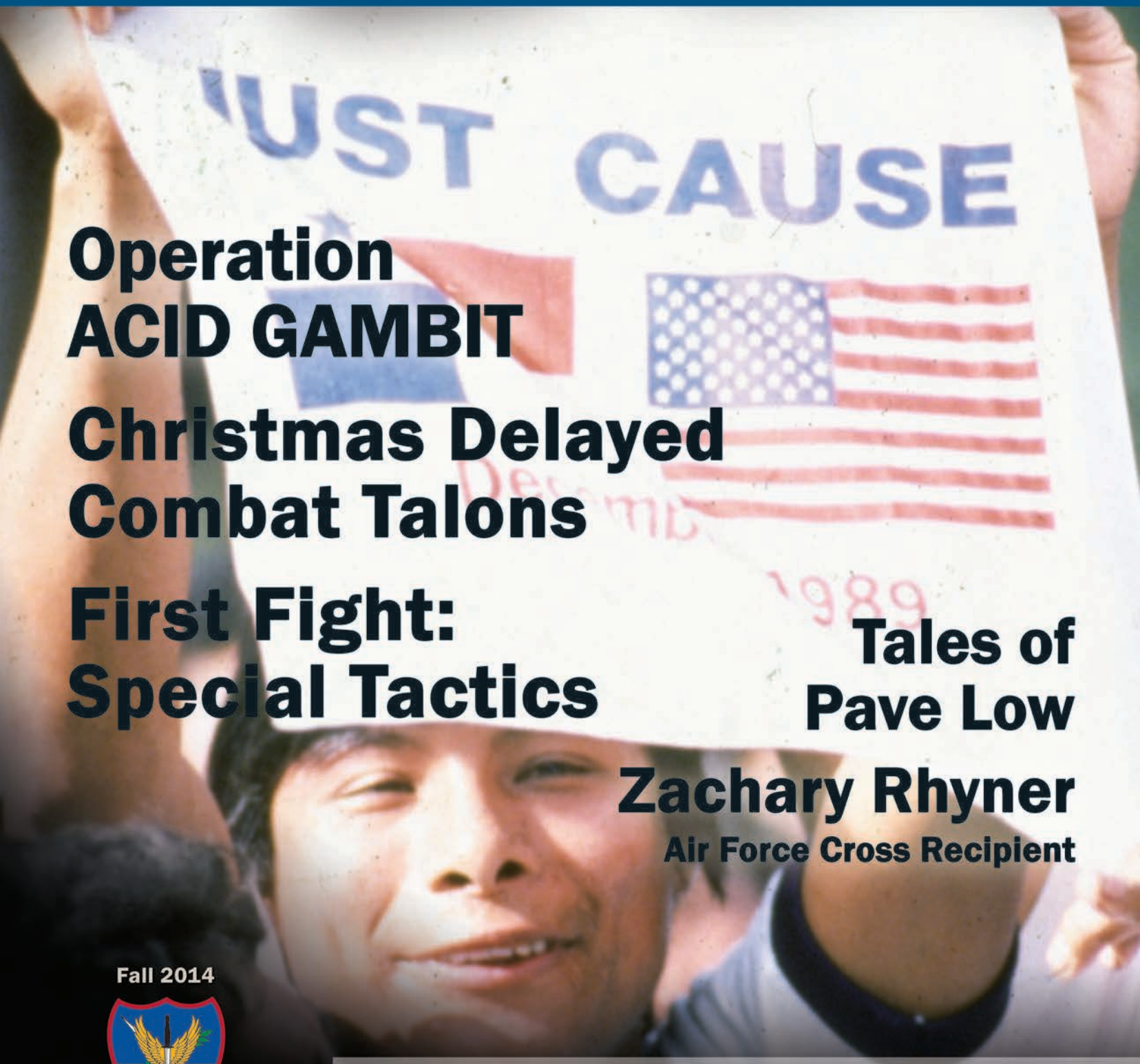
AIR COMMANDO JOURNAL

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



Operation ACID GAMBIT

Christmas Delayed Combat Talons

First Fight: Special Tactics

Tales of Pave Low

Zachary Rhyner
Air Force Cross Recipient

Fall 2014

Vol 3: Issue 3

Foreword by Bruce L. Fister, Lt Gen, USAF (Ret)

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Operation JUST CAUSE

Americans were seen as liberators by a large majority of the Panamanian population.

Photo courtesy of AFSOC History Office.

AC-130H Gunships from the 16 SOS 'Spectres' send a message to Panamanian Dictator Manual Noriega.

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FOREWORD

Operation Just Cause in Panama was the first major joint special operation since the establishment of the United States Special Operation Command in 1987. At the time, 23rd Air Force was a subordinate operational command under Military Airlift Command (now Air Mobility Command) and was also designated the air component of USSOCOM—Air Force Special Operations Command. Preparations to help Panama rid itself of the dictator, Manuel Noriega, had been going on for over six months. That plan, Blue Spoon, envisioned a slow build up of forces in Panama with military action triggered by an event precipitated by Noriega.

When Gen Max Thurmond assumed command of USSOUTHCOM, this strategy changed to a very rapid intervention in Panama. The planners determined that USSOCOM and the Air Commandos of AFSOC offered the only reasonable means of achieving the surprise necessary to depose Noriega and ensure the safety of the thousands of American civilians living and working in the Canal Zone.

When a group of Noriega's Panamanian Defense Force (PDF) troops harassed four American officers, fatally wounding one, and after another PDF unit abused a US Navy Lieutenant and his wife, President George H.W. Bush had sufficient justification to order the intervention. The President directed Just Cause commence at 0100 hrs on 20 Dec 1989. The plan called for taking down 27 key targets within 15 minutes of H-hour. Air Commandos, along with the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment and Military Airlift Command Special Operations C-130s, C-5s, and C-141s inserted the Joint Special Operations Task Force.

As you will read in this edition of Air Commando Journal, there were some very key events that occurred during Just Cause. One was the infiltration into Panama of over 200 special operations and conventional forces aircraft into Panama without detection by Cuban radar. Another was the rescue of Mr Kurt Muse from the Carselo Modelo Prison, during which two AC-130 gunships successfully destroyed the PDF headquarter across the street from the prison. AC-130s also blocked the PDF's "Battalion 2000" from entering the fight at the Pacora River Bridge. Operation Just Cause also saw the first limpet mine attack since World War II by the US Navy's SEALs, against two of Noriega's yachts. SOF and conventional forces combined to seize two airfields: Rio Hato and Torrijos-Tocumen. Jerry Thigpen provides a stirring account of how the 8th SOS established a forward area refueling and re-arming point at Rio Hato airport, in the middle of a tough fire fight. And finally, how the Special Forces employed the "Ma Bell" concept to exploit their overwhelming advantage in air power by telephoning PDF units who were resisting to look up at the AC-130 circling overhead. The SF advised the PDF commander to have his soldiers stack arms and form up for their surrender to Special Forces soldiers.

Operation Just Cause put USSOCOM and AFSOC on the map, eventually leading to AFSOC becoming an Air Force major command equal to ACC and AMC. Just Cause was also the harbinger of the continual string of successful operations through the 1990s—in the Balkans, the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia…all the way to 9/11 and the last decade and a half of war in Afghanistan, Iraq, and around the world. The lieutenants, captains, and majors who earned their spurs during Just Cause are today's Air Commando leaders.

Bruce L. Fister, Lt Gen, USAF (Ret)
Former Commander AFSOC

CHINDIT CHATTER

This issue is dedicated primarily to the first well known successful action by a joint special operation force after the stand up of USSOCOM, Operation JUST CAUSE. We thank all of our contributing authors for providing at least a thumbnail of each of the different air commando forces involved; all serving with distinction. It could be argued that this operation validated Nunn-Cohen Amendment and Goldwater-Nichols Act. As in any large operation, there were still lessons to be gained, but all in all, it was a smashing success.

During the recent Air Commando Association's 2014 convention, we were fortunate to have Mr Kurt Muse as one of our guest speakers during the Heritage Seminar Breakfast. Mr Muse was a civilian prisoner of war who was rescued during ACID GAMBIT, a Joint SOF mission embedded during JUST CAUSE. He provided us with a fascinating rundown of his nine months in captivity at the hands of Manuel Noriega and the harrowing escape after his rescue by Special Forces with AC-130s pounding the La Comandancia next door. If you attended the Heritage Seminar, I am sure that you would agree and would also highly recommend his book *Six Minutes to Freedom*.

As with all our editions, we welcome further expansion on the topics we cover, along with any and all critiques so that we may continue to serve our members with a better product. I also want to take this opportunity to especially thank our volunteer editors: Rick Newton, Darrel Whitcomb, and Scott McIntosh, along with Jeanette Moore who does all the design and production work to bring you the *Air Commando Journal*.

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

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Air Commando JOURNAL

Publisher
Richard Secord / Email: info@aircommando.org

Editor in Chief
Dennis Barnett / Email: info@aircommando.org

Contributing Editors
Scott McIntosh
Rick Newton
Darrel Whitcomb

Public Affairs/Marketing Director
Shannon Pressley / Email: shannon@aircommando.org

Graphic Designer
Jeanette Moore / Email: jeanette@aircommando.org

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Air Commando Association
P.O. Box 7, Mary Esther, FL 32569
Telephone: (850) 581-0099
Fax: (850) 581-8988

Web Site: www.aircommando.org Email: info@aircommando.org

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Operation Enduring Freedom Recollections

The most vivid recollection of those first months of flying combat missions into Afghanistan was my profound, awe-inspiring pride in the Spectre crews, support and maintenance personnel. We launched our first combat mission within 18 hours of arrival because a Special Forces team needed help. We thought, "That's the whole reason we're here." When a Special Forces officer asked us if we were ready to go, I turned to one of our aircraft commanders (then Capt Sean) and asked if he and his crew were ready to go. He could not say "Yes Sir" quickly enough and ran off to alert his crew. Our pride in our performance continued to swell from that moment on.

One night, I met a crew on the flight line after they returned from a combat mission in December 2001. I asked the load master how it went and he said it went well, but he needed some time to get the feeling back in his feet, the cold was winning. The crews measured the wind chill on subsequent flights; it was well below zero aft of the 105mm. But even under those conditions, the only time they complained was when they DID NOT fly. All they wanted to do was get the opportunity to provide life-saving fire support to US and allied ground forces and crush the enemy that attacked us. They did both.

Greg McMillan, Col, USAF (Ret)
Commander 16th SOS
June 2001 - July 2002

Another Great Journal

I was surprised to read the comment from Jody Duncan, (first letter in Hotwash page 7, Summer 2014 Vol 3, Issue 2) who served on the McCoskrie Threshold Foundation (MTF) medical team in Guatemala. She was riding in a Guatemalan Army helicopter and was shot in the foot. I was told the incident had something to do with the withdrawal of the MTF humanitarian team.

