the bombers, tankers, and strategic missiles



were assigned. Typically, when one tanker aborted from a training mission, the wingman did a “sympathetic” abort and did not take off either. One night over Texas during one of the first major rehearsals for the Night One mission, we experienced the effects of a sympathetic abort just as our flight of MC-130s approached the air refueling initial point. Without tankers we had to cancel the mission and the entire joint task force had to return to our starting point. Col Kyle had a serious talk with the SAC liaison who was not allowed to tell the tanker crews what the implications of their abort had caused, but from then on, there were no more sympathetic aborts. The tanker crews got the message very quickly and were always there whenever we needed them.

The boom operators did have little bit of learning curve doing things at low altitude, slower than they normally did with the bombers and fighters, no-communications, blacked-out, and with those big props spinning in the dark. One night, while we were on someone’s right wing, waiting our turn to refuel, we could see the “boomer” was having a difficult time plugging in. He was bouncing the probe all over the top of the Talon. Even during blacked-out refueling, we kept the slipway lights on, but he was having a real bad night. He finally plugged in, but the Talon crew got a bit scared that night. As the training and rehearsals progressed, though, the boomers got better and we never again had to worry about them not being able to make the contact.

**Blonde Flight:** Several Talons were winging west again, this time using a “Blonde” call sign. We reached the point where we needed to descend and enter low-level to the objective area. Blonde Lead called air traffic control to cancel our instrument flight rules (IFR) clearance. Once the controller cleared us to descend on that clear, dark night over the western US, he asked, “Where are all you blondes going tonight?” There was nothing but silence from the Blondes. “Well, be good,” he said.

**Field 6 Landing:** Before heading west one night, we had to pick up a load of Army Rangers at Eglin Auxiliary Field

#6, which is at Camp Rudder, the home of the Ranger training camp. Field #6 is about five minutes flying time from Hurlburt. It is also a relatively short runway with no navigation aids. As it is isolated, in the middle of the Eglin Range Complex, we had practiced NVG landings there. Despite all the new, innovative, and somewhat dangerous things we had been doing, the approach and landing that night was as intense as it gets.

It was truly a “dark and stormy night” and a lot was packed into those five minutes. We had a heavy aircraft and there were severe thunderstorms in the vicinity. We had the blackout curtain up in the cockpit to keep the front as dark as possible. Because of the short duration of the flight, we had not planned for an NVG landing. Also, we feared that a lightning flash at the worst moment would black out the PVS-5 goggles. The right navigator, Jack Launder, kept the KA-band radar expertly tuned to the field while the left navigator, Joe McBride, monitored the inertial navigation system. It was raining really hard and although it was a sweet approach, it made for a true white knuckle landing. All four Talons landed safely, picked up the soldiers, and the rest of that night’s training came off without a problem.

**Sniper Perch:** After the concept of airdropping the fuel blivets did not provide the results that the JTF leadership had hoped for (Editor’s note: See Bob Brenci and Taco Sanchez’ article, this edition.), the planners chose the airfield seizure option. Several isolated airstrips in the US’ southwestern desert areas were used to practice this option. The remote, Iranian airfield initially chosen as the helicopter refueling site, code named “Fez” had a small building at the end of the runway that needed immediate attention as the first aircraft rolled out. “Taco” Sanchez, one of our loadmasters, and a Ranger planner brainstormed the idea of removing the flight deck overhead escape hatch, installing a stabilized shooting seat, and lighting up the building and occupants on roll out. I suggested a side limiter to restrict shooting into the props. This idea was eventually unnecessary when the leadership decided to forego an

airfield seizure and use a suitable landing area in the Iranian desert for Night One, the Desert One site.

**Ranger Training:** An airfield seizure was always the plan for Night Two and had been for most of the planning for Night One, also. This meant continuous training with the Ranger company assigned to the mission. As an airfield seizure is an extremely complex operation, this required extensive ground training and a series of full mission profile rehearsals. We learned early on that following proper aircraft ground movement after landing was critical to the Rangers’ execution of their mission. Having the aircraft in the wrong parking location or getting out of sequence on the ground could and, unfortunately did, cause problems and injuries. One of the lessons we learned was to make John Carney’s combat controllers responsible for controlling aircraft movements on the ground. The Ranger task force commander, Col Williford, emphatically stressed to us that his Rangers would always get the job done, but we must put them in the correct place to do it.

**C-141 NVG Training:** Prior to Eagle Claw, there was no such thing as the Special Operations Low Level (SOLL) capability in Military Airlift Command’s (MAC) conventional force. I was sent to Charleston AFB, SC, to train the C-141 instructor crews in NVG landings. We began the flying training down at Hurlburt with a day sortie using heavily-tinted welding goggles instead of NVGs. We found that the images, minus the green speckled effect that occurred in the NVG light tubes, were strikingly similar to the actual NVG visuals. The C-141 crews were fully on board and eager to be a part of the mission. The MAC general that flew on the training sorties with us offered me a job as a C-5 pilot at Dover if I ever wanted to get into “Big MAC.” I declined.

**Breakfast at Norton:** After one major rehearsal, the Air Force contingent recovered at Norton AFB in the early morning hours. Since operational security was always a top priority for us, I was shocked to realize that I still had the mission plans and procedures still with me. Joe McBride looked on as I burned

the papers in the ashtray (yes, the Norton BOQs still had them in 1980). This proved to not be the best idea I ever had. The burning papers set off smoke alarms in the building and much swearing was heard up and down the hallway as we woke up the sleeping residents. Joe looked at me and said, "Well, Meller, I think it's time we go to the O Club for breakfast." The fire department emptied out our BOQ and the club had a large, angry crowd for breakfast. Joe and I never said a word—ever.

**Miracle on Ice:** The 1980 Winter Olympics were in full swing and we had a day off between mission rehearsals while flying out of Norton. One night we ended up in a San Bernardino watering hole to watch the young US hockey team get crushed again by the Soviet pros in the semi-final match. We watched in amazement as the "college boys" made good coach Herb Brooks' pre-game speech of "great moments are born from great opportunity," and stunned the Soviets and the world—US 4, USSR 3.

Two nights later, 24 Feb, as we were flying from Norton to Davis-Monthan AFB, AZ, the sector air traffic controller came on frequency and said, "US 4, Finland 2. We won the Gold." Everyone on the frequency that night let out a cheer.

At the time, none of us knew that Coach Brooks had delivered another prophetic speech. In the locker room, between the second and third periods of that final game, and the US losing 2-1 to the Finns, he emphatically told the team, "If you lose this game, you will take it with you to your graves!" How right he was, as we sadly found out two months later.

**Problems with the Sealy Configuration:** The forward urinals on our Herks had been removed to prevent under-deck corrosion. The only places left to relieve oneself were the two urinals on either side of the ramp area. With soldiers sleeping on the mattresses during the long sorties, what we called the "Sealy Configuration" (also described in Brenci and Sanchez' article), it was too easy to inadvertently step on someone in the course of heading back to the urinals. After more than one soldier had their face stepped on in the dark or worse should a buddy miss the urinal, the forward urinals

were reinstalled.

**Final Trip West, 11 – 15 Apr:** Although we didn't know it at the time, this was to be the last rehearsal. Departing Pope AFB on the evening of 11 Apr, I flew with a mixed, augmented crew to Norton AFB, CA. We arrived at the usual o' dark thirty and went into crew rest at a local Holiday Inn. With the sun coming up, most of us started our crew rest around the pool. We splashed around a bit and laughed at the very brave, MSgt Bubba Almanzar, a non-swimmer, going off the high dive. As the sun rose higher into the sky, like the creatures of the night that we were, we went to bed. We weren't supposed to fly until the next night but Col Kyle called me in the late afternoon and told me to round up the troops, get back out to Norton, and call him on the secure phone from the command post. He did tell me that we were flying to Laguna AAF in the beautiful Yuma Proving Grounds—the YPG as we called it. It was also where the Marine Corps and Navy helicopter crews were sequestered.

The unplanned "bag drag" was easier said than done. One SMSgt was unable to make it to the crew bus in time, so we decided to press on and get him later. While talking to Col Kyle on the "fuzzy" phone at the Norton Command Post (CP), I overheard the CP NCO tell the Duty Officer that he had an irate senior NCO at the Holiday Inn requesting a crew bus. The NCO also said that crew transport had already sent a bus to that location, but this guy had missed the bus. I respectfully intervened and asked the captain to please send another bus since that man was vital to the success of our mission. I offered some lame excuse why he missed the original bus. I guess the captain figured we were up to something special because he sent the bus. That future CMSgt and I laughed about that incident until the day he died. Back on the phone with Col Kyle again, he said the reason for the hurry-up call was the need to do a live Fulton recovery rehearsal the next night. The "package" for the Fulton recovery was supposed to be the combat controller, Maj John Carney. A finer man and warrior you will never find. (Editor's Note: John "Coach" Carney was inducted into the Air Commando Hall of Fame in 1995 and the USSOCOM Hall of Honor

in 2011) We didn't know that John was making a trip into Iran to set up the landing lights at Desert One.

We landed at Laguna AAF at about 2400 and were initially taken to the helicopter crews' assembly room which, I think, was on the bottom floor of their quarters. The first thing that I saw was one big Marine pilot throwing an equally big Marine pilot over the pool table. It made me wonder how long had these boys been away from civilization? The biggest Marine, Barney Oldfield, said



that the head Air Force guy, me, would have to arm-wrestle him if we wanted rooms in their "home." I sure didn't see that coming. Somehow I talked my way out of that one, but I think having a lone Air Force pilot, Capt Russ "Rotor" Rakip, among the group of helicopter pilots helped a bunch. We finally all got bedded down and I shared a room with Rotor.

The Fulton rehearsal did not go well. Poor John Carney had to sweat in the dark under the Fulton pick-up balloon for a long time as we orbited and tried to get a balky recovery winch to stop



bleeding hydraulic fluid. We could not fix the winch and finally had to scrub the recovery.

The next night we did the Night One landing rehearsal with my crew in a Talon leading Capt Russ Tharp, in an EC-130 refueler to a landing on Edwards AFB's dry lake bed runway. The route was not too long, but Russ' crew got a bit out of position while turning inbound to the landing area. After I landed, Tharp let us know he was having some trouble picking up

**"Combat Talon Pterodactyl" by Diane Dillon, donated to USAF Art Collection in 1978 as catalog number 1978.032, "Blackbird - C130".**



the landing area. I pointed my aircraft down final with landing lights on and directed him to fly to the left of a very well lit shuttle gantry on final. He found the landing zone and landed just a few minutes later than scheduled. We all noted that the dust was not a problem as we refueled the helicopters.

**The Mission is a Go:** Shortly after returning to Hurlburt from the desert landing rehearsal, all the crews were gathered together and told that the mission was a "Go." We were ecstatic. Col Tom Wicker, 1st SOW mission commander and our group

commander, set up the crew order for the mission. Although we had done the Night One rehearsal, my crew was not scheduled for the Night One insertion. We would be the only Talon crew left at Wadi Kena in Egypt. But, since we had done so much helicopter ground refueling, our loadmasters, TSgt Dave Chesser and SSgt Ron Thomas, were put on Tharp's EC-130 tanker crew for Night One. They would rejoin us at Wadi Kena for Night Two when we would have the honor of leading Night Two with the Task Force Commander, Maj Gen Vaught on board—first in and last out. This plan made perfect sense to me, but my crew and I still felt like we were missing out on part of the greatest experience of our military lives.

**Departure:** On 18 Apr, I flew a functional check flight (FCF) on my mission aircraft (#64-0572) just a few hours before our mass departure briefing. I did a complete FCF, to include shutdown and restart of all four engines, using both the fire handle (T-handle) and the engine condition lever. For the first time in my extensive history of doing FCFs, one of the engines would not shut down using one of the methods. We tried several times, but without any luck. The maintenance chief grounded the aircraft and I went to the mission briefing. The maintainers immediately got to work on the aircraft and another pilot flew a successful FCF. We had a good aircraft by the next day.

We were the last of the seven MC/EC mission aircraft to depart Hurlburt the night of 20 Apr. After 15.7 hours and a night refueling in bad weather over the North Atlantic, 64-0572 landed late in the evening of 21 Apr at Rhein-Main AB, Germany, ostensibly to participate in EUCOM's Flintlock exercise, just as our orders read.

The next night we flew to Sigonella AB, Sicily where we were met by my good friend, Maj Dave Blum from the 7th SOS. I just wanted a good flight plan to "Alpha," as we called Wadi Kena before we knew its name, without talking to anybody over the Med. We departed Sigonella AB and figured if we flew down the flight information region boundaries, the airspace boundaries between countries, and did not talk to

anybody, we would be golden. As 7th SOS MC-130s had been flying from Rhein-Main AB to Wadi Kena for months on routine "training missions" and an exercise with the Egyptians to establish a presence, we did not cause any notice.

Approaching the Egyptian coast, we had an engine problem and had to shut it down. We landed before dawn, the last mission aircraft to land at Wadi Kena. We ate breakfast at the chow hall on the southern end of the airfield where the vast majority of the support and tanker force were housed. The JTF Command Center, Rangers, AC-130 Spectre crews, and my crew were housed in bunkered hangars at the north end of the runway, near our aircraft. The other 1st SOW Night One crews had already departed for Masirah Island. Therefore, my crew and General Vaught's radioman were the sole occupants.

**Wadi Kena:** We landed at Wadi Kena about three hours after Bob Brenci's crew departed flying a 1st SOS Talon (#64-0565). Lewis, Tharp, and Uttaro in their EC-130s had departed earlier. Since the other three Night Two crews would not return to Wadi Kena until just prior to launch, we spent most of our few waking hours refining the Night Two plan and making sure the three 8th SOS MC-130s were in good flying shape. The fourth Night Two Talon would be a 1st SOS aircraft flown back to Wadi Kena from Masirah. Pilots Jerry Thigpen and Charlie Williamson configured the Night Two aircraft, Combat Talons #64-0562, #64-0567, and #64-0572 with IR lenses on the landing lights and covers on the rotating beacons—try that without a cherry picker in 100 degree heat. Flight engineer Tom Daigneault pre-flighted the aircraft and coordinated the maintenance action required for the next night's launch. Navigators Jack Launder and Joe McBride refined the low-level routes to Manzariyeh airfield, the Night Two landing site, and created mission folders for each crew. The electronic warfare officer, Capt Bill Robb, analyzed the route for threats and colored the maps appropriately. Our radio operator, TSgt John Mink, checked all aircraft radios and worked

with the JTF communications element refining procedures. Since my primary loadmasters were with Russ Tharp's crew for Night One and would not join us until shortly before the Night Two launch, SSgt Jim Chamness was added to my crew and ensured that all the cargo compartments were properly configured. Jerry Thigpen helped me prepare an in-depth briefing that covered all phases of the Night Two mission into the Manzariyeh airfield. Since the three Night One Talon crews would have little time between returning and launching for the Night Two mission, I planned to brief them immediately after their arrival back at Wadi Kena and provide them the mission folders containing essential mission details. There would be just enough time for questions before take-off. In addition to coordinating all the above, I worked with the Ranger commander on the ground operation/airfield seizure plan at Manzariyeh, an isolated airfield the former Shah of Iran had built to USAF standards for firepower demonstrations by his air force, about 50 miles west of Tehran. I even showed Capt Bubber Youngblood, the AC-130 pilot, where he could crash land his gunship on Manzariyeh after doing lethal damage in his target area.

**Hammer Time:** General Vaught's call sign throughout training was "Hammer." Either before or after (I forget which) the Night Two mission briefing, "Hammer" gave us a speech that was as impassioned than any I had ever heard—goose bumps and a desire to follow this man to Hell and back. I do remember one salient point that he "stressed" to the four Spectre crews and my Talon crew, there would be no in-flight

aborts on this mission. He told us to do whatever was necessary, but we had to get to the objective area. We were not to leave anybody in Iran. No Herb Brooks' Olympic hockey speech or Knute Rockne half-time speech could come close to Gen Vaught's masterpiece.

**25 April 1980:** The AC-130s and Rangers left Wadi Kena quickly after mission cancellation. Our crew, the last to arrive at Wadi Kena, volunteered to be the last to leave. We did what we could for the Night One guys as they came through Wadi Kena. That night we stayed up and got the generators going so they had hot water in the shower tent.

**Going Home:** On 28 Apr, good to our word, Combat Talon #64-0572 departed Wadi Kena—last in, last out. We flew home through Sigonella AB, Rhein-Main AB, and Goose Bay, Labrador, arriving at Hurlburt Field on 2 May. And, yes, my crew felt that we would take this to our graves. Sadly, Ron Thomas, Jack Launder and Joe McBride have.

Out of the ashes of Desert One, though, arose the "Phoenix" of the most lethal and respected Special Operations Force in the world.



*About the Author: Lt Col (Ret) Bob Meller was, at the time of Eagle Claw, 1 SOW Chief of MC-130 Stan/Eval. In 1977, while with 1SOS in Okinawa, he was project officer and first fully qualified C-130(MC-130E tail #64-0564) air refueling receiver pilot. He later was 23 AF/DOVA, 23AF OL-D Det 3/CC, 8SOS/DO during Desert Shield, and COMAFSACCENT in Saudi Arabia. He had 6300 flight hours with over 4000 in the MC-130E Combat Talon I.*

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# Operation Eagle Claw: Recollections & Reflections

By Col (Ret) Gerald "Jerry" Uttaro

## Introduction

First, I must introduce myself so some of this makes sense. When Operation Rice Bowl (the planning segment that culminated in Operation Eagle Claw) first began in late November 1979, I was selected by the 8th SOS's assistant operations officer, Lt Col Bob Brenzi, to be an aircraft commander of one of the first two aircrews that would begin training for a mission to rescue the US hostages that were held in the US embassy in Teheran, Iran, on 4 November 1979. So you can say that I was on the ground floor of the planning and tactics development for Operation Eagle Claw. I must inject here that many other individual crew members were also involved in the development and implementation of the tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) that were developed during Rice Bowl/Eagle Claw and subsequently became the standard operating procedures for special air operations.

During the actual mission I was the aircraft commander of Republic 06 (an EC-130, tail number 62-1818). Our mission was to haul fuel to the Desert One landing site and then refuel the RH-53D helicopters. My aircraft had a crew of 15 including myself. We were the last to land at Desert One and the last to take off after the tragic accident.

The rest of this catharsis is dedicated to those events that made a lasting impression on me during the lead up, preparation, and execution of the

actual mission. I must emphasize the fact that it has been over 30 years since most of these events took place, so I would ask the reader's indulgence if total accuracy is compromised in certain areas. I must admit that much of what I have read about the operation over the years seems foreign to me, almost to the point that I feel the authors are talking about a completely different mission. So I hope not to stray too far from what I actually know and REMEMBER!

## Recollections and Reflections

■ A few months before the Iranian students took the hostages, I attended the Combat Talon Management Review (CTMR) conducted by Maj Lee Hess. These annual conferences brought together representatives from US and overseas Combat Talon units, their respective headquarters, and industry representatives to discuss the Combat Talon weapon system, training, tactics, and logistics support. During one of the CTMR formal presentations, Capt Marty Jubelt, who would later command one of the Talons during the hostage rescue mission, reported that after numerous tests it was concluded that an MC-130 could not be landed using night vision goggles (NVGs). He stated that, in fact, it had been determined that no fixed wing aircraft could safely land using the NVGs currently available at the time.

■ The day after the hostages were taken the squadron was having a holiday

party and a TV was on broadcasting news about the American embassy personnel being taken hostage in Iran. Lt Col Roland Guidry, 8th SOS squadron commander, made the statement that he wondered if we would get involved.

■ On 21 November, we picked up the 12 sets of PVS-5 NVGs from the 20th SOS, at the time flying CH-3Es and UH-1Ns. The squadron commander never asked a question, although we did have to hand receipt over \$200,000 worth of NVGs, and he volunteered to send over his Stan/Eval pilot to show us how to use them.

■ Once we got the NVGs, we tried to use them in the 8th SOS's very small and totally blacked out briefing room. We could not see through the NVGs. We didn't realize until the pilot from the 20th SOS showed up that these first generation NVGs needed some ambient light in order to see with them. He showed us the basic operation of the NVGs and how to focus them for near and far vision. Lt Col Brenzi and three of us flew the first Combat Talon night sortie about a week later to see if it really would be possible to land a C-130 wearing NVGs. Because of the the urgency of the situation, within three weeks we had developed the basic procedures for blacked out, NVG landings that changed Combat Talon tactics forever.

■ The first time we attempted to demonstrate to Maj Gen Vaught, the task force commander, our ability to land the

MC-130s using NVG landings was not the smoothest. He was standing behind the copilot in order to get a ringside seat and when we made that first, VERY positive contact, he was thrown forward and it almost took his Adam's apple off in the process. Admittedly, that landing was not our best and he was not ready for it nor impressed by it. He could not talk for about 10 minutes. After a few more pretty rough landings we called it a night. Afterwards, Col Kyle gave us pretty clear instructions, perfect and then master the NVG landing techniques. Within a month, we had become the masters.

■ I was initially against having both pilots on NVGs during landing. During our first attempts to learn to land with NVGs, the copilot turned off all his cockpit lights and focused his NVGs on the instruments. The aircraft commander did not wear NVGs. A third (safety) pilot and the flight engineer focused their NVGs outside and assisted the navigators with alignment and cues for landing. The copilot would fly the aircraft down to aircraft radar approach minimums, 300' AGL, and when the aircraft commander had the runway environment in sight he took control of the aircraft and landed unaided. The first few attempts were not the smoothest. Bob Meller, a flight examiner pilot assigned to the 1st SOW, proved me wrong. He suggested and we elected to try landing with both pilots wearing NVGs. Bob's method worked great – both pilot and copilot on NVGs, and from there we learned, adapted, and developed the new TTPs.

■ During our preparation/training/development of tactics we were told that we needed to develop the capability to fly figure-tip formation. This came from Col. Tom Wicker who was the 1st SOW Director of Operations. You should know that the good colonel's background was F-4s. So one night we planned a training sortie to fly a 3-ship to Tyndall AFB and land and then return to Hurlburt Fld. We briefed the mission, but left out one very important part – what each aircraft should do if we encountered weather and had to break away. Needless to say, we did encounter weather and had to execute a breakaway. When we went into the clouds I was on the right wing and I think Meller was on the left wing. We all climbed – which was good. But

when we broke out on top of the weather, I was on the left side and Meller on the right side. For the debrief we decided that breakaway procedures would be an integral part of the crew briefings from that point forward.

■ During the early planning, it was thought that if the Talons air-dropped fuel bladders, commonly called “blivets,” and the accompanying pumps, hoses, and related equipment then a small team of Rangers could parachute in behind the blivets and set up a refueling point for the helicopters. The first time we air-dropped the blivets was at Davis-Monthan AFB, AZ. This was a new type of air-drop load that was under development by the Army. It was supposed to be a type of container delivery system (CDS) drop where the five 5,000-pound blivets would be gravity extracted. Bill Diggins was my copilot that night. We decided he would fly the drop portion of the mission that night because he needed annual training events. Col Bob Pinard, the Director of Maintenance for the 1st SOW, was on that mission as an observer. We flew across the DZ and made the drop. On its way out, though, the load wiped out the aft cargo compartment of the aircraft – anchor cables and parts of the 463-L rail system. Col Pinard's first response was that the pilots and crew had screwed up. Colonel Foley, the Army's chief rigger was also on the flight to review the drop procedures and equipment. After the test drop, he stated that the rigging method was screwed up and he would have to go back to the drawing board. Only then did Col. Pinard finally stop insisting that Bill and I should be decertified as pilots. Once the rigging and air-drop problems were solved, though, the dispersion of the fuel blivets made this procedure unworkable. The decision was made that we would refuel the helicopters after landing using a Vietnam-era, bulk-fuel delivery system intended to haul fuel to remote locations by C-130.

■ Another memorable moment for me was the time I first met Maj John Carney, the combat controller who would set up the landing zones at the Desert One site. We were told to proceed to Charleston AFB and pick up an individual by the name of John Carney who would be waiting for us at base operations and proceed out west for another exercise.