The Spirit 03 article (page 30) with the drawings of the crew was a special touch. Readers are going to be impressed. I enjoyed the article, and although some criticism is included, I assume corrected actions led to improved effectiveness.

Cheers,
Felix 'Sam' Sambogna
Lt Col, USAF (Ret)
Fort Walton Beach, FL

Side-Firing Concept

I have just received the Summer 2014 issue of the *Air Commando Journal* devoted to gunships. The following is in no way an attempt to diminish Ron Terry's contribution to Air Force weapons systems. The AC-47 and the subsequent AC-130 gunships have been an integral part of Special Operations since the Vietnam War.

Apparently the Germans had experimented with the side-firing concept during World War I. The Army Air Corps also conducted and experimented with the concept in 1926 at Brooks Field, San Antonio, Texas. My father, General Orval R. Cook, USAF, played a small role in the experiment. He was a flying instructor and engineering officer with the Primary Flying School. The following humorous and short-lived side-firing experiment is based on his recollections taken from his oral history conducted in 1974.

Part of the curriculum at the flying school was to fly pylon 8s to teach precision control of the airplane. As pilots made alternating turns around trees spaced a half -mile or mile apart, the trees would form the axis of each turn.

The pilot conducting the side-firing experiment was Lt Fred Nelson and he got permission from the commander. His idea was to place a side-firing machine gun in the back seat of an old DH-4 (DeHavilland). He asked my father if he could design and manufacture an electro-magnetic trigger for the machine gun, as he would be flying from the front cockpit. This my father did. Nelson then mounted sights on the rear struts of the bi-plane so that he could line them up with a limed circle target on the ground. Nelson then flew pylon turns at 500 or 1000 feet around the target adjusting the sights until he could put bullets in the target with ease.

As Nelson was also a deer hunter, he decided one day to go up into the hill country north of San Antonio and look to bag a deer. He saw an animal on the ground and using the pylon-flying concept, brought it to the ground. He could not land and pick up what he thought was a deer as the field was too small for the DH-4.

He flew back to Brooks, switched to a smaller trainer and flew back to get his deer. When he landed in the field and approached his prey he saw that it was not a deer, but rather a goat. He also saw an irate farmer coming across the field. Nelson jumped into his airplane, took off and headed back to Brooks Field.

By the time he got back to Brooks the farmer had called the Corps Area Headquarters complaining that one of his goats had been shot by an aviator, and the flying school commander, Maj Fitzgerald, was waiting for him. Maj Fitzgerald probably suspected that Lt Nelson was the culprit, but he saw neither a gun nor a goat. He asked Nelson where his deer was, and Nelson gave a negative reply. Nelson also stated that he had no gun with him. As Nelson related the story to my father after the event, Maj Fitzgerald did not ask him if he had the other aircraft out or if he had shot the goat. Maj Fitzgerald gave a negative report to Corps Area Headquarters and needless to say, immediately terminated the side-firing experiment.

Peyton E. Cook, Lt Col, USAF (Ret)

OPERATION ENDUIRNG FREEDOM

Tomorrow is 11 Sept. It doesn't seem like 13 years have passed since that day. Tomorrow I will walk down Corridor 4 here at the Pentagon and try to imagine and remember appropriately.

As an AFSOC chaplain, by 4 Oct I was in Uzbekistan. As part of the early group there, we were without support and literally sleeping in three inches of dust (poof!) in an old flapping tent not very far from a marked unexploded ordinance but...

Our CC permitted and encouraged me to pray God's sovereign protection over our Gunships, Pappas, and Talons as we launched OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM. What an incredible privilege to launch and receive each mission. Earlier this week a colleague was kind enough to share with me news about being included in the Air Commando Journal (Vol 3, Issue 2, Summer 2014) in an awesome article on page 39. To spend those days among AFSOC warrior heroes was truly amazing. All the names came back to me immediately.

We experienced incredible memories, ministry and protection for which I thank God.

We will not forget our countrymen lost on 9-11-01 and all with whom we have been privileged to serve in time of war since then!!

Very Respectfully,
DAVID L. CARR, Ch, Lt Col, USAF
Chief, Plans and Programs
Office of the Chief of Chaplains
HQ USAF/HCX
Washington, DC

Secret War in Laos

I enjoyed the article on the Secret War in Laos, an often little-told chapter of how SOF fought a secret and clandestine war to prevent the communist takeover of the Royal Laotian Government from the mid-50's up to 1974. Army Green Berets and USAF Air Commandos admirably performed a variety of advisor functions and participated in combat alongside Laotian Army and Royal Air Force units in such operations as HOTFOOT, WHITESTAR, Operation WATERPUMP (T-28 program), and later Project 404. Air Commandos of the 56th SOW also provided essential combat air support to beleaguered forces throughout Laos, reinforced with a variety of gunship fires. CCTs, Weathermen, and Butterfly and Raven FACs were also participants.

I would like to pass on to fellow members an announcement of my two-year history project to capture these exploits in a 500 – 600 page book, titled "The Ambassadors SOF – Green Berets and Air Commandos in the Secret War in Laos." I am eleven months into the non-profit, for historical use only, project with several interviews from Veterans of Laos, along with their inputs of pictures, maps, and journals. This work is intended to be in completed first draft form by December 2015. The detailed, historically accurate, and highly illustrated book will be provided free to Veterans who assist via a computer SD card. Anyone wishing to participate can reach me at the following: Home Phone: 678 546-0507 and e-mail address: GB5253@aol.com.

Joseph D. Celeski, Col
US Army Special Forces (Ret)
Member #5760
Buford, GA

ACA Convention

Got to tell ya! This 2014 reunion/banquet was the best ever. Awesome being on the Gulf. The folks at Ramada were wonderful hosts. Hospitality room drinks were a wee bit high priced limiting rampant jocularity. Maybe a good thing. Our speakers were mesmerizing. Kudos to all the work-a-bees. Such an honor to be in the presence of such magnificent warriors. Looking forward to next year.

Gary M. Craft, MSgt, USAF (Ret)
Mount Dora, FL

Dennis

Thank you so much for an incredible weekend and a spectacular banquet! You and your team are top notch!

God Bless Brother!
John Alvarez, Col, USAF (Ret)
Commuter Air Technology, Inc.
Tampa, FL

Posted in Congressman Jeff Miller's newsletter: In the District

Vicki and I attended the 2014 Air Commando Association (ACA) convention and reunion Saturday in Fort Walton Beach, at which former Chief of Staff of the U.S. Air Force and Air Commando Hall of Famer General Norton 'Norty' Schwartz (Ret) was the guest of honor. The ACA recognized the 25th anniversary of Operation Just Cause in Panama and the ACA members that helped depose Dictator Manuel Noriega. Inducted into the ACA hall of fame this year were Colonel John Alvarez (Ret), Colonel Craig Brotchie (Ret), Colonel Al Greenup (Ret), Colonel Gene Ronsick (Ret), Chief Master Sergeant Randy Anderson (Ret), and as a Honorary Hall of Fame Commando, Doolittle Raider, Colonel Richard Cole. It is always humbling to visit with the many fearless airmen that call Northwest Florida home, and I salute the courage of the Air Commandos who have bravely served and those future Commandos who will carry on the proud tradition of service, sacrifice, and dominance.

Congressman Jeff Miller

Air Commando Foundation Support

Thank you for the ACA's support to one of our CCT family! His spouse underwent a kidney transplant and your support ($500) offset the cost of lodging and meals for the family staying at the hospital, seventy miles from home, during her stay at the hospital. She was released today and doing great. The family was overly grateful for your support – you made the life saving surgery a positive experience for them. We are forever grateful for your support to our Commandos!

Sincerely,
Mark McGill, Commander
24 STS Pope AAF, NC

Submissions can be e-mailed to info@aircommando.org or mailed to Hot Wash c/o Air Commando Association, P.O. Box 7, Mary Esther, FL 32569. ACA reserves the right to eliminate those that are not deemed appropriate. Thank you in advance for your interest in the Air Commando Journal.

LAOS: THE SECRET WAR

Part Two: US Involvement Begins

By Ramon E. "Ray" de Arrigunaga, Lt Col, USAF (Ret)
Doctor of Public Administration

The major impact of the 20 Jul 1954 Geneva Agreements ended the French rule in Indochina. The signatories agreed that Vietnam would be partitioned at the 17th Parallel into the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam), and the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam). Laos was also impacted. The signatories agreed that Laos would be a neutral independent country, reaffirming its liberation from France in 1953. A coalition government representing the major political factions in Laos would include the neutralists, the anti-communist rightists, and the communist Pathet Lao. Additionally, a ceasefire would occur on 6 Aug 1954, and all North Vietnamese "volunteers" would be withdrawn within 120 days. France was the only foreign power that was permitted to maintain a military presence in Laos. Free elections would occur. The Pathet Lao army would disband and its forces would regroup in the northern Laotian provinces of Phong Saly (map, #10) and Houaphan (map, #5). These two provinces would become areas under "de facto" control of the Pathet Lao. The International Control and Supervisory Commission was also established, consisting of India, Poland and Canada. Its functions were to oversee the implementation and monitoring of the provisions of the Geneva Agreements.

Right wing politicians were furious at Phoui Sananikone, the Laotian Foreign Minister, who had agreed to these terms. In September 1954, an assassination attempt against him failed, but the Defense Minister, Ku Voravong, was killed instead.

This crisis caused the existing government of neutralist Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma to collapse and he was forced to resign. He was replaced by Katay Don Sasorit, whose government was defeated in the next elections in December 1955. Souvanna Phouma was returned to power on 21 Mar 1956, and was still determined to create a neutralist coalition government with representation including the leftist (Pathet Lao) and rightist factions. He was adamant that Laotians could settle their own differences without outside interference and that he could reach a satisfactory accommodation with his half-brother, Souphanouvong, leader of the Pathet Lao.

Over the next eight years, until the Geneva Conference of 1962, the power in the Royal Lao government would shift among the major political factions, sometimes veering gradually from Souvanna Phouma and his neutralists towards the rightist faction and sometimes towards Souphanouvong and the Pathet Lao. Sometimes these power shifts occurred unexpectedly and rapidly. Many were characterized by coups and counter-coups and were periodically accompanied by armed conflict among the three factions.

The Pathet Lao was totally supported by North Vietnam and was, in effect, a component of the North Vietnamese Viet

Minh. North Vietnam did not want Laos to be an independent sovereign state; it wanted to establish and maintain control of Laos through the Pathet Lao, thereby facilitating the conquest of South Vietnam and its unification with North Vietnam. Their plan to accomplish this was by using the eastern portion of the Laotian panhandle as a logistics supply route (later known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail) allowing the transfer of troops, supplies, and equipment from North Vietnam to South Vietnam, bypassing the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) between North and South Vietnam at the 17th Parallel. This strategy was proven to be a major factor (if not THE major factor) in the eventual conquest of South Vietnam by North Vietnam.