We landed at Charleston and parked in front of base operations. I went in to see if I could find our passenger. When I went to the dispatcher and asked if they had a passenger for us, the dispatcher look confused and asked who we were. Then there was a tap on my shoulder and this individual dressed in cowboy boots, jeans, and a short leather jacket, and holding a thin Samsonite briefcase, said “I'm your passenger.” I said, “Are you John?” He said, “Yep,” so we boarded the craft. The back of the aircraft was stripped down – no seats or rail – it was complete bare. I asked him if wanted to stand on the flight deck as it would be more comfortable. He said no, that he would stay in the cargo compartment. After takeoff I asked the loadmaster what our passenger was doing. He said he was sound asleep using the briefcase as a pillow. Right then and there I knew John was going to fit right in with this merry band of men. Right after takeoff we had to shut down the #3 engine and return to Hurlburt Field. John never got off the floor.

■ I got to set a record during all these exercises and rehearsals. Returning from the first major exercise, we landed at Field One at Eglin AFB to drop off the Rangers. Once the passengers were offloaded, Lt Col Guidry, the squadron commander, asked if he could fly the aircraft back to Hurlburt Field and get the landing. Naturally I said yes. The flight takes about 5 minutes. Just enough time to get all the checklists completed. Once in the pattern, he lowered the landing gear and the instruments went crazy. As Col Guidry was newly checked out in the Combat Talon, he asked me if I wanted to get back in the left seat and make the landing. I could not get in fast enough. We then made a flyby of the tower and determined that we had nose gear problems. When the tower controllers asked what I wanted to do, I asked if the runway foam was available. They put the foam down on the runway and we made an uneventful landing. I was the last aircraft in the USAF to land on foam as the procedure was discontinued later that year.

■ After the decision had been made to ground refuel the helicopters using the bulk-fuel delivery system, we needed a way to transport the 3,000 gal. bladders of





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fuel and pumping equipment. The answer was to use EC-130E Airborne Battlefield Command, Control, and Communications (ABCCC) aircraft from Keesler AFB, MS. These C-130s normally had a slide-in, railroad car sized capsule, that provided the work stations for controllers. With the capsule removed, two of the bladders on large metal pallets could be carried in the cargo compartment. The pumps, hoses, and extra equipment were strapped to the loading ramp and when lowered, the entire system was ready to offload fuel to the waiting helicopters. We nicknamed it the “Exxon” configuration. Capt Russ Tharp picked up the EC-130 aircraft from Keesler AFB and flew it to Hurlburt Field. I was in the tower the afternoon he landed. I thought to myself, “Boy am I glad I’m not flying one of those.” The next afternoon my crew and I were out at that EC-130 getting ready for our first flight and checkout in the aircraft. We had one takeoff and one landing and were signed off and ready to go.

■ Once President Carter made the decision to deploy the joint task force everything intensified. The EC-130s were to deploy through Lajes Field in the Azores. After takeoff the next morning, on climb out the ramp of our aircraft malfunctioned and would not lock in place. That meant we could not pressurize the aircraft and could not fly above 10,000 feet. We had tankers scheduled for our flight to NAS Sigonella, Sicily. Luckily our refueling altitude was at 10,000 feet. So I instructed the loadmaster to chain the ramp to the inside tail section of the aircraft to keep it from opening any further. We flew the entire deployment and mission in that condition. Later we learned that that was probably not the smartest thing to do. The engineers later said that if the ramp had further malfunctioned and opened it would have ripped the tail off the aircraft. This was one of those times when it paid to be lucky.

■ Upon landing at NAS Sigonella we were greeted by a Maj Dave Blum. All we wanted was fuel and a flight plan to Wadi Kena in Egypt. Instead, Dave brought us into a briefing room and gave us a 30-minute briefing on how we should behave while in EUCOM. Oh yes, he also extended a welcome from the Commander of EUCOM. He finally gave us our flight plans and we departed. However, I would run into Dave again on my return trip – covered later in this chronology.

■ Three things stand out in my memory about Wadi Kena:

▶ The first is the huge concrete hangers where we stayed. The walls must have been 2 feet thick and the sliding doors about the same. The hangers were built by the Russians to help the Egyptians protect the Russian-built Migs.

▶ The starkness of the desert. The airbase looked like a movie set right out of an Indiana Jones movie.

▶ General’s Vaught’s sendoff speech the morning we took off for Masirah Island in Oman. I must admit, as Bob Meller described earlier, that Gen Vaught was hugely inspiring. Again it was a scene right out of a Hollywood movie.

■ On takeoff out of Wadi Kena we were extremely heavy. By our estimates we weighted about 185,000 pounds. Just before takeoff roll I briefed the crew that if we lost an engine on takeoff and could not maintain altitude we would land straight ahead in the desert. The desert floor was nice and smooth for a very long way. Once we took off and all was well, my navigator,

Capt Thom Beres, said he was sure happy we did not have to set down in the desert. So I asked why. He said that, according to his charts, the area all around the airfield was a mine field – for about one mile. Would have been nice to have known that before takeoff, I thought quietly to myself.

■ The two days spent at Masirah before we took off on the mission were, in hindsight, extremely interesting and insightful.

▶ In those days our flight planning, to include threat analysis, was all done by hand. We stretched out the charts on plywood tables and held them down with dried camel chips to keep them from blowing away. Today everything is done by computer and the press of a button.

▶ During this time we walked through the taxi plan numerous times. We were determined to get it right. Of course we didn’t. The airfield at Masirah Island is a single runway and all departing aircraft have to taxi down the runway to the hammerhead in order to take off. When the flight lead, Marty Jubelt in MC-130 Dragon 02 taxied out, his wingman, Hal Lewis in EC-130 Republic 04, was stuck between the other two EC-130s. As we were comms-out on the blacked out runway, Republic 05 inadvertently taxied out ahead of Republic 04. After Marty departed, Steve Fleming followed him in MC-130 Dragon 03. Following Steve’s departure and amid all the confusion, I began to back taxi down the runway. This led to a very interesting time on the runway as Hal Lewis began his takeoff roll as I was back-taxiing. I was able to avoid running head-on into Hal by turning off onto the hard-packed sand of the runway shoulder. The messed up takeoff sequence resulted in a messed up formation. The heavily loaded EC-130s were too slow to catch the lead Talon, so Steve Fleming and Dragon 03 led all three Republic “Bladder Birds” to the Desert One site.

▶ I remember when Doc Postles (our combat flight surgeon) decided to sleep on his cot under the wing of one of the aircraft instead of inside one of the tents. The next morning Doc was awakened by a camel who had stuck his nose through the mosquito netting and into the Doc’s face. They were both surprised by what they saw, and everyone had a good laugh.

▶ I was amazed at how hard the maintenance crews worked in the conditions they had to work in to make sure the aircraft were ready to go. And they never complained.

▶ The day before we were to take off JVO Weaver, one of my navigators and life support officer for the mission aircraft flown by crews from the 8th SOS, handed out the life support gear to the crews. JVO had enough equipment to support a crew of 12 on each aircraft. There was only one problem with that – the three tankers had crews of 15. So even before takeoff our options were limited should something happen over water. Not enough parachutes to jump; not enough water wings to swim. Then JVO got mad at me because I kept all the bullets on board and would not hand them out. I called this early “gun control.”

■ I remember very clearly the afternoon before we were to take off on the mission. I was talking with Capt Hal Lewis. We had been crewed together since the very beginning. As the crews expanded in numbers he went on to take over his own crew (Republic 04). He loved to fly and he loved life.

We had just finished checking out equipment on each of our aircraft. Hal and I were standing under the wing of one of



the aircraft to stay out of the sun, when he looked at me and said, "Jerry I'm not coming back from this. I just know it." I was truly taken back. I didn't think I heard him right. I said, "Hal what do you mean not coming back?" He said, "Jerry I just have that feeling." I told him he was crazy, "We are all coming back." He then said even Sergeant Mayo, the flight engineer, felt like something was going to happen.

I did not believe what I was hearing. I insisted that he was wrong and that everything was going to be fine. I said, "You know we learned to land these things without lights. This is the easy part." He shook his head and grinned and we went off to do other things. I did not think about it again until we got back to Masirah Island and we started to decompress and take stock of what just happened that tragic night.

I had never mentioned that conversation to anyone before this year. In February I was at the USAF Academy's National Character and Leadership Symposium, making a presentation on Operation Eagle Claw. During the question and answer period a member of the audience asked if any of the crew members were worried about the plan. Hal's words popped into my mind like a fluorescent billboard. The theme for the symposium was demonstrating courage in adversity and I could not think of a better example. Capt Lewis had a premonition of what was to come and still he went on with the mission, even after the close call on the runway during the takeoff from Masirah Island.

If Hal's actions don't demonstrate true courage and dedication, I don't know what would. I ask myself sometimes if I had felt as strongly as Hal felt about the outcome what would I have done. Maj Hal Lewis' and Technical Sergeant Joel Mayo's actions will stay with me the rest of my life.

■ I won't go into the actual mission in detail. Enough has been written about all of that and the published versions are many. But I will mention one small act of leadership that has not received the recognition it should have. After the mix-up on the taxi out and the resulting out of sequence takeoffs, there was one individual that was smart enough to know what had happened behind him and that he needed to do something. Capt Steve Fleming in Dragon 03 knew our EC-130 Bladder Birds were too slow to catch up with the Combat Talons and did not have the navigation and terrain following equipment needed to get to Desert One on their own. Realizing what had happened on the departure he made the decision to slow down and wait for the three tankers to join up on him so that he could lead them to Desert One. His flight of three turned out to be a flight of four. He knew and understood – you don't leave your wingmen behind.

■ When the helicopter crashed into Hal Lewis' EC-130 that night at Desert One, it was horrendous. From the cockpit of my aircraft I watched as my friends burned to death and there was nothing I could do to help. For almost a year I had been sleeping, eating, drinking, and working with these men day in and day out. You soon come to realize that there are some things you never really get over or forget. This incident is one of those.

■ I remember getting word from John Carney that the area had been policed up and we could take off anytime. We were the last C-130 out of Desert One. When we returned to Masirah Island, we immediately offloaded the injured. I walked to the



**On April 24, 1980, in the Oman desert (top row from left): Maj Richard Bakke, killed; unidentified survivor; TSgt Joel Mayo, killed; Maj Lyn McIntosh, killed; Maj Harold Lewis Jr., killed; Capt Charles McMillan, killed; SSgt J.J. Beyers, survivor; Col Jeff Harrison, survivor. (Bottom Row): unidentified survivors. (The Associated Press)**

back of the aircraft just in time to hear Col Beckwith tell Doc Postles to leave JJ Beyers, the radio operator from Republic 04, because he was as good as dead. Doc ignored Col Beckwith and kept right on treating JJ. And because Doc ignored Col Beckwith he was able to save JJ's life and hands.

■ The first person to meet us after landing in Masirah Island was Capt George Ferkes. George and I had checked into the 8th SOS at the same time and had gone through Combat Talon school together. We also had bent many an elbow together. He was a pilot on Dragon 01 and had landed back at Masirah before all hell broke loose. George asked how I was doing, if I needed anything, and just stayed nearby the rest of the day. A true friend who knew what was needed at the moment.

■ After getting over the initial shock of what had just happened, it was time to redeploy. The EC-130s were to redeploy through Wadi Kena. We had just enough time for a hot meal, a shower, and some crew rest. Capt Russ Tharp (Republic 05) and my aircraft were to fly formation back home. It was determined that, because of my ramp problems, the number of crewmembers on the return flight should be kept to a minimum. Russ would take many of the maintenance folks and the remaining crew on his aircraft. As luck would have it, Russ had to shut down #3 engine as we flew past Rota, Spain. When we diverted into NAS Rota, we were greeted by the base commander, a nice guy but not happy we were there. He understood our situation, but said the Spanish government knew who we were and wanted the aircraft off Spanish soil ASAP.

We got an engine shipped in from Rhein Main AB, Germany, the main USAF airlift hub in Europe back then, within six hours. The maintenance folks had the engine hung and run in record time. Everyone wanted to get home. While all this was going on, US European Command notified me that I needed to select four crewmembers plus myself to stay



**Maj Richard L. Bakke, USAF**



**Sgt John D. Harvey, USMC**



**CPL George N. Holmes, JR., USMC**



**SSgt Dewey L. Johnson, USMC**



**Maj Harold L. Lewis, Jr., USAF**



**TSgt Joel C. Mayo, USAF**



**Maj Lyn D. McIntosh, USAF**



**Capt Charles T. McMillan II, USAF**

on at Rhein Main to wait for the release of the remains of the eight crewmembers who had died at Desert One. They said CINCEUR had determined that my aircraft was not in good enough shape to fly back to the US. Once Capt Tharp departed NAS Rota we were to leave for Rhein Main AB.

I had no problem getting four volunteers. Ed Bagby, Ken Poole, Dee Newberry, and Ray Doyle jumped in and off we went to Rhein Main. While we waited for the Iranians to release the remains of our fallen comrades, EUCOM got the five of us all cleaned up with new class A uniforms. On the second day at Rhein Main AB there we were finally allowed to call our families back home. However, we could not tell them where we were, although we were not sure why not. Ken Poole found out during his call to Sarah that he was going to be a new father in a few months. It was something to celebrate and we truly needed that.

We spent five days waiting for the release of the remains. We all wanted to get home, but we also wanted to do this. Finally, word came that the remains were to be picked up in Geneva, Switzerland. We would fly by C-141 from Rhein Main AB to Geneva, and then direct to Dover AFB, Delaware.

Once the remains were on board in the flag-draped coffins, the five of us got very quiet and introspective. Those were our friends, colleagues, and drinking buddies. My daughters had babysat for Lyn McIntosh's set of twins. We lived a stone's throw away from them back home. Capt Rick Bakke had started out as my navigator. I had just met his new wife before we deployed. These weren't strangers that you read about in newspapers or see on TV. It was almost surreal. Upon landing at Dover we were met by General Creech, the Commander of the Tactical Air Command.

After the remains were ceremoniously offloaded, everyone took a very deep breath. I realized we were finally on US soil. General Creech did his greetings and typically laudatory comments. Ed Bagby, who was never known to be shy, asked

the General how we were to get back to Hurlburt. The General was honest. He said I don't know how we were getting home, but his ride was right there, pointing to his T-39 Sabreliner with the four stars in the window. As we all chuckled about it, I saw a big black aircraft landing. I knew they had not forgotten us. Our MC-130 "carriage" had arrived.

■ It had been a long six months. I was exhausted, but I knew it wasn't over. The government couldn't stop now. I was right. The next six months turned out to be a story unto itself.

## Summary

Although the actual mission was a failure, much was learned. We developed new tactics, techniques, and procedures that would have never been accomplished in a normal, non-emergency environment. The aircrews were driven by an attitude of "this was going to be a success." Much of what was developed is still used today, some 30 plus years later.

In the aftermath of Operation Eagle Claw, the organizational structure of the United States Special Operations Forces was completely revamped. Because of our failure 33 years ago special operations forces across the 4 Services has literally exploded. Prior to 4 November 1979, Hurlburt Field was very near caretaker status. Army Special Forces were being systematically moved into the Reserve component. Navy SEAL units were usually assigned to the fleet. April 24, 1980 changed everything. As a result of that April night in the desert of Iran, everything changed..



*About the Author: During Operation Eagle Claw, Col Uttaro was assigned to the 8th SOS, 1st SOW, Hurlburt Field, Florida as the 8th SOS's standardization and evaluation officer. He was selected as one of two pilots in the unit to be aircraft commander for the initial two-aircrew cadre to begin preparation for a possible hostage rescue attempt. He flew an EC-130 with call sign Republic 06. Republic 06 was the last aircraft to land at Desert One and the last aircraft to takeoff from Desert One.*





# 1st SOS in Operation Rice Bowl/Eagle Claw

*By Ray Turczynski and Steve Fleming*

In November 1979, only 7 of the 14 Combat Talons in the USAF had been modified for aerial refueling. The 1st SOW had three and the other four were assigned to the 1st SOS at Kadena AB, JA. The Combat Arrow Talons in Europe would not be modified until the 1990s. The joint task force (JTF) planners had determined that all seven air refuelable MC-130s would be needed for Eagle Claw. This led to a twist in the normal way of doing business.

Because the 8th SOS at Hurlburt had an insufficient number of modified Combat Talons, all four MC-130s assigned to the 1st SOS were ordered to join the JTF. Where normally, a Stateside unit would augment an overseas unit for an overseas contingency operation, the opposite became true for Eagle Claw. During this operation, 1st SOS aircraft and crews deployed to Hurlburt and joined forces with the 1st SOW for mission preparation, training, and the mission.

The 1st SOS would provide four Combat Talons and two crews for the Night One mission. Aircraft 64-0565, with its Forward Looking Infra-Red (FLIR) capability, would be flown by Bob Brenzi from the 8th SOS as Hurlburt's lead crew. MC-130E 64-0564, was to be flown by Kadena's Marty Jubelt as the #2 aircraft. And, 63-7785, flown by Kadena's Steve Fleming would be #3. The 1st SOS' fourth aircraft, 62-1843, would serve as the spare for the Night One.

This "non-conventional" setup posed two crew concerns. First, the Kadena families were placed into a "reverse-remote" scenario. Normally, a remote assignment sends the military member

overseas while the spouse and children remain in the US. During Eagle Claw, and again with the succeeding Honey Badger operation (preparation to try again), the 1st SOS military members were in the US for an extended period while their families remained in Okinawa. But, special operations spouses are tough gals. They stuck together and weathered their "remote" tour as a team.

The second concern proved to be more difficult. Military members stationed overseas all have a DEROS month, or the Date Expected to Return from Overseas. Personnel assignments to a unit are managed on the DEROS date, with the replacement member arriving at the overseas during a certain month and the military member they replace departing the same month. This personnel management system ensures all units are neither over nor under-manned. This strict personnel management process would immediately impact the selection of Eagle Claw crewmembers.

The first to be affected were Thom Beres and Mike Sumida, two top-notch instructor navigators in the 1st SOS. The American hostages were taken by the Revolutionary Guard in November 1979. Thom already had orders to the 8th SOS at Hurlburt, with a February 1980 DEROS. Mike had made the decision to separate from the Air Force as of April 1980. Ray Turczynski, the 1st SOS Squadron commander, wanted both Thom and Mike on Jubelt's crew. Ray discussed the situation with both navigators, but already knew their answers in advance. Both said "Hell, Yes!" when asked if they wanted to be on the mission. Turczynski could legally hold them in his squadron until their respective DEROS months,

but he was not supposed to send either on temporary duty (TDY) for 60 days prior to DEROS so that they could meet their out-processing requirements from the squadron and the base. He sent both Thom and Mike TDY to Hurlburt during Jan 1980 for Eagle Claw training and mission rehearsal. Beres was obviously violating the "No TDY" rule. But while at Hurlburt, a swap was made: Les Smith, the 8th SOS Operations Officer and also an instructor navigator, was reassigned to the open 1st SOS Operations Officer position, and Beres into the 8th SOS as planned. Both were able to depart for the swap in February and probably passed each other en-route. Both also flew as Eagle Claw crewmembers.

In Sumida's case, things got a little trickier with a "severe violation" of the personnel rules. Mike flew on Eagle Claw but missed his port call. His wife departed from Kadena without him in late April and was in Chicago heading home to New Jersey on the night of the mission. The squadron was able to get word to her that her husband was okay, but would be a little late getting home. Mike departed Kadena in late April following the mission and got home in May. Sue Sumida was a little upset, but also very tough. She soon realized why her husband might be late and was proud of what he had done. Ray Turczynski was severely chastised by the Personnel Center for his actions, but didn't care. Neither did Mike Sumida!

Training for the mission and developing the new tactics that were required proved to be a challenge for 1st SOS crews. Turczynski was able to travel to California in December 1979 while he was attending a Pacific Air

Force (PACAF) Squadron Commander's conference in Hawaii. Ray linked up with Bob Brenci's crew at Norton AFB and flew on a night vision goggle (NVG) training mission with Bob's crew. The whole time, Ray was taking copious notes in a small notebook. At the time, neither NVG tactics nor training programs had been developed for the Combat Talon. That notebook would become the 1st SOS' training manual.

Following his single night sortie with Brenci, Turczynski quickly returned to Hawaii to rejoin his conference. More importantly, though, was that he needed to catch get his return flight to Okinawa. It was December 22 and Ray thought it might be nice to get home for Christmas. In Hawaii he was given two A-3 bags containing 25 sets of NVGs, which he accepted on a hand receipt. At approximately \$20,000 per set, he had roughly a half million dollars of equipment in his hands. It took some convincing, but finally the NCO at the Hickam AFB passenger terminal agreed to let him hand-carry and not check the two large duffle bags of NVGs.

Ray arrived back in Okinawa in the early hours on December 24. Almost immediately he realized that while the 8th SOS crews would be off for the holiday, his 1st SOS crews were way behind in training and preparation. He called for a selective crew recall that afternoon to introduce his two crews to the NVGs and review his training notes with them. The 1st SOS would have to begin NVG

training on December 26 in order to catch up with the 8th SOS crews. Turczynski's wife would receive several calls that afternoon, "It's Christmas Eve, does your husband know what he's doing?"

Turczynski assigned himself as Jubelt's safety pilot so that he could oversee the initial training. One of the challenges they had to overcome was finding an unlighted airfield where they could practice. It was out of the question to turn off the runway lights at Kadena in order to conduct NVG training as it is a busy fighter base, but also a popular transit point in the western Pacific region. Thom Beres called his contact, Terry Mitchell, at the 314th Air Division in Korea to arrange for an airfield that could be blacked-out and used for training the entire Christmas week. Mitchell, a former 1st SOS crewmember now on the staff at 314th AD, asked no questions. He selected Yechon AB, an isolated airfield in the southern part of the Korean peninsula with 10,000 feet of runway and in caretaker status. It proved ideal.

The procedure Terry Mitchell arranged for the training was clever! Crews would file an "out-and-back" flight plan from Kadena AB to Yechon AB. They would fly Instrument Flight Rules (IFR) to Yechon AB, fly the prescribed instrument approach, and land. Once on the runway they would broadcast an assigned code word and a controller would extinguish the runway lights. The aircraft could then takeoff and land using NVGs for as long as the

crew desired without making a single radio call. Once training was completed, after the last landing, the crew would broadcast another code word and the lights would come back on. They would then receive their clearance and return to Kadena AB. The two 1st SOS crews used this procedure all week, alternating nights. Both were both fully trained by New Year's Day!

The only unusual, although perhaps not unexpected, thing that happened was that it snowed one night. The Talon crew had some anxious moments looking through their NVGs into a snowstorm and finding a snow covered runway. Of course, the situation solved itself before too long as the snow melted on the warmer runway and NVGs clearly showed the darker runway surrounded by snow covered grass.

Since there were no prescribed procedures for the use of NVGs, 1st SOS crews developed ones that were not being used by the Hurlburt crews. During the NVG practice at Yechon AB, it became obvious that internal aircraft lighting and controlling glare would be a major concern. The 1st SOS crews tried many different configurations. The first problem was to isolate the light from the left and right navigator stations coming to the forward area of the cockpit. The aircraft already had a black curtain installed between the navigator and flight engineer (FE) stations, but it proved to be too thin to stop the light from illuminating the pilots' stations. By augmenting the curtain with standard-issue, Army woolen blankets, we could control the light in the cockpit. The more difficult problem was all the instrument lighting needed for normal night operations. The Kadena crews tried flying the approach and landing with all four crewmembers, the pilot, copilot, safety pilot, and FE, in front of the curtain wearing NVGs. The limitations of the first generation, PVS-5 NVGs made that tactic difficult and undesirable. The crews found that the best lighting configuration was to have all of the pilot and FE's instrument lights off and for the copilot to not wear NVGs. He would turn his instrument lights as low as possible and fly the approach until the pilot and FE acquired the runway and were in a position to land.