It is important to note that although the US did not ratify the Geneva Agreements, it did agree to abide by its provisions. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles was afraid that without US backing Laos would migrate into the communist orbit, facilitating Ho Chi Minh's conquest of South Vietnam. This possibility could – in turn – jeopardize the stability of Thailand. The US would therefore provide military and economic assistance to the Thai government, as well as to the Royal Lao government.

The Geneva Agreements allowed France to maintain a military training mission in Laos to keep the Royal Lao Army as well trained and equipped as possible to counter any threat posed by the Pathet Lao. This training mission was limited to 5000 personnel. As the departure date of the French approached, the Eisenhower administration was faced with the problem of continuing to provide assistance to the Royal Lao Army without openly violating the terms of the Geneva Agreements.

Ordinarily, the US would have established a Military Assistance and Advisory Group (MAAG), but this action was interpreted to be a direct violation of the Geneva Agreements.

The US State Department developed a solution in December 1955. An entity called the "Programs Evaluation Office" (PEO) was created and would remain in place for several years. Dr. Timothy Castle, noted Southeast Asia author, lecturer and historian, states in his book *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam* the following:

> *The Mission of the PEO was two-fold: first, to advise the US Ambassador and USOM (US Operating Mission) on the military needs of the RLG (Royal Lao Government) and assist in preparing the requests for MAP (Military Assistance Program) funds, and second, to provide end-use observers for the military material already furnished to Laos. ... PEO operated as a separate agency, with the Chief of PEO (CHPEO) acting as a member of the Country Team and reporting directly to the Ambassador. On purely military matters CHPEO reported directly to Commander in Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC), and DOD (Department of Defense), with information to the Ambassador.*

The PEO was initially staffed by former US military personnel, military retirees, and reservists. It operated surreptitiously through the legitimate French military training mission until February 1961, when the French withdrew from this arrangement. (In April 1961, the PEO was formally designated as a MAAG).

Throughout this entire period of time, the US Embassy and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) were involved in virtually all functions and aspects of the Laotian government and its military, attempting to influence, establish and maintain Laotian policies that were supportive of US goals.

In May 1958, national elections were held for the Lao Assembly, i.e., the Laotian parliament. The Pathet Lao won 13 seats in the 59 seat governing body. The US was greatly disturbed that the Pathet Lao was to be included in the government. Economic assistance to Laos was therefore halted in June 1958, and Souvanna Phouma, prime minister since March 1956, was forced from office. A new government was formed by the pro-West former foreign minister, Phoui Sananikone, whose cabinet included four members of the anti-communist Committee for the Defense of National Interests (CDNI). Souvanna Phouma was sent to France as the Laotian Ambassador. US aid resumed in October 1958. Souvanna Phouma's attempts at a neutral, coalition government had failed.

In December, 1958, elements of the North Vietnamese military occupied several villages in the Tchepone district of Laos, located east of Savannakhet and west of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) separating North and South Vietnam at the 17th parallel. This was the beginning of the creation of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

In December, 1959, Phoui Sananikone became concerned at the growing influence of the CDNI. He reacted by removing the four rightist CDNI members from his cabinet. With the support of the CIA, Brigadier Gen Phoumi Nosavan (CDNI member) engineered a coup that replaced Phoui Sananikone.

Savannakhet, Tchepone & the DMZ

On 7 Jan 1960, Kou Abhay, a Nosavan supporter, became Prime Minister, but Gen Nosavan was clearly in control.

National elections were held in April 1960. These elections were rigged by the Royal Lao Army with support of the CIA to minimize inclusion in the new government of Pathet Lao members and sympathizers. Not unexpectedly, the right wingers achieved victory in the elections and Prince Somsanith became Prime Minister. Dr. Castle states, "The Phoumi Nosavan-controlled government virtually guaranteed the United States a commanding influence in Laotian affairs. By early August 1960 Washington was optimistic about the future of Laos and quite unsuspecting of the next bizarre turn in Lao politics."

During the summer of 1960, a battalion commander of the Royal Lao Army, Captain Kong Le, became more and more disillusioned by the corruption and growing ineffectiveness of the Lao government. He attributed the corruption to the massive amounts of financial, economic, and military assistance that was pouring into Laos from the US. He felt strongly that the neutralist policies of Souvanna Phouma were in the best interest of Laos. Accordingly, on 9 Aug 1960, Kong Le seized control of Vientiane, the administrative capital of Laos.

The coup was virtually unopposed. Kong Le was aware of the challenges facing him, as well as his limitations. He sought assistance from Souvanna Phouma, who agreed to help, provided that the Lao Assembly was in agreement, which they were. On 16 Aug 1960, Somsanith stepped down and Souvanna Phouma – again – became Prime Minister.

Gen Nosavan was unwilling to accept this turn of events. On 10 Sept 1960, he formed his own government, the "Revolutionary Committee," and relocated to Savannakhet, located on the Mekong River across the border from Thailand, about halfway down the Laotian panhandle. He then announced the abrogation of the Laotian constitution, and with the aid of the Thai military, blockaded Vientiane.

The US found itself on the horns of a dilemma: how to deal with the legitimate neutralist government of Souvanna Phouma, as well as the rebel rightist government of Gen Phoumi Nosavan, which was supported by the US. Souvanna Phouma asked the US to intervene with Thailand and lift the blockade of Vientiane. The US refused to do so.

In reaction, on 4 Oct 1960, Souvanna Phouma announced his intention to establish diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. He also invited the Pathet Lao to discuss the creation of a new coalition government. The Pathet Lao were willing, and ordered its troops not to engage with the forces loyal to Souvanna Phouma, which included Kong Le's army.

On 7 Oct 1960, all US aid to Laos was suspended. The US also announced that its former ambassador to Laos, J. Graham Parsons, would conduct negotiations with Souvanna Phouma. The Prime Minister was presented with three conditions for renewed US support: terminate negotiations with the Pathet Lao, begin negotiations with Gen Nosavan, and move the administrative capital to Luang Prabang where it was felt that the king could exert a pro-US influence on the Prime Minister. Souvanna Phouma refused. He decided to look elsewhere for assistance and the next day began negotiations with the newly appointed ambassador from the Soviet Union, Aleksandr Abramov.

In late October 1960, Souvanna Phouma announced that he would gladly receive assistance from the USSR. The US then began to plan the overthrow of the Souvanna Phouma government by supporting the rebel faction led by Phoumi Nosavan. The US Embassy ordered the PEO, the CIA and Air America to begin providing the Nosavan forces in Savannakhet with military supplies, equipment, and training.

In a strange set of circumstances, Kong Le's forces and the Pathet Lao agreed to join forces against Gen Nosavan. In early December 1960, USSR aircraft began airlifting fuel and supplies into Vientiane. The US State Department estimated that at least 34 such flights were made in just under two weeks.

By late November 1960, Gen Nosavan's forces, supported by the US, had started a march from Savannakhet to Vientiane. On 9 Dec 1960, Souvanna Phouma abandoned Vientiane and went into exile in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. A few days later, Vientiane fell to Gen Nosavan's forces. On 12 December, Gen Nosavan gathered 38 members of the National Assembly in Savannakhet and passed a formal "no confidence" resolution in the Souvanna Phouma government. Prince Boun Oum would become the new prime minister on 4 Jan 1961, and Gen Nosavan the deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense. The US announced full support to, and recognition of, the new government.

On 16 Dec 1960, after a few days of artillery bombardment

and several hundred dead civilians, the Kong Le forces left Vientiane and began to march north toward the Plain of Jars (Plaines des Jarres, or "PDJ"), supported by Soviet transport aircraft. By 3 Jan 1961, the PDJ and its road networks were all under control of the joint Kong Le-Pathet Lao forces.

From his exile in Phnom Penh, Souvanna Phouma continued to insist that his neutralist philosophy was in the best interests of Laos and its people, and only he could unite the neutralists, rightists (Gen Nosavan and his followers) and leftist-communists (Pathet Lao). On 20 Feb 1961, Souvanna Phouma returned to Laos and met with other interested parties to discuss a unified government, eventually meeting with Gen Nosavan in Phnom Penh in March. The discussions with Gen Nosavan were fruitless. However, they did agree on their mutual opposition to foreign interference in Laotian affairs, and their desire for a truly neutral Laos.

At the international level, tensions between the US and the Soviet Union were increasing as each accused the other of interfering in the internal affairs of Laos, both of which were true. US airlift was a major factor in the capture of Vientiane by Gen Nosavan. Similarly, Soviet airlift was a major factor in the capture of the PDJ by the Kong Le-Pathet Lao forces. It appeared that armed conflict could envelop both superpowers.

On 31 Dec 1960, President Eisenhower was briefed on these developments. He was told by his staff that intervention by the People's Republic of China (PRC) and/or North Vietnam was a distinct possibility. In his book, *Waging Peace*, Eisenhower, at the end of his briefing, said, "We cannot let Laos fall to the communists even if we have to fight … with our allies or without them."

On 19 Jan 1961, the day before he took office as president, John Kennedy (JFK) held a final meeting on Laos with President Eisenhower. Eisenhower reiterated his domino theory, indicating that Laos was the key component to preventing the whole of Indochina from falling to communism. At the very beginning of his administration, Laos would become JFK's first major foreign policy challenge.

In early February 1961, JFK organized an inter-agency task force to evaluate the Laotian situation and to provide recommendations for the administration. On 9 Mar 1961, the task force provided JFK a range of options for dealing with Laos, to include occupation of southern Laos by some 60,000 US troops. Additionally, in the event of Chinese or North Vietnamese intervention, a nuclear option was also discussed.

At this same conference, JFK authorized the transfer of 16 Marine Corps H-34 helicopters to the CIA and Air America. These were eventually flown to Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base, about 40 miles south of Vientiane. This set the stage for the extensive CIA/paramilitary war that would evolve in Laos.

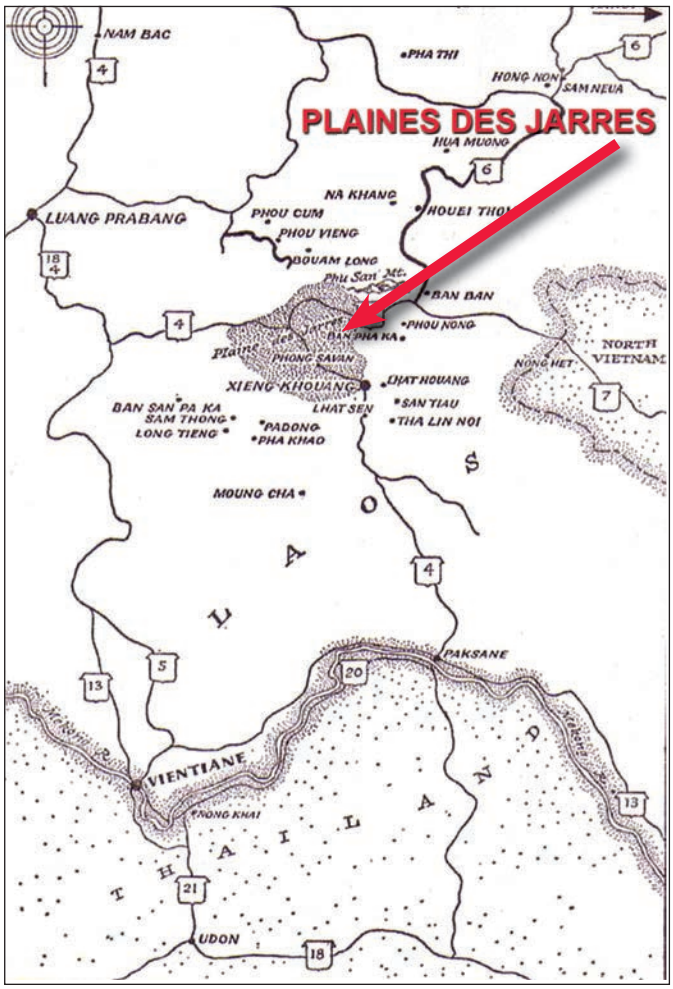
On 19 Apr 1961, JFK authorized the conversion of the PEO to a MAAG. The administration felt that the subterfuge of having a MAAG disguised as the PEO was no longer necessary, since the conditions of the 1954 Geneva Agreements were no longer in existence.