During one of the first debriefings, the crews were doing the normal “what if” sessions and the scenario of mountain flying and go-around/missed approach came up. The objective was to have the Terrain Following (TF) Radar available at all times. This was accomplished by installing a blackout cover made from black cloth which Jubelt and Fleming had purchased at a yard goods store in Okinawa, taped to the pilot’s glare shield above the left-seat pilot’s instrument panel. This allowed the crew to immediately use TF radar scope and instruments simply by tearing off the cover. Later, more advanced configurations attached the cloth cover with Velcro®. This method also allowed the safety feature of having at least two crewmembers observing each aspect of aircraft operation and configuration.

During the navigator-directed approaches, the copilot would fly the aircraft on instruments without NVGs down to the minimum altitude for the approach. The pilot in the left seat, wearing NVGs, would be looking for the landing zone and/or traffic and threats in the area. Once at minimums and in position to land, the pilot would take control of the aircraft for landing and for ground operations. The FE, also wearing NVGs, would be focused inside the aircraft and backup the crew by observing desired airspeed. The safety pilot would assist in looking for the landing zone and confirm any aircraft configuration changes, such as flap settings or landing gear, by focusing his NVGs inside the cockpit to verify desired settings.

It is interesting to note that crews from both the 8th SOS and 1st SOS came up with almost identical procedures for approach and landing, even though there was no discussion between the two groups who were half of a world apart. The one exception was the use of the blackout cloth covering the left seat pilot’s instrument panel. The 1st liked it and the 8th did not, so after some “professional negotiations,” it was decided that each aircraft commander could decide his internal lighting configuration as long as everyone used the same modified infiltration/exfiltration checklist.

One other thought. Much has been written about NVG operations, but with



an aircraft the size of an MC-130, if you are not aligned with the landing zone with a reasonable degree of accuracy, the entire approach is for naught. For their consistent ability to bring the aircraft into position for landing, the skill of the Talon navigators is acknowledged—they always got us to a point 300 feet on final approach and in a position to land.

In order for those outstanding navigators to do what they did with the aircraft configured as described above, the navigator station became extremely warm. By the end of a flight, the navigators’ flight suits would be wringing wet. So our amazing maintainers came up with a local modification and installed a fan on the aft cockpit bulkhead to improve the situation. That modification was formally approved for the fleet two years later!

One final item worth noting was how the 1st SOS departed from Kadena for the actual mission while maintaining operational security. The parent wing at Kadena AB is the 18th Tactical Fighter Wing. In order to not raise any suspicions about our three MC-130s and maintainers packing up and leaving (64-0565, with one of the operational FLIRs, had remained at Hurlburt, on loan to the 8th SOS after the March rehearsals), the wing commander held a practice Operational Readiness Exercise that night. While the fighter squadrons practiced and trained to mobilize their F-15 equipment for deployment, the 1st SOS likewise mobilized, but they departed for real. When the time came to launch, a 1st SOS trusted agent was sent to the control tower. At the prescribed time, he had the controller broadcast an “updated” altimeter setting. This

signified clearance for engine start and taxi. Visual Flight Rule takeoff clearance was issued by broadcasting “updated” winds. The Kadena Talon crews had trained using no-communications and minimum lighting air refueling, so no further radio calls were made until the squadron arrived at Diego Garcia.

At Diego Garcia, however, we encountered another problem. Coordination with the US Navy officials and British customs agents at Diego Garcia had not taken place so the Talons arrived unannounced. The commander refused to provide quarters or workspace for the maintainers until the mission commander revealed the purpose of our presence—something we could not do. But, after getting access to a secure, KY-3 telephone, a call from Turczynski to the Pentagon alerted mission personnel there of the difficulties at Diego Garcia. The return call to the commanding officer quickly resolved the situation. From that point on the officials at Diego Garcia could not have been more supportive!


While awaiting clearance to proceed to Masirah Island, the 1st SOS crews flew sea surveillance missions for a couple of days to reinforce their cover story. On 19 April, Turczynski and the first of three 1st SOS crews arrived at Masirah Island. On the 20th, the remaining two crews arrived. Turczynski and the 1st SOS crews unpacked the crates holding the tents and cots that would form the beginnings of a small tent city for the Eagle Claw crews. By 22 April, all seven C-130s, four MC-130s and three EC-130s carrying fuel to refuel the helicopters, were in place, ready, and waiting for the launch order.

On 24 April, we launched.

# EAGLE CLAW

## A Crewdog's Remembrances

*By Col (Ret) George Ferkes*



MC-130E night vision goggle  
(NVG) approach to landing.

### Fate's Cruel Choice

It was mid November 1979, Lyn McIntosh and I worked in squadron training together. Everyone was aware of the hostage situation in Iran and we both knew that something was going on in the squadron and most likely it had to do with the hostages. We were both combat vets from Vietnam, but new to the 8th Special Operations Squadron (SOS) and Combat Talons. One thing we knew, newbies or not we wanted to be included in whatever was going on. Every day, without fail, Mac and I would make up excuses to be in the Operations Officer's office to let him know we were available for anything he needed us to do. As the crew force expanded we both were brought into the mission and as fate would have it Mac ended up on Hal Lewis's crew and he lost his life in the accident. I often wonder why Mac ended up on Lewis's crew and I didn't. It is something that stays with me to this very day.

### Roll Call

After all the aircraft returned to our staging base on Masirah Island, and the details of the accident were discussed an official "roll call" was directed.

Each crew formed up on a dusty, bone dry patch of earth. By crew, the names were called out by the unit commander. The replies were heard "here" "present" "OK" "I'm here", etc. Capt Lewis, Capt Lewis, no reply, Capt McIntosh, Capt McIntosh, no reply, Capt Bakke, Capt Bakke, no reply, Capt McMillan, Capt McMillan, no reply, TSgt Mayo, TSgt Mayo, no reply. Those haunting "no replies" still echo in my head and in the minds of many others who were there.

### Beer and Guts

Little did we know at the time, but news of the aborted rescue attempt and the loss of lives was being flashed around the world. The local British airmen there at Masirah, quickly figured out that we had flown the mission. I remember looking across the tent and seeing a commotion. Through a gap in the tent I could see the wheels of a khaki British Land Rover, two sets of legs, a couple boxes being put on the ground, and the Land Rover heading out in a small cloud of dust. In typical British fashion they wanted us to know they knew we were in pain and quietly dropped off two cases of ice cold beer. Scribbled on the side of one of the cases was a message "TO YOU ALL,

FROM US ALL, FOR HAVING THE GUTS TO TRY." We passed around the beer for all to have a swig and ease our pain. I don't think anyone there will ever forget the memorable words written on that case of beer. These words epitomize the special operations mission and today still serve as an inspiration to our Air Commando brethren.

### Training Chaos

From the very beginning of the preparation for the mission, up until we deployed, the planning and training were in a constant state of chaos. The basic elements of the plan changed numerous times, but it was always viewed as a two night operation. The ground plan was in continuous revision and the Navy helicopter crews were almost completely replaced after it was deemed they were not up to the task. Marine helicopter crews were brought in with some of the Navy crew members staying on and one Air Force helicopter pilot was also in the crew mix. The method of insertion of the Army element as well as the plan to refuel the helicopters once they were in country was constantly revised and revisited. The one constant for the fixed wing operation was that MC-130 Combat Talon aircrews



and C-130 aircraft would provide any long range infiltration and exfiltration of forces and fuel. For aircrews of the 8th SOS and the 1st SOS this was what they trained for every day.

## Coming Home

As we gathered up our gear and started our return flights to the United States, our minds and hearts were filled with uncertainty and sorrow. We had no idea the world was so aware of the accident on the desert floor and the loss of eight of our warriors. We made our way west from Masirah Island, north thru Egypt into the Mediterranean, with an overnight stop in Italy, and then on to Hurlburt. As we crossed into US airspace an emotional thing happened. We checked in with the American traffic controller. There was a pause. Then the controller stated in a strong clear voice, words to this effect, "Thank you for trying, the whole nation stands with you and grieves with you, God Bless." To this day I still remember the rush of emotion and the lump in my throat as I heard this message from our nation.

## So Much for Operational Security

Once we got home and the dust had settled, we had a chance to talk to our wives about the mission and their emotions following news of the accident. One of the things that several of the wives told us was that in spite of our efforts to convince them that this TDY was just another training exercise, they knew when we left that this was the real thing. And how did they know this? It was what we took with us. As one wife put it "when you took the booze and the sunscreen we knew it was the real thing."

## Lives Lost not In Vain -- The Beginning not the End

The lives of the eight brave men lost while attempting to rescue the embassy hostages on the early morning of 25 April 1980 were not in vain. As retired Air Force Chief of Staff General Norton Schwartz so clearly put it, "The singular event that propelled my thinking and my orientation was the experience of Desert One. That event propelled an effort in the Department of Defense which resulted



ultimately in the mission in Abbottabad that took down Osama Bin Laden. It (Desert One) would never happen again, and in fact it hasn't and it won't."

The failed mission was not the end or even the beginning of the end. In fact it was the beginning of a process that would ensure the US had forces trained and equipped to succeed in these high-risk, high-gain missions. To ensure future mission success, the US Congress passed legislation creating the United States Special Operations Command, with the USAF's Air Force Special Operations Command as a component. The events of Desert One spawned a tremendous growth in special operations force strength and funding.

## The Children Left Behind

When we returned from the mission many of us wondered what was going to happen to the children affected by the loss of their fathers. We knew the government would provide some help, but other than that we were worried and, to say the least, clueless about how these children would be taken care of. Through the good graces of many people, to include a significant donation by H Ross Perot, and the hard work and dedication of others, the "Bull Simons" Fund was created to provide college educations for the 17 children who survived the men killed or incapacitated at Desert One. The Fund was named in honor of the legendary Army Green Beret, Col Bull Simons, who repeatedly risked his life on rescue

missions. The fund has expanded in recent years as the number of casualties has increased with the expanded use of SOF.

In 1995, the Special Operations Warrior Foundation (SOWF) was formed from portions of several other organizations to ensure full scholarship grants, as well as educational and family counseling, to the surviving children of special operations personnel of all Services who lose their lives in the line of duty. It also provides immediate financial assistance for severely wounded special operations personnel and their families. Today, this commitment covers nearly 1000 surviving children, 220 of whom have graduated from college. From this tragic loss of life of eight of our bravest warriors in the hostile environs of a faraway desert, a world class organization has arisen like a phoenix out of the smoldering ashes to provide a safety net when tragedy strikes.



*About the Author: Col (Ret) George Ferkes spent over 21 years in Special Operations serving in command positions at the Sq and Gp level as well as staff positions at HQ AFSOC and JSOC. He was the co-pilot on the Desert One (Eagle Claw) lead MC-130E aircraft and flew in Honey Badger (train up for second hostage rescue attempt). He was involved in planning for Urgent Fury (Grenada), TWA 847 aircraft hijacking and Achille Lauro ship hijacking responses along with a number of other classified special operations.*

# From One Aux Field to Another GONE, BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

By Col (Ret) Raymond Chapman

**Aircrew from the 919th Special Operations Wing admire their aircraft, the MC-130E Combat Talon I.** (USAF photo by TSgt Samuel King Jr.)

It will work. These three words were the strategic guidance to the men and women of Air Force Special Operations Command from their commander, Maj Gen Charles Holland. It was September 1999 and the rumors had been flying since March 5th, the day that the Chief of Staff of the Air Force announced the results of the 1998 budget initiatives that would forever change AFSOC's force structure.

The March announcement from the Chief declared that the transformational adjustments levied on AFSOC were necessary to prepare the command for the arrival of the CV-22 Osprey, projected to enter the Air Force's inventory in 2003. Gen Holland relayed to the command that the impending changes were vital to the future of special operations and America's Air Commandos must not only be ready for the transition, but it was imperative that the migration happen without any adverse impact to the unit's mission and readiness. According to Maj Gen Holland, the projected program changes were fiscally essential, and the logical action was to eliminate the redundancies of maintaining and operating a small number of unique SOF

aircraft in three separate locations.

At the time of the General's remarks, both active duty and Reserve units at Eglin AFB, Hurlburt Field, and Duke Field were operating MC-130E Combat Talon and MC-130P Combat Shadow aircraft. AFSOC's plan was simple: co-locate similar aircraft, crews and support teams in order to more efficiently exploit SOF's precious resources, while conserving manpower and delivering a more combat capable force to our SOF customers.

The major force structure changes driven by the 1998 budget initiatives began with the deactivation of the 55th Special Operations Squadron at Hurlburt Field on Sep 16, 1999. The unit's six MH-60G's were transferred to Air Combat Command (ACC) to bolster its conventional combat search and rescue forces. In addition, the MC-130P fleet was reduced by four aircraft that were plucked from the worldwide SOF fleet and transferred to the Air National Guard at Moffett Field to further enhance ACC's neglected CSAR capability.

With the elimination of the 55th and the four P-models transferred to the National Guard, there were still a

few pieces missing from AFSOC's plan to reach the targeted net decrease of 433 manning billets. Maj Gen Holland knew that the CSAF's goal was a daunting challenge and he called upon his gunship crewmate from the Vietnam War to assist him with it. Col Thomas Stogsdill, the 919th Special Operations Wing Commander, sat down with the General and together they devised a bold "out of the box" plan that required buy-in up and down the chain and, if executed flawlessly, would prove itself the only way to reach the targeted manpower reductions directed by Headquarters Air Force.

The two commanders determined that it was necessary for the active duty Air Commandos to team with AFSOC's only Air Force Reserve wing to make those reductions happen. The agreement was to establish a traditional associate unit at Eglin AFB, combining the SOF power of the 9th SOS's five P-models with the five MC-130Ps from the 919th SOW's 5th SOS. The plan was to







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jointly operate the 10 MC-130P Combat Shadows out of Eglin AFB, leveraging Reserve crews and maintenance. The Reserve aircrews and maintenance teams were thus to relocate from Duke Field to Eglin AFB, coalescing the 5th's "Truth Shall Make Them Free" with the 9th's "Night Wings". This Reserve association, a new concept for AFSOC, reflected what was happening throughout Air Mobility Command's C-141, C-5 and C-17 fleets.



The quandary was that merger at Eglin AFB only solved part of the manpower reduction challenge facing Maj Gen Holland. Once again, he turned to his long-time confidant Col Stogsdill, and the two devised another plan to create a "reverse association" where an active duty flying unit, combined with an active duty maintenance unit, would move to Duke Field and "reverse associate" with the 919th SOW's aircraft and support. This groundbreaking enterprise between the active duty forces and Air Force Reserve Command was met with skepticism from all who were briefed on its concept. How could the laid back attitude of a Reserve wing handle the lean-forward mind-set of two active duty SOF units? The answer was simple for Gen Holland and Col Stogsdill; they determined "it will work!" And with that, the reverse association, later identified as an "active association", was conceived. For the first time in the history of the USAF, the Reserves would own the aircraft on a Reserve base and the active duty crews and maintainers would team with their Reserve counterparts to prepare the aircraft and deliver them to the fight.

The 919 SOW's journey to "active association" first began in 1994, when it was determined that the AC-130A gunship would be retired and the AC-130H, slated to be transferred to the Reservists at Duke Field upon the retirement of the A-model gunship, would remain on active duty.

With word on the streets at Duke Field that the gunships were being retired by the Air Force Reserve Command, there were a number of highly experienced Air Commando citizen-airmen ready to pull chocks out of Duke Field and seek other bases where they could deliver USAF Reserve airpower to the global frontiers. Foreseeing this potential time-bomb, USSOCOM wisely decided to assign the Combat Talon I aircraft that were returning from Mildenhall and Kadena to the 711th SOS and the 919th SOW at Duke Field. When the gunship mission at Duke was officially terminated on Sep 28, 1995, the 711th was well on its way to becoming one of the Air Force's finest Combat Talon squadrons. Over the next year, eight Talons were assigned to Duke Field and the Reserve crews, support, and maintenance relentlessly trained and honed their skills, bringing their wartime readiness up to SOF standards in absolute minimum time.

Five years later, the Air Force was looking at the aforementioned force structure adjustments; the stars were aligned, and the Air Force's first-ever active association was on the table. The question on everybody's mind was how could a unit with the motto "After Five and Weekends" team with the 8 SOS to deliver the Praetorian Starship on the timelines demanded by our national forces.



Maj Gen Holland had requested an audience with the men and women of 8th Special Operations Squadron at our commander's call to explain his vision. After opening up with the words "It will work," he briefed us on what he expected from the 8th SOS as AFSOC prepared to implement the monumental force structure changes ordered from above. He poignantly began by pointing out that this would be the first time an MC-130E would not be assigned to Hurlburt Field since the 8th itself was assigned there in 1974. He told us of how the 8th SOS had departed Clark AB for Florida and

on March 1, 1974, without personnel or aircraft, began its transition to the MC-130E Combat Talon. He affirmed that after 26 years at Hurlburt, and with an unprecedented record of supporting wars, disasters, crumbling democracies, and humanitarian efforts, the 8th was now asked to embark on another mission. This 8th SOS mission, like several in the past, was an untested and untried concept where the mighty Combat Talon would permanently park on a Reserve ramp in Northwest Florida, the Air Force Reserves would own the aircraft, and the active duty crews would be assigned to meet the demanding time-lines of the national force, a constraint that by law the Air Force Reserves could not meet.

Col David Scott, 16 SOW/CC and Col Stogsdill, 919 SOW/CC, knew that there would be efficiencies in "pure fleeting" the two squadrons under one wing's flying and maintenance programs. They therefore decided to execute this plan and immediately positioned the forces for success. Active duty crews and maintainers would remain under the operational control of the 16th SOW for support and the veterans serving in the Reserves would augment the young active duty crew and maintenance force, increasing the Talon's readiness, improving MC rates and producing more training sorties. With a slap on the table, the two wing commanders agreed to make it happen sooner rather than later and, with that decision, the wheels of transformation began to turn.

The remaining task for the 8th SOS was moving the final six MC-130Es to Duke Field, 26 miles away, (without affecting the unit's commitment to the national force), while maintaining the squadron's mile-high esprit de corps, and simultaneously keeping the faith with all the Airmen and their families involved in the move. Over a beer at Connie's Hooch Bar, Col Scott approached me and inquired how the 8th SOS would make this historic move a memorable event. He mentioned that running the 8th's guidon to Duke Field, allowing each of the Blackbirds an opportunity to carry the flag for a portion of the run, would cement this untested relationship. After thinking about his recommendation for about a second and a half, I made the



decision and with a pledge from all of the men and women of the 8th we sat down and devised our “guidon run” CONOPs. At H-hour on Feb 5, 2000 Lt Col Al Vafidies, the 716 MXS/CC, and I trotted with the squadron guidons to the numbers on runway 18 at Hurlburt Field and I then passed the 8th’s flag to Col Scott, coining him after he accepted the flag; by the way, he didn’t have his coin and he still owes me a beer. Col Scott, Command Chief Sanchez, Lt Col Vafidies, and I ran the squadron flags out the back gate displaying our bittersweet black t-shirts that read “From one auxiliary field to another, gone but not forgotten.”

There, we handed the squadron flags to the next oldest person in the squadron, and the relay proceeded, from oldest to youngest, until finally the 8th SOS’ youngest member planted the squadron flag on the podium at Duke. After my run, I climbed aboard the last Talon and flew it to Duke in time to personally receive the guidon. I can still remember the pride I felt as we made a low approach over a large crowd of Reservists and active duty Airmen that were running toward the Duke Field main gate with the 8 SOS’ streamer-laden flag (it must have weighed about five pounds). As the squadron’s blue and gold guidon waved in each runner’s wake, you could hear it silently bragging about a history of aviation excellence that began at Kelley Field, Texas, on May 31, 1917.

The stand-up ceremony took place at Hangar 3020 on Saturday, February 5, 2000, during an annual training weekend at Duke Field. We were already getting into the weekend mode. There were now approximately 300 active duty airmen assigned to Duke Field. The 716th Maintenance Squadron, joined with the 8th SOS, augmented the 300 full-time Reservists and civilians and the 1,200 traditional Reservists that were already assigned to that so-called sleepy hollow in Eglin’s northeast range. This was the first time that all 14 Talon Is were united under one wing on one base. Twenty months later, after the attacks on Sep 11, 2001, the active association proved its mettle and for the next five and a half years as the 8th and 711th flew side-by-side on a myriad of combat missions and emerged as one of the most potent and

effective flying teams in the fight against terrorism and oppression. On August 9, 2006, the 8th SOS guidon was run back to Hurlburt Field to represent the Air Force’s first CV-22 Osprey squadron.

In the words of Yogi Berra, it’s “déjà vu all over again,” and today Lt Gen Fiel is dealing with the force structure changes that have arrived alongside a shrinking defense budget. As the squadron commander of the 4th SOS and the Deputy Commander of the 16th Operations Group, he witnessed the success of blending the SOF active duty and Reserve forces and recently came up with a new and innovative twist in order to take advantage of the expertise the SOF Reserves offer. On Feb 11, 2013--nearly 13 years to the day-- AFSOC stood up the Air Force Special Operations Air Warfare Center (AFSOWAC), commanded by Brig General Jon Weeks, a flag officer with a SOF Reserve pedigree. Their mission is to organize, train, educate, and equip forces conducting special operations missions; lead major command irregular warfare activities; execute the special operations test, evaluation and lessons learned programs; and develop doctrine, tactics, techniques and procedures for AFSOC. The 919th SOW, in partnership with the AFSOC Air Warfare Center, now provides operations and maintenance personnel to support the Aviation Foreign Internal Defense and Combat Aviation Advisor programs for AFSOC by flying and maintaining the C-145A aircraft. The 919th SOW also conducts U-28 and C-145A formal training unit instruction through a classic association with the AFSOAWC. On May 28th, 2013, the 6th SOS, which coincidentally resided in the old 8th SOS squadron building at one time, ran its guidon to Duke Field to cement a new chapter in AFSOC’s ever increasing reliance on our Reserve and National Guard SOF citizen-airmen.

Since its inception, the active association concept has crept its way into the fabric of the USAF’s Total Force, and has been responsible for keeping precious National Guard and Reserve bases that were targeted for cuts open in this resource constrained environment. By leveraging manpower and aircraft, the nation has benefited by this teaming



**An Airman from the 8th Special Operations Squadron nears Hurlburt Field with the unit’s guidon. As part of the 8th SOS transition festivities, a team of Airmen ran the guidon 26 miles back to Hurlburt Field the same way it was delivered to Duke Field years ago. (USAF photograph by Senior Airman Andy Kin)**



**Lt Col Joe Michalek, from Headquarters Air Force Special Operations Command, carries the 6th SOS guidon from Hurlburt Field to Duke Field, May 28, 2013. (USAF photo by Dan Neely)**

effort, which synergistically blends the experience and stability of our Air Force Reserve Components with the flexibility and perseverance of our active duty force to ensure that the greatest Air Force in the world is ready at moment’s notice to fly, flight and win, Any Time - Any Place.



*About the Author: Col (Ret) Ray Chapman began his 32 year Air Force career as a combat controller at Pope AFB, NC and spent over 22 years in Special Operations serving in command positions at the 8 SOS and 353 SOG as well as staff positions at SOCPAC, USSOCOM, and HQ AFSOC. He was the navigator on one of the three MC-130E aircraft that simultaneously dropped three 15,000lbs BLU-82 daisy cutter bombs on Failaka Island during Desert Storm. Col Chapman led multiple deployments to southwest Asia and was instrumental in the success of the Air Force’s first ever active association.*



# Tharthar Palace Raid

*By Col Bruce Taylor, Lt Col Chris Stegner, and CMSgt Tyler Outten*

**2 APRIL 2003**



In April 2003, US special operations forces raided Saddam Hussein's Tharthar palace north-west of Baghdad. According to the Associated Press, the Tharthar compound was one of eight palaces that had been an obstacle to United Nations inspectors hunting Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) during the years leading up to the 2nd Gulf War. In 1998, the Iraqis had refused to allow the UN weapons inspection teams to visit Tharthar to search for chemical and biological weapons that had been banned after the 1991 Gulf War.

In 1998, after years of sanctions and in order to avoid further air strikes as part of Operation Southern Watch, the Iraqis finally allowed the UN inspectors into the palaces, but only when escorted and if the Iraqis were given advance warning.