At this exact same time, the invasion of Cuba (17-19 Apr 1961) was turning into an unmitigated disaster, both militarily and politically. JFK was growing skeptical of his foreign policy experts who were recommending active military intervention in Laos. These were the same experts who had urged JFK to proceed with the Bay of Pigs invasion. Nonetheless, CIA covert operations in Laos would continue for a very long time, with extensive cooperation from the Thai government. This cooperation would include Thai "volunteers" assigned to Royal Lao Army units.

As far back as 1957, small groups of Lao soldiers were trained by the Thai military. This training was expanded and by 1961 several Royal Lao Army battalions were also trained, and included artillery training and basic pilot training for the Royal Lao Air Force.

The Royal Lao Army was far from being an effective fighting force. Military planners in the Pentagon were convinced that the Royal Lao Army was incapable of defending the sovereign territory of Laos, in spite of the efforts of the PEO and various US Special Forces Mobile Training Teams (MTTs). However, an exception to this situation was the Hmong/Meo tribesmen situated in northern Laos, in the vicinity of the PDJ. This ethnic group could fight exceptionally well, but generally only to protect their land and lifestyle.

It was important for the CIA to get these Hmong involved in the fighting up north because they were the only viable force that could keep control of the areas north of Vientiane. If and when political settlement discussions would occur, it was important for the government to be able to claim that



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they controlled the areas to the north of the capital. The CIA recruiting message was simple and effective. They would train the Hmong in military operations and provide them with the weapons necessary to achieve this goal. The Hmong were very receptive to this message and within a few months several thousand had received rudimentary training and weapons.

Another problem facing the Laotian military was a lack of leadership abilities within a large percentage of the officer corps. As it turned out, Lt. Col. Vang Pao, a Hmong himself, had exhibited the very qualities of leadership lacking in many Royal Lao Army officers. Vang Pao had determined that the Hmong people, who were scattered in some two hundred villages in northern Laos, should consolidate to several pre-selected sites in the mountains surrounding the PDJ. The CIA and Air America provided the resources to make this proposal a reality. This action was in keeping with the US idea of having a fighting force north of Vientiane that could control this area, as well as providing a blocking force to keep the Pathet Lao from posing a viable threat to the government in Vientiane. The Hmong would evolve into the most effective Laotian ground combat force. They would also suffer unimaginable casualties.

Although JFK was willing to use military force in Laos, he preferred to seek a solution through diplomacy. If Moscow and Washington could come to some agreement on Laos, that would free up time for both to pursue other issues of a higher priority. On 26-27 Mar 1961, JFK met met with Harold Macmillan, the British prime minister and Soviet foreign minister Andrei Gromyko. They agreed to set 11 May 1961 as the date for a truce within Laos.

Five days later, on 16 May 1961, the Second Geneva Conference on the Neutrality of Laos began. It ended on 23 Jul 1962. Fourteen signatories were present. The 14 included: the PRC, Cambodia, France, Laos, USSR, Great Britain, US, South Vietnam, North Vietnam, India, Canada, Poland, Burma, and Thailand.

On 3-4 Jun 1961, JFK and Nikita Khruschev met in Vienna. A major result of this meeting was that the Laotian situation was defused. The US, USSR and the PRC were all in support of a neutral Laos. However, the work of the delegates in Geneva could not proceed without the establishment of a neutral Laotian government.

Souvanna Phouma, Souphanouvong (leader of the Pathet Lao) and Boun Oum met in late June 1961 and again in early October 1961 to work out the details of the new coalition government. They agreed that Souvanna Phouma would head the new government, but were bitterly deadlocked as to the allocation of cabinet ministries, especially those of Defense and Interior.

In a misguided attempt to break this deadlock, Gen Nosavan developed an outlandish plan which would go awry. His forces had control over the northwestern Laotian town of Nam Tha, which was being intermittently attacked by the Pathet Lao. He began adding troops to the Nam Tha garrison, hoping to incite an attack by the Pathet Lao, and in turn capture the city. He felt that this would then lead to US military intervention on his behalf, and that Souvanna Phouma and his neutralists would be eliminated from the new government. In early May 1962, Pathet Lao forces did attack, and routed some 5000 of Gen Nosavan's troops, who retreated across the Mekong into Thailand. Nam Tha was captured.

Subsequently, on 15 May 1962, JFK ordered the movement of some 3000 troops to Thailand in a show of force. Ten days later, Nikita Khruschev announced that the USSR would continue to support a neutral Laos. Massive US intervention in Laos was again avoided. By now, the US had reversed its position and decided that supporting Souvanna Phouma instead of Gen Nosavan was in its best interests.

The poor performance of Gen Nosavan's army left the rightists in political and military disarray. Boun Oum and Gen Nosavan decided to accept the terms of Souvanna Phouma, who would – once again – become Prime Minister as well as Minister of Defense. The neutralists would occupy seven cabinet seats, the rightists got four seats, the Pathet Lao got four seats, four seats were left uncommitted. On 11 Jun 1962, Souvanna Phouma announced his new government, and on 23 Jul 1962, the Geneva Accords were signed.

Souvanna Phouma would continue as Prime Minister until December 1975, when the Pathet Lao established complete control over Laos, and its name changed to the Lao People's Democratic Republic. (Note: The Republic Of Vietnam ceased to exist and became part of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam effectively on the day Saigon fell, 30 Apr 1975).

Souphanouvong remained as leader of the Pathet Lao, and in December 1975, became President of the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

Gen Phoumi Nosavan became Minister of Finance in the neutralist government of Souvanna Phouma, retaining that position until 1964, when he was removed from office. He went into exile in Thailand in 1965.

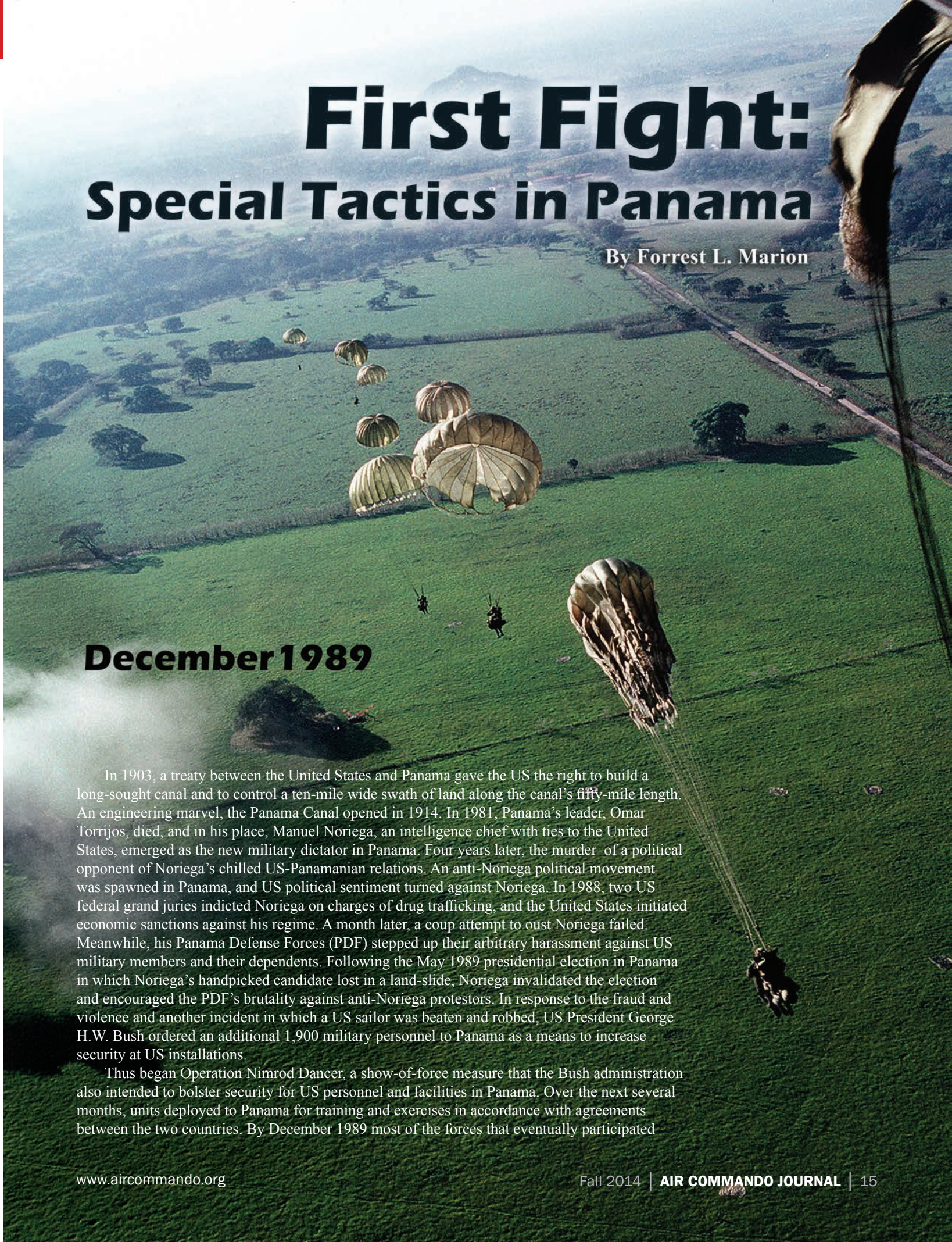
Kong Le became head of the new army in November 1962, and would remain in that post until November 1966, when he was dismissed and left the country.

Over the next 13 years, Laos would be ravaged by intense combat operations primarily involving the US, the Pathet Lao, and the North Vietnamese military. Laos, and most especially the Hmong, would suffer on a monumental scale. However, the war in Laos would be greatly overshadowed by the conflict that was on the verge of erupting in South Vietnam.