As part of a joint special operations task force (JSOTF), our mission was to support the seizure of a suspected WMD site and major intelligence node at Tharthar Palace, located about 56 miles northwest of Baghdad. This stronghold was one of the top five targets for the JSOTF. We were to provide helicopter

air refueling (HAR) to a 10-ship, rotary-wing assault package consisting of four MH-47E, four MH-60L troop transports, and two MH-60K gunships, carrying a full complement of Special Forces soldiers.

Both the route to the palace and the HAR track were well inside the Iraqi's integrated air defense network. This area consisted of at least 10 known strategic and tactical surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems, including SA-2, SA-6, SA-8, and an unknown number of shoulder-fired SAMS and anti-aircraft artillery



**"MC-130E and MH-47 Evading the Missile"**

**Accession number 2004.194 by Artist**

**Jack Lutzow.** Courtesy USAF Art Collection

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(AAA) pieces. The volume and diversity of the threats, the Iraqi's extensive radar coverage, and the resulting requirement to fly low-level made detection by the enemy likely. Because of the route, package size, target, and threats, this mission earned a 'High Risk' rating on our risk assessment analysis and thus required the JSOTF commander's endorsement to execute. This was also the only mission where the Combat Talons would plan to pass inside the detection ring and lethal radius of an SA-2 SAM.

We launched from Ali Al Salem AB in Kuwait to a forward staging

base in Ar'ar, Saudi Arabia, as a three-ship formation of Combat Talons. Once at Ar'ar, the lead Talon developed a significant fuel leak during ground refueling and had to abort. Down one aircraft and at minimum force (2-ship) to complete the mission, both Talons took on as much fuel as we could hold and then launched. Just prior to our takeoff, a fighter sweep was sent through our planned route of flight to seek out and suppress any SAM and AAA sites. As we launched from Ar'ar, we were warned of an active Spoon Rest target acquisition radar 10 miles from the palace.

CMSgt Outten, the flight engineer on the lead Talon observed, "The plan was to refuel the formation at 500' AGL and drag them north and then east after a 90 degree turn north of the Euphrates River. The conditions were typical for low-level flying in the AOR that night, with little to no lunar illumination and a lot of suspended particulate matter at the refueling altitude. Cultural lighting was sparse to the left of track and villages in the distance on the right provided some needed ambient lighting for our NVGs. In the distance, the Euphrates was clearly defined with lights."

The 2-ship formation of Talons entered enemy airspace at low-level with good Talon weather: dark, dusty, poor visibility, and hardly any lunar illumination. During our planning we had anticipated not being able to see many lights from cultural built-up areas. To our surprise, as each few miles would come into view, the incredible number of lights illuminating the banks of the Euphrates River and gave us a welcome, short snapshot of our location. Lt Col Chris Stegner, the navigator on the second Talon remembered being "thankful for the low altitude, dark grey paint, and hazy night, knowing our chances of survival given the perceived number of inhabitants in the area, were greatly enhanced, outside a little window of opportunity to detect us." To those on the ground, the only thing indicating our presence was the momentary sound of 16,000 horses passing overhead in the dark.

We made an uneventful rendezvous with the helicopter assault force. Lead took the six MH-60s, while we refueled

the four MH-47E helicopters transporting the ground assault teams. Refueling the helicopters from heavy, fuel-laden Talons at low level was a challenge as we were not very maneuverable and we were flying very near our minimum operating airspeed. We only had a 3-5 knot margin above power-off stall speed.

As the formation was refueling the first helicopters, the copilot of the lead Talon called out, "Missile launch, 3 o'clock." With two MH-60s plugged into lead's hoses and refueling, they were restricted in their options. We also saw the bright flash and glowing ball of the missile launch at our 2 o'clock position. The lead Talon and the MH-60 element were about a mile in front of our element. Chief Outten recalls making a conscious decision to not discharge any flares for fear of damaging the helicopters still connected to our hoses. The MH-60s, meanwhile, disconnected from lead's refueling hoses, initiated evasive maneuvers, and lit up the sky with their countermeasure flares. Once the helicopters were clear, but with the refueling hoses still extended, the aircraft commander of the lead Talon began a straight-ahead descent at the maximum speed allowed with extended hoses—130 kts. With his hoses coming back into the pods and the Talon at extremely low level, the years of training and preparation took over. Between blacked-out, low-level flying, de-conflicting with all the helicopters, and avoiding the Iraqi threats, the crew of the lead Talon ensured they would survive to complete the mission.

With the hoses finally in, Lead broke right and descended across our flight path, coming extremely close to the ground. The MH-60s also descended and scattered into the night. Our Electronic Warfare Officer had not gotten any radar guidance indications, meaning the SAM had been either Infrared (IR) guided or had been visually launched. The missile missed Lead but the countermeasure flares dispensed by the Talon caused our night vision goggles (NVGs) to 'wash out' and we quickly lost sight of lead and all six MH-60s. We still had an MH-47 on one of our hoses and together we began a slow turn away from the SAM launch site.

The six MH-60s were still close-by and somewhere in front of us when the right loadmaster spotted another bright flash and a smoke trail approaching our aircraft from the 3 o'clock position. Two of the four MH-47s also detected that missile launch and immediately dispensed flares and broke away. Standard defensive tactics would have had us also launch flares, break away from the MH-47s, accelerate and descend, but this was impossible in our situation. Extending away from the Chinooks would have put us at grave risk of hitting one of the MH-60s that were somewhere close by and in front of us. Additionally, breaking formation integrity with our element would have left the remaining MH-47s without fuel and there was no guarantee we could have rejoined with them if our element scattered into the night. This would have jeopardized the mission, not to mention the assault teams and the helicopters. We also elected not to launch flares because we still had an MH-47 refueling on the hose and were concerned our flares could cause damage to that aircraft.

The other two MH-47s had ejected flares, so we were forced to rely on their countermeasures to decoy any IR threats to our element. We made a slow descending turn and watched as the missile passed overhead. We regrouped with all the MH-47s and began searching for the six MH-60s and the lead Talon. Meanwhile, lead had been engaged by a third missile launch from a probable shoulder-fired SAM. We were able to acquire the 6-ship of MH-60s on track and just in front of us, but had to maneuver further to avoid them. We were now leading the entire formation, with the MH-47 package in front of the MH-60s. We refueled the last two MH-47s just after crossing the Euphrates River, a major line of communication with villages and roads, and continued down track to top off the four MH-47s just prior to the end of the air refueling track.

Meanwhile, lead was attempting to gather the MH-60s northwest of the planned refueling track, in the Al Jazirah desert. As we approached the end of our route, we realized that our MH-47 package had drifted off course and were several miles left of the planned route, also in the Al Jazirah desert. By listening to inter-plane communications, we knew the lead Talon and the 6-ship of MH-60s had formed up somewhere behind us. The significance of this mission and the fuel state of the helicopter package drove us to reverse course and set up for a head-on offset rejoin to make the final HAR, putting us

beak-to-beak with the lead Talon.

By now, the visibility had significantly deteriorated. The navigators were able to pick up the first element of other Talon and the MH-60s, and quickly directed an abrupt climbing left turn as we got a visual with the lead helicopter—we came pretty close. The navs then picked up our MH-47 package and we completed a second refueling with them. As soon as that refueling was complete, both Talons left the helicopters, broke up our own formation, and followed separate egress routes to a high altitude tanker track in Saudi Arabian airspace. We then rejoined, refueled with a KC-135 element, and loitered to provide on-call helicopter air refueling for the formation egressing from the objective area.

We had spent weeks planning this mission with the helicopter assault force. But, other than refueling the helicopters, very little went as planned. It was the teamwork of the seasoned Combat Talon crews and the extraordinary capabilities of the MC-130E Combat Talon that helped SOF put 'boots on the ground' that night at Tharthar palace.



*About the Authors: Col Bruce Taylor is the Deputy Commander, Air Force Special Operations Air Warfare Center. He directs formal and specialized training and education programs to produce combat-ready Air Commandos. Lt Col Chris Stegner is the Deputy Commander, 919 Operations Group. He is responsible for group resources and execution of the training budget. CMSgt Tyler Outten is the 919 Operations Group Superintendent. He advises the Commander on Operations Group enlisted affairs.*

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# Medal of Honor Recipient



## *Capt Hilliard A. Wilbanks*

### **“Little Bird Dog...in the Fight”**

*By Harry J. Bright, ACA Life Member*

#### **The Beginning**

Hilliard Almond Wilbanks was born in Cornelia, Georgia, on July 26, 1933. He was born in his parents' home on Maple Street. He had two younger brothers and a sister, the youngest of the four children. As a boy growing up in Cornelia, Hilliard played piano for the small country Baptist Church his family attended, delivered newspapers, and played football on his high school's team. Hilliard graduated from Cornelia High School in 1950 at the age of 17, enlisting in the United States Air Force. After basic training he was schooled in the Air Police career field. He spent most of the next four years assigned to Strategic Air Command bases.

In 1954 Hilliard was accepted into the Aviation Cadets program, Laredo AFB, Texas. He made his first solo flight in a Piper Cub on July 19, 1954, and received his commission and wings at graduation in June of 1955. He was a distinguished graduate from class 55-P. His first duty station as an officer was Greenville AFB, Mississippi, where he was assigned to the 3506th Pilot Training Squadron as a T-33 instructor pilot. He met and later married Rosemary Arnold of Glen Allan, MS, in 1956. He was promoted to 1st Lieutenant on Dec 15, 1956.

In February of 1959 he was reassigned to Maintenance Officer

School, Chanute AFB, Rantoul, Illinois. After completing this schooling, he was stationed at Eielson AFB, Alaska. While stationed there, Wilbanks qualified on F-86 Sabre Jets as a test pilot. He was assigned as an aircraft maintenance officer. On October 15, 1961, he was promoted to Captain. He received orders in May of 1962 for Nellis AFB, Nevada, to fill the billet as Flight Line Maintenance Officer on F-105 “Thunder Chief” fighter-bombers.

Hilliard and his wife started their family with two children, a boy and a girl, during his first two duty assignments. On March 30, 1966, Hilliard was scheduled to leave for his next assignment, Southeast Asia. A few days before leaving, he and his wife were told their soon-to-arrive next child would actually be twins. They were born two weeks after he deployed. The twins were a boy and a girl.

Before deploying to Southeast Asia, Capt Willbanks was sent to Hurlburt Field, (Eglin AFB, Aux. Field #9) Florida. There he was trained to be a Forward Air Controller (FAC), checking out in the smaller Cessna O-1 Bird Dog.

The O-1E aircraft (Cessna 305C) Wilbanks would be flying was a light-weight, high-wing, tail-wheel landing, single-engine, two-seat aircraft. The engine was a Continental O-470-11, 213 hp flat (opposed) six cylinder machine. Maximum speed was 150 mph with

normal cruising speed of 104 mph. Range was 530 miles. With no armament or ordnance, it carried four 2.75 inch white phosphorous smoke rockets for marking ground targets. Pilots usually flew alone. Although issued flak vests, some pilots placed them on their seats and sat on them; flying low and slow, small arms fire could easily penetrate the underside of the aircraft.

#### **Vietnam**

FAC pilots flew reconnaissance missions each day to observe activity in specifically assigned areas, making them experts on both usual and unusual activity in these areas of responsibility. If any changes occurred, the FAC would immediately be aware of it and report the findings up the chain. FACs were based with the Army units they supported, and this streamlined a lot of the communications and relationships necessary to both provide Close Air Support (CAS) to ground units in contact and put bombs accurately on marked targets. They were the “eyes on the battle field,” orbiting soldiers and maintaining radio contact to advise them of enemy locations and movement.

Stationed at Nha Trang, South Vietnam, Capt Wilbanks was assigned to the 21st Tactical Air Support Squadron (TASS). The squadron reported to Lt Col Norman Mueller, the air liaison



officer (ALO) for the Central Highlands. Mueller was also a FAC and his group was attached to the US Army advisory team with the South Vietnamese 23rd Division, Ban Me Thuot. This group of FACs covered the southern half of II Corps, the largest military region in South Vietnam, an area consisting of approximately 10,000 square miles. Of the 30 FACs assigned, only 12 were on station in February of 1967. Open slots were slow to be filled.

Capt Wilbanks spent most of his time in Vietnam stationed at Bao Loc, about 100 miles north of Saigon, and the site of South Vietnam's military academy. He had been the senior sector FAC. An opening developed at Da Lat, higher in the mountains, during the eleventh month of his twelve month tour in Vietnam. Wilbanks was reassigned to that location. The weather in that region was ideal for vegetable farming and growing tea bushes that were approximately five feet high. The Viet Cong routinely attacked the railway and road traffic in the area, as it was an infiltration point from the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

On February 22, 1967, North Vietnamese soldiers of battalion strength (approximately 560 men) joined forces with local Viet Cong near Di Linh, approximately 15 miles away from Bao Loc. The following day they captured a large tea plantation and forced the owners and laborers to build ambush sites on surrounding hills overlooking the road from Saigon to Da lat. The next day, February 24, a South Vietnamese army company (approximately 180 men) stationed at Di Linh started its morning patrol of the area. They proceeded directly into the ambush. Among those killed were the officers and NCOs. The remaining survivors were captured. No radio transmissions had been made to report the situation. The area was cleared of all signs of the battle, setting the stage for another ambush.

About mid-day, having received no communications from the unit, two Ranger companies of the ARVN (Army-Republic of Vietnam) and their US Ranger advisers from Boa Loc proceeded to the general area to search for the missing soldiers. Capt Darrell Westby, Wilbanks replacement at Bao Loc, flew

three reconnaissance sorties during the afternoon to assist in the search. By the later part of the day he had not seen any signs of the missing unit or enemy forces. In support of the search mission, Lt Col Mueller and Army Maj Robert Snell flew from Ban Me Thout in Mueller's O-1 plane. They met Capt Westby over Bao Loc and took over the search mission, giving Westby time to rest. They soon switched planes, as Mueller's had developed radio problems.

When Mueller and Snell flew over Di Linh they saw the Rangers and their advisors approaching the tea plantation, but no signs of the enemy. There were two flights of F-4 Phantoms in an orbiting pattern overhead awaiting instructions, but they were now low on fuel and had

routes. He flew ahead of the Rangers, staying in constant radio contact with Army Capt R.J. Wooten, the senior American advisor. Arriving in the area, Wilbanks recognized several changes in the landscape, most noticeably the camouflaged emplacements among the tea bushes.

Realizing that the Ranger companies were approaching the ambush, he radioed Capt Wooten to advise him of the danger looming ahead. The enemy forces, realizing Wilbanks had spotted them, opened fire on the Rangers. The two companies were pinned down and the forward positions took heavy casualties from 60 mm mortars, Czech 12.7 mm machine guns, .30 caliber machine guns, and countless shoulder-fired weapons.



**Hilliard Wilbanks O-1E.** (Photo courtesy of Wilbanks family)

to return to Cam Ranh Bay. Before leaving the area Mueller instructed them to expend their ordnance into a wooded section of the plantation that seemed like a possible hiding place for the enemy. Two flights of fighters were en route to replace the departing Phantoms.

### **Wilbanks Joins the Search**

Capt Wilbanks (call sign Walt 51) had already flown 487 combat missions by February 24, 1967. On that day he was flying in the area of Da Lat, when Lt Col Mueller radioed him to request assistance in the search mission. Since Wilbanks had previously flown over 400 missions in the general area, he was familiar with the trails, jungles, streams, communities, plantations, daily activities, and travel

Lt Col Mueller had been circling above Wilbanks, observing the ground movements. Within a few seconds his plane became a target for enemy .50 caliber guns, with tracers streaming past as he made evasive maneuvers flying from the danger zone.

Capt Wilbanks brought in three helicopter gunships to respond to Mueller's call for help. Wilbanks flew into the center of the VC concentration and fired one white phosphorous smoke rocket to mark the location of the enemy forces for the Rangers and the gunships. As the gunships approached the area, enemy forces opened fire from the surrounding hillsides. One helicopter was hit and lost its hydraulic system. The pilot regained control and withdrew from



**Wilbanks' O-1, shown here after the crash, was a total wreck. With its pilot mortally wounded and unable to exert control, the Bird Dog flew into the tea bushes and flipped on its back.** (Photo courtesy of Wilbanks family)

the area. Capt Wilbanks allowed the two remaining gunships to escort the disabled helicopter back to their base. After flying only a few kilometers, Warrant Officer John Grow, Sr., the gunship team leader, received another request for assistance from Mueller.

When the NVA realized the gunships had left the area the enemy renewed his attack on the Rangers, who were now alone in the fight, with no airpower to cover them or attack enemy positions. The situation was disastrous. Vastly outnumbered, the Ranger companies were in dire need of help. That help would present itself in the most unlikely form.

Capt Hilliard Wilbanks, flying in his O-1 Bird Dog, was fully aware of the situation. He knew the lead elements of the Ranger company were heavily outnumbered and in danger of being overrun. Wilbanks flew directly toward the enemy force and fired his remaining three white phosphorous smoke rockets into their positions. Seeing this, Lt Col Mueller radioed him, informing him of heavy ground fire in the area. Wilbanks acknowledged the warning, but continued to press his attack. The NVA immediately responded. The only weapon on his plane was the M-16 rifle that Wilbanks carried for protection if evading the enemy in the event of being shot down. With the

rifle in one hand and the O-1's controls in the other, Wilbanks made three low passes over the NVA positions, firing the assault rifle on full automatic from the side window. This act of bravery (the O-1 aircraft had no armament or mounted weapons) slowed the enemy advance and allowed the Rangers time to regroup and to find safe cover. In later interviews, many of the Rangers stated they could hear bullets impacting the plane.

After his third "gun run" on the enemy positions, (1804 hours, 6:04 p.m.), Wilbanks seemed to lose control of his aircraft. Flying erratically, the O-1 crash-landed in the area between the Rangers and the enemy, the propeller still spinning, and quickly flipped onto its back. Army Capt Gary F. Vote, Army Capt Joseph Mucelli, and Army Sgt 1st Class Clifton Tanksley made their way to the crash site and pulled the unconscious Wilbanks from the wreckage. They could not, however, return to their defensive position as they were quickly pinned by NVA fire.

During the time of the O-1 attack, Lt Col Mueller recalled the departing gunships, which returned accompanied by a Slick (unarmed helicopter). Heavy enemy ground fire, however, prevented them from rescuing Wilbanks and the Rangers. Mueller was able to fly his O-1 close to the area and to draw the

enemy's attention while a medevac "Dustoff" helicopter successfully picked up the US Rangers and Wilbanks. Just as the gunships were running out of ammunition, fighter planes arrived and made attacks on the enemy into the night.

Capt Hilliard A. Wilbanks died on February 24, 1967, while en route to the medical station at Bao Loc. His actions that day saved the lives of over 130 US and Vietnamese soldiers. He was returned to his family and funeral services were held on Friday, March 3, 1967, at Glen Allan Methodist Church, Glen Allan, Mississippi. Interment took place at the Fayette Methodist Cemetery, Fayette, Mississippi. He was 33 years old. He never saw his twin son and daughter.

## The Medal of Honor

On January 24, 1968, the Medal of Honor was posthumously awarded to Hilliard Almond Wilbanks, Capt, US Air Force, for his actions and sacrifice in the service of the United States of America. The presentation was held in Washington D.C., at the Pentagon. Rosemary Wilbanks, his widow, received the Medal of Honor and its citation from Secretary of the Air Force Harold Brown and Air Force Chief of Staff, General G.P. McConnell. With Mrs. Wilbanks were their two oldest children, Tommy and Paula, and Hilliard's mother and father. Also attending were his two brothers, his sister, and their spouses. In the audience sat Col Norman Mueller, Hilliard's commanding officer, and many of the eyewitnesses to his action alongside several of Capt Wilbanks's comrades.

The final sentence of the Medal of Honor Citation reads:

"His unparalleled concern for his fellowman and his extraordinary heroism were in the highest traditions of the military service, and have reflected great credit upon himself and the United States Air Force."

## Dedicated, Named in His Honor

1984- Reproduction of his Medal of Honor portrait that is displayed in the Pentagon presented to the Town of Cornelia, GA, by the US Air Force.

American Legion Post 201 is the home of the North Georgia Chapter 576, Military Order of the Purple Heart



Hilliard A. Wilbanks Chapter, of the congressionally chartered group of "Combat Wounded Veterans".

2000- FAC Memorial dedicated at Hurlburt Field, in honor of the 219 FAC pilots KIA in Vietnam. Wilbanks is recognized by a bronze plaque on a pedestal near the O-1 Bird Dog display.

2001- 17th Air Support Operations Squadron Building, Fort Benning, GA, dedicated in his honor. His widow was presented the Vietnamese Ranger Badge on behalf of the US Ranger advisors.

2001- He was inducted into the Georgia Aviation Hall of Fame, Warner Robins, GA. Lt Col Mueller was present and spoke at the banquet, sharing Wilbanks' story.



**Hilliard Wilbanks** (Photo courtesy of Wilbanks family)

2001, July 29- Habersham County, GA, Community erected a six-foot-tall, two sided, black granite memorial marker on the grounds of the Cornelia Community House honoring the county's only Medal of Honor recipient.

2003- USAF Pilot Training Class 55-P (his class) sponsored a granite bench with his name at the National Museum of the US Air Force, Dayton, Ohio.

2008- Joseph Habersham Chapter, Sons of the American Revolution, started an annual remembrance for Capt Wilbanks.

2011- The Hilliard A. Wilbanks Foundation was established to honor his life, to perpetuate his legacy of courage, sacrifice, and patriotism, and to promote the advancement of higher education through scholarships.

2011- To honor the memory and actions of Hilliard A.

Wilbanks, the Habersham County Board of Education voted unanimously to name their new school in Demorest, GA in his name. The dedication took place on Saturday, August 13, 2011. The keynote speaker for the dedication was another Georgia native, Medal of Honor recipient, Col Joe M. Jackson, USAF retired.

### **Lesser Known Facts**

Hilliard Wilbanks had several uncles serving in the Army while he was youngster. This had a solid influence on him and contributed to his interest in the armed forces.

Both of his brothers served in the military, one in the Army, and the youngest a career Air Force member.

While traveling to Alaska, he was interested in learning to ski. When he arrived there, he learned that another officer had broken a leg while skiing. Hilliard never attempted to ski, putting his pilot status ahead of all other activities.

He liked to hunt and was an avid outdoorsman. While in Alaska he harvested a moose, and in Nevada he took a desert mountain sheep. Playing golf and bowling were also sport activities he liked, but bowling was his favorite as it easily fit into his schedule.

His nickname (from his Air Force friends) was "Willie".

He loved to fly.

The tail number his O-1 Bird Dog was 515078.

In addition to the Medal of Honor, he received the Distinguished Flying Cross, Purple Heart, Air Medal with 19 Oak Leaf Clusters, and the Air Force Commendation Medal. He also received the Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross with Silver Star, along with nine other unit and citation medals.

In 2012, the first 4-year (\$1,000 per year) Hilliard A. Wilbanks Foundation Scholarship was awarded to Dylan Haynes, AFJROTC senior at Habersham Central High School. Haynes is currently attending North Georgia College and State University.

In 2013, The Hilliard A. Wilbanks Foundation awarded two scholarships to: AFJROTC Cadet Alex Ezuka, Habersham Central High School, attending North Georgia College; Cadet Skyler Toney, Riverside Military Academy, who is attending Virginia Military Institute.

The Hilliard A. Wilbanks Middle School has several areas dedicated to his memory. A display case in the atrium, given by his Aviation Cadet Class 55-P, holds his medals, including the Medal of Honor, along with many of his personal items. A half-scale model of the O-1 Bird Dog is suspended from the atrium's ceiling.

### **Sources of information for this article:**

The Congressional Medal of Honor Society, Mt. Pleasant, SC  
The Hilliard A. Wilbanks Foundation, Cornelia, GA, a non-profit, 501(c)3, public charity, established to honor the life of Capt Hilliard A. Wilbanks, USAF, by providing college scholarships to high school seniors and promoting the heritage of the Medal of Honor in schools and colleges.

Mrs. Hilliard A. Wilbanks

Mrs. Patricia DeWitt, sister of Capt Wilbanks

Mr. Alan DeWitt, brother-in-law of Capt Wilbanks



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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