About the Author: Ramon E. "Ray" de Arrigunaga retired from the Air Force as a lieutenant colonel in 1982 as a command pilot after 20 years of service. In 1981, he was selected for promotion to colonel, but chose to retire instead. His flying career was mostly in special operations aircraft (C-47, B-26K/A-26A, U-10, OV-10, O1-E, O-2A). He has 707 hours combat flying time in Southeast Asia, where he flew the OV-10 in support of the US Army 1st Infantry Division in South Vietnam, and as an O-1E "Raven" FAC in northern Laos. He was awarded the Silver Star, two Distinguished Flying Crosses, and 11 Air Medals. After retirement, he was a government executive for 19 years. In 1992, he was awarded the Doctorate in Public Administration. In 2002, he became a member of the Political Science Department faculty (full-time in 2004) at the University of Miami in Coral Gables, FL, where he taught numerous courses in counterinsurgency, guerrilla warfare, terrorism, and international relations.

First Fight:
Special Tactics in Panama

By Forrest L. Marion



December 1989

In 1903, a treaty between the United States and Panama gave the US the right to build a long-sought canal and to control a ten-mile wide swath of land along the canal's fifty-mile length. An engineering marvel, the Panama Canal opened in 1914. In 1981, Panama's leader, Omar Torrijos, died, and in his place, Manuel Noriega, an intelligence chief with ties to the United States, emerged as the new military dictator in Panama. Four years later, the murder of a political opponent of Noriega's chilled US-Panamanian relations. An anti-Noriega political movement was spawned in Panama, and US political sentiment turned against Noriega. In 1988, two US federal grand juries indicted Noriega on charges of drug trafficking, and the United States initiated economic sanctions against his regime. A month later, a coup attempt to oust Noriega failed. Meanwhile, his Panama Defense Forces (PDF) stepped up their arbitrary harassment against US military members and their dependents. Following the May 1989 presidential election in Panama in which Noriega's handpicked candidate lost in a land-slide, Noriega invalidated the election and encouraged the PDF's brutality against anti-Noriega protestors. In response to the fraud and violence and another incident in which a US sailor was beaten and robbed, US President George H.W. Bush ordered an additional 1,900 military personnel to Panama as a means to increase security at US installations.

Thus began Operation Nimrod Dancer, a show-of-force measure that the Bush administration also intended to bolster security for US personnel and facilities in Panama. Over the next several months, units deployed to Panama for training and exercises in accordance with agreements between the two countries. By December 1989 most of the forces that eventually participated

in Operation Just Cause actually had entered Panama under the auspices of Nimrod Dancer, and many personnel had already familiarized themselves with the travel routes, objectives, and PDF forces they would oppose during the operation. The US also managed to deploy to Panama, either under Nimrod Dancer or surreptitiously, a number of aircraft that later conducted operations during Just Cause. Those included AH–64, MH–6/AH–6, MH–53J, and MH–60 helicopters and AC–130 gunships.

At the end of September, Gen Maxwell Thurman took command of US Southern Command. Days later, after another attempted coup against Noriega failed, a US military operation seemed the only recourse remaining. On 15 December, Noriega arbitrarily declared "a state of war" to exist between Panama and the United States. The following evening a US Marine Corps lieutenant was killed by PDF guards at a roadblock in Panama City. On the afternoon of 17 December, President Bush met with his national security team. Judging that the discipline and control of the PDF seemed to be disintegrating, thereby threatening American lives, the President ordered the execution of a military operation in Panama to accomplish four objectives, "to safeguard the lives of Americans, to defend democracy in Panama, to combat drug trafficking, and to protect the integrity of the Panama Canal treaty." Later, he added one more directive: Manuel Noriega's apprehension and extradition to the United States to face federal drug trafficking charges. The overall operation was "Just Cause."

In the period September–October 1989, operational planning transitioned from US Army South, US Southern Command's Army component, to the XVIII Airborne Corps, and the lead assault element shifted from the 7th Infantry Division (Light) to the 82d Airborne Division. As of fall 1989, the concept for Panama was that any military incursion would have to be swift enough to prevent insurgents from dispersing into the jungles to organize a meaningful opposition; hence, the 82d's lead role. At the same time, planners boosted the role of special operations elements for Panama. Their numbers included Air Force Special Tactics teams of combat controllers (CCTs) and pararescuemen (PJs). While the CCTs belonged to the 1724th Special Tactics Squadron (1724 STS) and 1723d Combat Control Squadron (1723 CCS), the Special Tactics PJs belonged to the 1724th STS or 1730th Pararescue Squadron (1730 PRS). All three squadrons were subordinate to the 1720th Special Tactics Group based at Hurlburt Field, Florida, the US Air Force's only special tactics group at that time.

Military planners had devised a Joint Task Force South (JTF South) for the operation to be conducted under the auspices of General Thurman's Southern Command. Thurman selected the XVIII Airborne Corps Commander, Lt Gen Carl Stiner, to command the JTF. The 1st, 2d, and 3d battalions of the 75th Ranger Regiment and the 82d Airborne Division comprised the core of Stiner's ground forces. Under JTF South, initial phase operations were to be conducted by six maneuver task forces (TFs), one of which was TF Red. The three Ranger battalions comprised the bulk of Red's initial forces, whose mission was to fly from their bases in the United States and jump into the Torrijos-Tocumen and Rio Hato airfields. Torrijos-Tocumen was both an international civil airport and a military airfield, located just east of Panama City. The PDF's 1st Infantry Company was based there. Rio Hato was a strictly military airfield situated some fifty miles west of the city and was home to the PDF's 6th and 7th rifle companies. At Torrijos-Tocumen, the 1st Ranger Battalion and one company of 3rd Rangers would jump into the airfield at H–hour, set for 0100 local, 20 December. At Rio Hato, the remainder of the 3d Ranger Battalion and the 2d Rangers expected to 'hit the silk' at 0104 hours. About fifty-five minutes after H–hour, "Task Force Pacific" consisting mainly of 82d Airborne troopers plus heavy equipment including Sheridan light tanks, would be dropped at Torrijos-Tocumen. Because the Panamanians could not challenge US control of the air except for a limited ground-based anti-aircraft capability, planners assigned slow-moving US Army helicopters and USAF AC–130 gunships with the primary ground attack role from the air.

The US plan called for twenty-seven key targets to be struck or secured on the opening night, about one-half of them simultaneously, the rest within hours. The top priority, charged to TF Black, was Manuel Noriega himself. As the 1724 STS commander, Major Craig F. Brotchie, expressed, the "one criteri[on] for success in the Panama mission was getting Noriega." Expecting that special operators would 'bag' him on the first night, military planners envisioned the PDF would acknowledge the fait accompli and quickly surrender. Aside from several fratricide incidents, Noriega's ability to elude capture for several days was the most disconcerting aspect of the entire operation. The second most critical objective for TF Black was the rescue of a US citizen, Kurt Muse, who had been imprisoned for running an anti-Noriega radio station. Muse's daring rescue from Panama City by Special Forces operators constituted the first successful hostage rescue by the Army's counterterrorist/hostage-rescue force.

One little known but significant incident on the opening night concerned the marking of the Torrijos- Tocumen Airport by Special Tactics members to ensure the air assault's success in the event of bad weather. As Brotchie recalled, his view on the eve of the operation was that one of the few ways "this thing can fail is to not have the [Torrijos]-Tocumen Airport." But what if fog or low clouds, common in Panama, made it impossible for the lead transport aircraft to identify the drop zone? Brotchie's combat controllers devised a plan for placing an electronic marker at the drop zone (DZ) prior to the arrival of the first aircraft carrying the Rangers.

Their plan called for two MH–6 "Little Birds" to airlift relatively large all-weather navigational beacons to be emplaced at the DZ fifteen minutes prior to H-hour. Based on a successful rehearsal, Brotchie received approval for the DZ markers to be emplaced by Little Birds flying out of nearby Howard AFB. At H-hour minus twelve minutes, a four-man team led by TSgt Robert Kinder and including SSgt Bradley Baxter, TSgt Robert Martens, and a pararescueman, SSgt Ishmael Antonio, placed two TPN–27 zone markers at the approach end of the intended runway. The Ranger-laden C–141s were able to enter the markers' exact location into their computers, and had the weather been marginal they could

CCT/PJ members who made the combat jump into Torrijos-Tocumen International Airport. Pictured left to right (kneeling): Capt John Koren, TSgt Ray Cooper, TSgt Lucky Cook, SSgt Fred Wulff, TSgt Duane Stanton, MSgt Scott Fales and SSgt Steve Borbee. Left to right (standing): SSgt Stan Braxton, *TSgt Jim Lyons, SSgt Steve Cast, SSgt Joel Getzug, TSgt Harvey Perriott, *MSgt Tim Brown, SSgt Dave Holcomb, SSgt Dan Rivera, SSgt Chuck Hibbard and *TSgt Rick Caffee. Missing from photo. SrA Paul Lawrenz, MSgt Ed Lundberg, TSgt Dave Pickering, SSgt Adam Pope, TSgt John Scanlon and TSgt Ron Taylor. Det. 6 members were Cooper, Fales, Lawrenz, Pickering, Pope and Stanton. Photo courtesy of Wayne Norrad, CMSgt, USAF (Ret) (*denotes second combat jump for three members who previously jumped into Grenada)

have relied on the backup measure. At nearly the same time that Special Forces operators rescued Muse, just one block away special operations AC–130 gunships opened fire on the Comandancia, the PDF's headquarters building.

On 19 December, as deploying troops gathered at several stateside installations, severe weather conditions threatened to delay the operation. In California, ground fog and heavy Christmas shopping traffic slowed the 7th Infantry Division's travel from Fort Ord to its primary departure airfield at Travis AFB. More serious, however, was a sudden drop in temperature in North Carolina, turning rain into a dangerous ice storm at Pope AFB. Of 20 C–141s that flew into Pope, half experienced a takeoff delay of 3 hours due to the ice. Pope's de-icing equipment could handle no more than six aircraft at a time. The Rangers and 82d Airborne paratroopers loaded their aircraft on schedule but then, wet and cold, had to sit until the de-icing process was completed.

A small number of Air Force combat controllers and pararescuemen were among those shivering on the flightline at Pope as part of TF Red's forces. Captain John A. Koren served as liaison officer between the 1st Rangers and two dozen Special Tactics members under his command that would jump into Torrijos-Tocumen with the Rangers and control the airfield for the follow-on forces arriving an hour later. But when the scheduled C–130 somehow departed Pope AFB without his team, Koren and his men had to drive hurriedly to Savannah, Georgia, through the ice storm to catch up with their aircraft. The Special Tactics team at Torrijos-Tocumen, consisting of 14 combat controllers and 9 pararescuemen, plus 2 support personnel, was divided among the first 3 or 4 C–141s. Upon finally arriving over Panama, they jumped into the airfield from 500 feet.

Within about forty-five minutes the Rangers secured the airfield. Later that night, the Special Tactics team controlled the C–141s that dropped the 82d Airborne troopers. Despite the drop being made "right on the zone," Col. John T. Carney, the 1720th commander, later wrote that a number of Army "vehicles, howitzers, and ammunition pallets landed in deep mud" near the runway. Some were unrecoverable. Ultimately, the de-icing delay at Pope contributed to the paratroopers' aircraft arriving at Torrijos-Tocumen in several cells of between 2 and 16 C–141s, over a period of more than 3 hours that morning (20 December).

MSgt Timothy C. Brown was one of the combat controllers who coordinated with Koren, and he served as the special tactics team leader on the Torrijos side of Torrijos-Tocumen. A Michigan native who after high school had worked in a central market in Detroit, Brown entered the Air Force in 1977 and initially served as an air traffic controller. He retrained into combat control in 1979. Since 1983 he had served with the elite Pope CCT unit that by 1989 was known as the 1724th STS. At the time of the Panama operation, Brown served as the squadron's "Silver Team Lead." He described the preparations for Panama and the initial phase of the operation thusly:

We had been rotating into and out of Panama for a year. Some of us had been in Panama over the years numerous times working surveys and with [Special Operations Command]. So . . . we knew the target very well. The special ops folks were all dropped where we were supposed to be. When we got to Torrijos-Tocumen, we established internal communications immediately. We . . . [set] up the runway and our equipment, navigational aids, and lights. We . . . helped the reconnaissance element set up that [had come] in on [MH–6] Little Birds.

Next to Brown on the lead aircraft was a 1724th pararescueman, MSgt Scott C. Fales. Although Fales was a PJ, he held a dual role as did many special operators. Initially upon landing at Torrijos- Tocumen, he emplaced a strobe and a radar transponder on the airfield before reverting to his primary job of providing medical assistance for combat casualties. In addition to providing immediate aid, pararescuemen controlled the helicopter landing zone (HLZ) at the joint casualty collection point (JCCP) using night vision goggles (NVGs), infrared chemical-lights, and communications with the tower. Fales personally treated several casualties from chemical burns and at least one soldier wounded by enemy fire, but the heat and humidity were responsible for most of the casualties he treated on 20 December. The morning sun was bright, the air humid, and temperatures pushed ninety degrees. Describing the scene that morning, Fales remarked, "Everyone was just passing out right and left from heat exhaustion. We had them stacked up ... and [fellow PJ] TSgt Ray Cooper and I were just giving 'IVs' like they were going out of style." A separate report mentioned up to ten "serious heat injury victims."

Tim Brown and the rest of Silver Team, both CCTs and PJs, remained at Torrijos-Tocumen for about three days, handling the "string of airplanes" that arrived there. On 22 December, they relocated to nearby Howard AFB after being relieved by follow-on CCTs. Until redeploying around 6 Jan 1990, Silver Team's combat controllers and PJs conducted

a number of "small missions" including counter-drug work, rescue missions, and securing another airfield for the US Army's use. Another 1724th squadron combat controller and future chief, TSgt James A. Lyons, participated in several missions in the mountainous northwestern part of the country looking for possible insurgents, arms caches, and encouraging locals to turn in weapons for cash.

For Air Force Special Tactics personnel, one of the biggest challenges was the simultaneous planned takedown by airborne forces, with CCT/PJ augmentation, of both the Torrijos-Tocumen Airport and the Rio Hato Military Base airfield. The nearby location of one of Noriega's several residences was one reason for the latter airfield's importance.

Although Panama's weak military could not hope to stop the US incursion, a 'worst-case scenario' for the United States would have been for Noriega to have escaped from Panama—perhaps flying from Rio Hato's airfield—to inspire a Panamanian insurgency from abroad. At Rio Hato, the Special Tactics mission was to assist in clearing the airfield of any obstacles, light the field for follow-on airland sorties, and provide air traffic control, satellite communications, and medical support as long as required or until relieved.

The Rangers' 2d Battalion and most of the 3d Bn had been assigned to take down Rio Hato. CMSgt Wayne G. Norrad served as combat control advisor to the 3d Battalion's commanding officer, Lt Col Joseph Hunt. Minutes after 0100 on 20 December, nearly 1,000 Rangers would parachute to the objective. Their opposition would be an estimated 500 Panamanian soldiers belonging to the PDF's 6th and 7th rifle companies. Once matters were sorted out on the ground, Norrad would work out of the primary Tactical Operations Center (TOC), with Colonel Hunt. Accordingly, Norrad was to fly on the second aircraft into Rio Hato. He described the hours at Fort Benning on a rainy and cold afternoon leading up to the flight to Panama:

We made our initial manifest call at noon, the final manifest was 1315 [hours], parachute issue 1330. Col [William F.] Kernan . . . the regimental commander, delivered some inspiring words out on the flight line, and he and the chaplain led us in prayer. . . . We began rigging at 1415, had our jumpmaster inspection, and waited for movement to the aircraft. Given the expected heat and humidity in Panama, a number of the men had dressed lightly.

Yet in Georgia, it was cold and miserable out on the flightline. Prudently, someone decided to issue the paratroopers the old, green Army blankets affectionately known as "horse blankets," which they wrapped around themselves while wearing their parachutes and waiting for some three hours to board the aircraft.

Finally, at 1802 hours, 19 Dec 1989, fifteen C–130s departed Fort Benning's Lawson Army Airfield for the seven-hour flight to Panama. Trained in Special Operations, Low Level, the pilots flew what one veteran expressed as a "miserable low level," mostly over water. With a parachute on, and more than sixty men rigged for combat, Norrad remembered it was anything but comfortable, especially after hydrating oneself prior to the flight and without an adequate means of relief.

As Norrad's aircraft neared the Panamanian coast about

CCT/PJ members who made the combat jump into Rio Hato. Left to Right: TSgt Gary Lantrip, Sgt Jim Holloman, SSgt Gordy Tully, **TSgt Jerry Thomas, CMSgt Wayne Norrad, Maj Mike Longoria, Capt "Jeff" Schuldheiss, *CMSgt Mike Lampe, SSgt Chet Ebeling, TSgt "Carl" Casey, **SSgt Rex Frericks, MSgt Bernie Oder. Missing from photo: **SSgt Tim Ryan and SSgt John Thompson. Photo courtesy of Wayne Norrad, CMSgt, USAF (Ret) (*denotes making their second combat jump, ** denotes pararescuemen).

thirty minutes from the drop, his thoughts turned to the "young troops" and their mission. For most of them, "this was their first taste of combat." One of those untested in combat, SSgt. Chet Ebeling, recalled the final minutes before the jump:

The aircrew opened the door at three minutes out; all I could see was water. I had the job of getting the bike bundle in the door so that I could push it out and follow it on the green light. The aircrew called 1 minute warning; I could see the beach, some houses along the beach, and fishing boats out in the water. Just as I positioned the bike bundle in the door the aircrew passed back [the 10 second] warning. The green light came on; I pushed the bundle out the door and followed it out.

On the Rio Hato airfield seizure, 15 Special Tactics men jumped with the Rangers: 11 combat controllers and 4 PJs. All but one CCT member was in the 1723d CCS. Three pararescuemen were assigned to the 1724th STS and one from Detachment 2, 1730th PRS.

Ninety seconds after H–hour, an AC–130H gunship appeared over Rio Hato. Capt Mark Transue's crew was allowed just two-and-a-half minutes to prepare the drop zone before the sky would be filled with Rangers. Having been alerted, Noriega's PDF was waiting. They had obstructed the airfield with vehicles and had manned Soviet-made ZPU–4 anti-aircraft guns. The captain's crew destroyed one ZPU–4 with a direct hit from the plane's 105–mm howitzer, but other anti-aircraft fire continued. At 0104, the Rangers hit the silk, the Hercules crews delivering them "exactly" on target, according to General Stiner. As parachutes descended, the AC–130 again employed its howitzer, destroying two Panamanian armored vehicles that had appeared. Small-arms fire continued in the vicinity, however.

Well before H-hour, Maj Michael A. Longoria and others wanted nothing more than to get out of their airplane

to escape the heat, filth, and odor. Get out they did, but while "shuffling to the door," at least one trooper fell inside the cabin. Weighted down with equipment, he couldn't get up even with assistance. Chief Norrad, behind him in the "stick" of jumpers, climbed around the soldier as best he could in order to make the jump himself. Late in exiting the aircraft into the darkness from an altitude no higher than 500 feet, he was still struggling with one of the two equipment quick-releases when he hit the ground hard.

Once on the ground, Norrad "chambered a round," got out of his parachute, and moved out. With the delay exiting the aircraft, he was several hundred yards away from the intended location. Meeting up with a group of Rangers along the way, and then encountering Major Longoria, they somehow became separated into several smaller groups. "Movement was slow due to some small arms fire and an occasional mortar round," Norrad noted. Adding to the combat scene, an AC–130 blasted away at nearby PDF positions.

Joining Norrad was CMSgt Michael I. Lampe who served as the 1724 STS liaison with the 3d Battalion, 75th Rangers. Rather than follow the normal procedure of augmenting the 1724th with CCTs from Hurlburt's 1723d CCS, Lampe's squadron commander, Maj Brotchie, delegated the Rio Hato Special Tactics mission to the Hurlburt unit. Since Brotchie maintained overall responsibility for the CCT mission in Panama, he assigned Lampe to be his "eyes and ears" at Rio Hato. Furthermore, because the 1723d lacked pararescuemen at the time, Brotchie also assigned three of his squadron's PJs to accompany Lampe at Rio Hato. The PJs provided a combat casualty collection point in the immediate vicinity of the drop zone.

In addition to his liaison role, Lampe doubled as an assistant jumpmaster on his C–130 aircraft and was one of the last to jump onto the Rio Hato drop zone. By the time his aircraft approached the DZ, the PDF had plotted the transport formation and adjusted their fire accordingly. The chief recalled his aircraft taking numerous small arms hits as it arrived over the zone.

As the Rangers secured the airfield, Capt Mark Transue repositioned his AC-130 to fly a wider orbit in case of approaching threats. Shortly thereafter, the Spectre destroyed a truck carrying PDF soldiers toward the fight and another ZPU–4 the Panamanians had moved into firing position near their barracks. Although intermittent firing in the area continued for another day, an Air Force historian noted that the AC–130's display of firepower "marked the end of organized resistance at Rio Hato."

Although casualties were light, they would have been worse without the presence of a small number of Special Tactics pararescuemen. One of several PJs who performed outstanding work in the early hours of the operation was SSgt Frank Medeiros. Assigned to the 1730th PRS, Medeiros was aboard the first aircraft to air-land at Rio Hato less than two hours after the Rangers jumped in. Upon his arrival, Medeiros' teammates contacted him via the intra-team radio asking him to look for two injured soldiers on the northeast side of the runway. He located a Ranger with a compound tibia-fibula fracture and another with a fractured femur who had already lost a significant amount of blood. Medeiros began treatment of the second Ranger, the more serious of the two, and requested air transport.

Next, Medeiros was directed to the area of the runway north of the highway, where he and another paramedic discovered five civilian casualties with multiple bullet wounds. Again calling for transport, they loaded the plane with the wounded as quickly as possible. Next came an urgent call to help a sucking chest wound victim. While under fire

sporadically, Medeiros hydrated the patient and assisted a doctor with a chest tube procedure, then he and three other PJs moved on and found four seriously injured Rangers. While treating the wounded they again came under enemy fire, which killed one Ranger. Medeiros, wrote Col Carney, marshaled "helicopters into a landing site near the joint casualty collection point (JCCP), and his team loaded two litter patients and two ambulatory ones on an MH–60 while other critical casualties were put into a waiting C–130 and quickly flown out of Rio Hato."

Exhausted, the PJs hydrated themselves with an intravenous saline solution for some quick energy. Resting for a bit, an hour later the PJs used a motorcycle and a recovery all-terrain vehicle (RATV) to reach yet another soldier suffering from a sucking chest wound. The PJs loaded the Ranger on their RATV and drove him and several other casualties to the joint casualty collection point (JCCP) where they were flown out. The RATV that pararescuemen used represented a significant, and creative, improvement over the handling of battlefield trauma in previous conflicts.

Military observers in Panama recognized that the RATV "filled a major gap" in the medical coverage of past conflicts. An after-action report stated the RATV "provided rapid transportation of large numbers of casualties" from casualty collection points to the JCCP and medevac aircraft.

By daylight on 20 December, the Rangers at Rio Hato had repositioned both the primary and alternate TOCs; the former to several buildings situated a short distance from the runway. For the next two days, Longoria and Special Tactics members at Rio Hato remained there, providing reliable communications for the Rangers. Others conducted various missions beginning with the top priority of locating Noriega. He remained at-large until the 24th when he sought refuge at the Papal Nunciature in Panama City. On 3 Jan 1990, he surrendered to US forces and was extradited to Homestead AFB, FL. Meanwhile, all 27 initial targets in Panama had been secured sometime after midnight on the night of 20 December.

By 23 December, Special Tactics personnel had relocated to Howard AFB where they linked up with locally-based combat controllers. Although organized resistance had all but ceased on the 20th, one attack occurred on the 23rd when Noriega loyalists attacked a Panamanian police facility near the US Southern Command headquarters at Quarry Heights.

The Special Tactics men remained in Panama over Christmas. Chief Norrad collected a few dollars from each teammate and went to the commissary to buy a 24 pound turkey and all the fixings. The men, both CCTs and PJs, enjoyed the dinner in the relative plush surroundings of one of Howard AFB's recently-vacated base houses. Moreover, Norrad felt that feasting together brought an unplanned benefit in the bonding of combat controllers and pararescuemen. "The CCT/PJ bond was now in place. War and Christmas together!" he wrote.

The day after Christmas, the Hurlburt and Eglin CCT/PJ members joined a number of Navy SEAL passengers that returned stateside on a Military Airlift Command C–141 Starlifter. Arriving at Pope AFB, the Special Tactics members transferred to a waiting C–130 which flew them to Hurlburt Field. There they were met and welcomed home by the 23rd Air Force Commander, Maj Gen Thomas E. Eggers.

An Air Force historian, the late Eduard Mark, summarized the Panama operation thusly:

On the whole, the US Air Force and the other armed services carried out their responsibilities during Operation JUST CAUSE efficiently and according to plan. It detracts nothing from the accomplishment to observe that conditions . . . were uniquely favorable—American forces were present in the country to be occupied, and . . . there was little about Panama that the United States did not know. Rarely indeed can an invasion be practiced on the very ground where it is to be executed. The local population generally favored the intervention, and the Panamanian armed forces had little stomach for hard fighting in Noriega's dubious cause. The PDF was in any case a small and largely unprofessional force.

In contrast to their Panamanian adversaries, the small community of 1720th Special Tactics Group members, combat controllers, and pararescuemen demonstrated superb professionalism in their first fight since the joining together of the two career fields after the 1983 Grenada operation. A number of them jumped on the first night, when Panama became the objective of the largest airborne operation in roughly 40 years. Of about 3,700 US troops that jumped into Panama on the first night, almost 40 were combat controllers or PJs assigned to units belonging to the 1720th. Summarizing the role of the 1720th in Panama, Colonel Carney stated:

During Operation JUST CAUSE, special tactics personnel were attached and employed with all . . . maneuvering task forces. Their responsibilities ranged from beacon insertions to participating in parachute assaults where they provided air traffic control, established command and control communications, assisted gunship operations, directed marshalling, and FARP [forward air refueling point] operations. In addition, pararescue personnel established forward casualty collection points while providing emergency medical treatment on the airfields.

Carney, the first-ever combat controller promoted to full colonel while still serving in a CCT position, viewed Panama as "the high water mark" for Air Force Special Tactics up to 1989. It had been a long road, with significant improvements achieved since 1980 and particularly in the six years since Grenada.

Forrest L. Marion graduated from the Virginia Military Institute with a BS degree in civil engineering. He earned an MA in history from the University of Alabama and a doctorate in United States history from the University of Tennessee. Since 1998, he has served as a historian at the Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, Alabama. In 2009, he deployed in military status to Afghanistan, as historian for the 438th Air Expeditionary Wing, and in 2011, he deployed in civilian status to the same position. Commissioned in 1980, he retired from the USAF Reserve in May 2010. A complete version of this article appeared in Air Power History (Winter 2012).

Christmas Delayed

Combat Talons In Operation JUST CAUSE

By Jerry L. Thigpen, Col, USAF (Ret)

**Portions of the following article were excerpted by the author from his book, "The Praetorian STARShip: The Untold Story of the Combat Talon"*

On 17 Dec 1989, the 8th SOS learned that an operation in Panama was imminent. The squadron had just completed a series of demanding training exercises that culminated in a successful airfield seizure operation conducted at Choctaw Auxiliary Airfield just west of the Eglin AFB range complex. It was Sunday evening and most assigned personnel and their spouses were attending the annual 8th SOS Christmas party being held at Liollio's restaurant in downtown Ft Walton Beach. Honored guests had begun to arrive, with about 150 people already at the restaurant, when the 1st SOW commander, Col George Gray, came in. An easygoing and likable professional, Gray showed no outward sign that something was brewing.

After greeting several members of the squadron, Gray found an opportune time to speak privately with the 8th SOS squadron commander, Col Jerry Thigpen, and confide in him the developing situation. Tensions had increased in Panama over the past several days and Manuel Noriega, the strongman who had controlled the country since the early 1980s, had declared war on the United States. Gray directed Thigpen to put together four crews and to place them in crew rest in anticipation of a noon Monday launch from Hurlburt Field. Not to arouse suspicion, Col Gray remained at the Christmas party through the dinner meal, but during the break at 2030, Thigpen made an announcement to the group. The squadron had just completed JRT 90-1 the previous Friday and Thigpen relayed to the guests that another iteration of the exercise had been scheduled for the following week. All 8th SOS assigned personnel were told to continue to enjoy the social event but to stop consuming alcohol by 2100. The party resumed, although somewhat subdued, with entertainment and other scheduled activities. Although nothing further was said about the unplanned tasking, spouses and squadron members alike (many of whom had been in special operations for most of their professional lives) sensed that something more than an exercise was imminent.

Earlier in the evening, Thigpen had talked with Col O'Reilly, his operations officer, and had directed him to quietly leave the party after dinner, proceed to the squadron, and put together four Combat Talon augmented crews. O'Reilly was to use the same crews that had participated in the recent JRT where possible. Some crew members, however, had departed on Saturday, 16 Dec, for Christmas leave and were not available. (The old adage that you never, ever go on leave while assigned to a special operations unit rang true again!) Thigpen remained at the party until 2230, when it began to break up and the attendees left for home. He went straight to the squadron operations center at Hurlburt Field, where O'Reilly had assembled a cadre of schedulers and aircrew personnel. With only minor adjustments, Thigpen approved the four crews and directed O'Reilly to put them in crew rest for a Monday morning (18 Dec) launch. With notifications made, everyone left for a brief night's sleep. Before noon the next day, the largest air operation since the Vietnam War was under way and the 8th SOS Combat Talons were in the thick of it.

8th SOS Deploys to Lawson AAF, GA

The 1st SOW was a blur of activity by Monday morning, 18 Dec, when the 8th SOS crews were alerted and reported to the squadron. By 0900 there were five crews ready to brief in the 8th SOS squadron briefing room. (During the previous night the requirement for a fifth crew was added and the fifth crew was put in crew rest for the Monday morning show.) The 20th SOS, along with

MH-47s from the Army's 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, were in the process of deploying to Panama. The 9th SOS at Eglin AFB was tasked to refuel the helicopters and to provide SAR support over the Gulf of Mexico during the helicopter deployment. The 8th SOS was tasked to provide backup tanker support if the 9th SOS experienced an aircraft abort.

Two 8th SOS Talons were placed on alert for the backup helicopter refueling mission. Two MC-130Es, carrying the three Just Cause mission crews, departed for Lawson AAF, GA, at 1100 local. The 9th SOS successfully completed the helicopter refueling mission and the two alert Combat Talons were subsequently released to join the first two Combat Talons in Georgia. They departed Hurlburt Field and arrived at Lawson AAF during the late afternoon on 18 Dec. At 1500, a mass aircrew briefing was held at Ft Benning, GA, which was home to Lawson AAF and also the home of the 75th Ranger Regiment. The crews were given as much information as was available on the objective area and on possible threats to the aircraft. At the briefing the 8th SOS crews learned that their objective was Rio Hato Airfield and that their mission was to airland elements of Task Force Red Romeo utilizing NVG airland procedures.

With information in hand, the planners and crews sat down to put together the assault plan. An intelligence update and an in-progress review were scheduled for 2100 that evening, leaving no time to spare. Because most of the crew members from the 8th SOS had participated in the recently completed JRT 90-1, they were familiar with the task. Throughout the evening, additional special operations low-level (SOLL) C-130 crews arrived from Pope, Dyess, and Little Rock AFBs. These were conventional C-130s with crews trained to augment the Combat Talons. Most of the SOLL crews also had participated in the JRT.

At the 2100 briefing, there were 20 SOLL crews and 5 Combat Talon crews in attendance. A mission planner began the briefing by announcing that the President had signed the execute order for Operation Just Cause, which signified to all attendees that the mission was a go. The Rio Hato air assault force was divided into 2 packages—a 15-ship C-130 air-drop package that was scheduled to drop at H hour and a 5-ship NVG airland package that was made up of the 3 8th SOS Combat Talons and 2 Pope assigned C-130 SOLL aircraft. The airlanding was scheduled 35 minutes after the parachute assault. After the 2100 briefing, planners and crew members assigned to the 2 packages continued to refine their mission plans. The 5-ship airland package was ready to brief its mission by 0200 on 19 December. With some questions still not answered by planners during the briefing, the crews went into crew rest at 0300L.

Four MC-130Es and five Combat Talon crews had deployed to Lawson AAF for Operation Just Cause. After final mission planning, only three Combat Talons (plus a spare aircraft) and three augmented crews were required. Thigpen and O'Reilly had the difficult task of deciding the final makeup of the three mission crews. Because of the anticipated extended crew duty day for the mission (more than 24 hours), additional crew members were moved from Ted Korver's crew to the three mission crews (See Figures 1-3). Korver later deployed to Howard AFB on 23 Dec to participate in follow-on operations in Panama. (Additional 8th SOS crews flew in Panama until 4 Jan 1990, when all hostilities ceased with the capture of Manuel Noriega and his delivery to the United States aboard Skip Davenport's Combat Talon.)

While the 8th SOS crews were in crew rest, a cold front swept through Georgia and onward to the East Coast, bringing with it low clouds, rain, and near-freezing temperatures. At Pope AFB, where the XVIII Airborne Corps was scheduled to depart for its insertion into Panama, a severe ice storm threatened to cancel the launch. Weather, which had played a pivotal role in both Operation Eagle Claw and Operation Urgent Fury, was again giving the invasion force fits. At Lawson AAF the biggest problems faced by the force were the low clouds and generally miserable weather associated with the light, cold rain. The Combat Talon crews arrived at their aircraft at 1500 on the afternoon of 19 Dec. Through a scheduling glitch between Air Force and Army planners, the Ranger force had arrived hours earlier and was huddled behind the mission aircraft waiting for the aircrews. The troops were dressed for the hot, tropical environment of Panama and were chilled to the bone. The crew chiefs quickly opened the locked aircraft and started the gas turbine compressors so that the aircraft heaters could be operated. With the soldiers on board, the three aircraft were warmed up as maintenance and aircrew personnel initiated their preflight duties. By 1700 personnel and cargo were loaded and all were ready for launch.

The three Combat Talons were heavy. The first two aircraft had nearly identical loads—two US Army gun-jeeps and one USAF Special Tactics Squadron (STS) all-terrain vehicle (basically, a four-wheel-drive combat ambulance). In addition, there were 2 motorcycles, 4,000 pounds of Class A explosives, a forward-area-refueling-and-rearming-point (FARRP) system with 2 USAF fuels technicians, and 45 Rangers, plus the aircrew. T. J. Gallagher's aircraft did not carry a special tactics vehicle, Class A explosives, or FARRP equipment, but was loaded to capacity with additional Rangers.

Each aircraft carried 58,000 pounds of fuel, with the first 2 Talons grossing out at approximately 180,000 pounds. The number 3 Combat Talon weighed slightly less. There were approximately 25 C-130s at Lawson AAF—15 primary C-130s for the air assault, three MC-130E Combat Talons and two SOLL C-130s for the NVG airlanding, and an assortment of spare aircraft should any primary aircraft abort during launch.

By 1730 the entire flight line was on the move. The proverbial "walk of the elephants" was under way, with the fully loaded C-130s maneuvering on a crowded ramp area into their takeoff positions. The Combat Talon crews had an excellent view of the spectacle, being parked on a side taxiway just 100 yds from the runway. At precisely 1802, Eastern Standard Time, the first C-130 began its takeoff roll, followed every 15 seconds by another aircraft. The weather had remained marginal throughout the

afternoon and the ceiling was 300 feet overcast with one-mile visibility as the C-130s lifted off into the near darkness of the approaching night. One by one the aircraft disappeared into the overcast. Not one aircraft failed to make its scheduled departure time. By 1807L the C-130 formation had departed, leaving behind the engine running spare aircraft and the five-ship airland formation. There were only a few minutes left for the Talon crews to reflect on the night's events before it was time for them to make their own departure.

Assault on Rio Hato AB

After a short taxi to the runway, Thigpen lined up the lead aircraft (64-0567) for its takeoff roll. At 1844L, the lead Combat Talon began to roll, with the other two Talons following at two-minute intervals at 1846L and 1848L. The two SOLL aircraft, which were not capable of in-flight refueling, and were lighter and faster than the Talons, followed the last Talon 15 minutes later at 1903L. As the heavy Combat Talons lifted into the now darkened night, they entered a solid overcast as they passed the departure end of the runway. The cold temperature helped create badly needed thrust for the turboprop engines, but the aircraft could climb only at about 300 feet per minute to a cruise ceiling of 14,000 feet. Eventually, as the aircraft burned off fuel, the formation continued its climb to 18,000 feet. After the two SOLL C-130s departed Lawson AAF, one experienced a maintenance problem and had to return to the airfield for repairs. Thanks to a superior maintenance effort, the problem was fixed and the aircraft was able to launch and to make its landing time at Rio Hato.

As the three Combat Talons flew south towards Panama, the early portion of the mission went according to plan. After passing the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico, the three Talons were scheduled for an in-flight refueling (IFR) from two KC-135s at 10,000-feet altitude. At the air refueling control point, there were no tankers in sight. High overhead the Talon crews could see an armada of aircraft heading south on the same track as their formation, but none were slowing to refuel the MC-130Es. Eventually, one KC-135 rendezvoused with the Talon formation, and Davenport was first to receive his onload of fuel. With only one tanker, the three Talons could not take their preplanned fuel load. The crew navigators quickly calculated the minimum amount of fuel each Talon had to take to complete their primary airland mission, depart Rio Hato, and either land at Howard AB for additional fuel or refuel with another tanker en route back to Hurlburt Field. Gallagher was second on the boom, and he received his computed minimum fuel.

Thigpen was the last to hook up to the single tanker. He knew that his secondary mission, after airlanding his Rangers and STS personnel, was to set up a ground FARRP at Rio Hato to service helicopter gunships supporting the Ranger assault. Consequently, in coordination with his crew, he elected to onload all remaining fuel available from the tanker, which was about 5,000 pounds more than his planned on load. Thus, number two and number three Talons received slightly less than their planned on load while number one onloaded 5,000 pounds more fuel than was originally planned. If all went according to the pre-mission timetable, and the lead Talon landed at the scheduled time, the crew would have to dump excess fuel before landing to stop in the available runway. During the recent Blue Spoon JRT, however, the Ranger air-assault operation had taken more time than planned, and the follow-on airland mission was delayed until the runway was cleared. There was a good chance, the crew reasoned, that the formation would have to hold and wait for the "runway clear" call. The extra fuel would allow the lead Talon to hold for an additional hour and then still be able to deliver the planned fuel to the helicopter gunships.

The IFR operation was extremely challenging for the three Combat Talon crews, being in and out of the weather throughout the entire operation. Visual contact was lost several times between the formation aircraft, but the operation was successfully completed. Departing the tanker refueling track, the three Talons began their climb back to 18,000 feet and continued south. The two SOLL C-130s had closed slightly on the three Talons during the refueling operation. The number five aircraft, which had to return to Lawson AAF for repair, was still behind schedule but was catching up as the formation flew south. As the formation neared the northern coast of Panama, the 3 Talons began their descent to 500 feet above the water in the terrain-following mode. The 2 SOLL C-130s descended to approximately 1,000 feet above the water and flew modified contours once over land.

Coastal penetration was near Point Mauseto, Panama, with three low-level legs planned before the initial point for Rio Hato. From the time the formation descended to its low-level altitude, it was in and out of the weather until landing. When the lead Talon passed the Panamanian coastline, for some unknown reason, the ALE-40 flare system activated, and three defensive flares were launched from the aircraft. Any possibility of aircrew complacency was quickly forgotten, as the crew scrambled to determine the source of the flare activation. The crew could not determine why the three flares were expended, but there was little time to worry about it. The second turn point was rapidly approaching.

As the 3 Talons approached the second turn point at 500 feet, a C-141 formation passed overhead on a northerly heading out of Panama. They had air dropped Task Force Red Tango at Torrijos/Tocumen International Airport at H-hour. The large, blacked-out jets passed about 500 feet above the 3 blacked-out Combat Talons. The next critical decision point for the Rio Hato formation was the "runway clear" call, expected at 0130 as the lead aircraft approached the initial point for landing. No call was received, so the three Talons entered holding at that point. The lead Combat Talon held at 500 feet, number two climbed to 1,000 feet, and number three climbed to 1,500 feet. The two SOLL C-130s held at the pre-initial point at approximately 2,000 feet. Holding was flown in a fan pattern, with each aircraft passing over the holding point each time it made a complete circuit. The formation thus avoided flying the same ground track to minimize the possibility of drawing fire from hostile forces.

Thigpen's Crew: Standing left to right: Alaniz, Ross, Weiler, Gregor, Thigpen, Ammons, Wilcox and Gorczynski. Kneeling left to right: Bouressa, Harris, Bonck, Abbott and Brackett. Not pictured: Pies, Doyle, Fox, and Cribbs.

The three Talons were in the clouds for most of the holding pattern, which increased the risk to the formation of a midair collision or impact with the ground. They utilized their terrain-following radar to remain clear of the terrain and altitude separation to remain clear of each other. Each time one of the aircraft passed through the radar signals of one of the other two aircraft, the system would sound an alarm and direct an immediate fly up. With coordinated crew effort, the fly ups were systematically analyzed to make sure that there was not a clearance problem with the ground and were then overridden by the navigator. As the minutes passed, it became apparent that the lead Talon would need the additional fuel it had taken from the tanker a few hours earlier.

While the formation held short of Rio Hato, the crews monitored the progress of the action on the airfield by way of the aircraft's radios. At H-hour two F-117A aircraft had each dropped a 2,000-pound bomb near the Panamanian Defense Force (PDF) barracks southwest of the airfield. As the bombs fell, the C-130 formation that had departed Lawson AAF just before the Talons began its airdrop. Fifteen aircraft dropped personnel and equipment of Task Force Red Romeo and then escaped to the north upon completion of the airdrop. The PDF defenders were waiting for the formation, having been alerted 15 minutes earlier when the initial attack kicked off in Panama City. Several aircraft suffered battle damage during the drop and had to recover at Howard AB for combat repairs.

Along with the Rangers, STS personnel also parachuted into Rio Hato. Bernie Oder, the senior STS team member on the airfield, was responsible for relaying the all-important clearance to land for the Talon formation. He had become separated during the airdrop from his six-man team and from the Ranger Ground Force Commander. The PDF continued to put up a determined defense on the airfield as Oder made his way down the runway to the designated rendezvous point with the Ranger command element. Oder observed that the runway was blocked by two large trucks that had their tires deflated to make them more difficult to move. Once linked up with the ground force commander, Oder monitored the unfolding situation as the Rangers moved to secure the airfield. Because of the stubborn resistance by the PDF, it took the assault force approximately 90 minutes to clear the runway of obstructions.

Overhead, two AC-130 gunships from the 1st SOW were pounding PDF strongholds around the airfield. From Howard AB, a contingent of US Army AH-6 gunship helicopters deployed in direct support of the Rangers. As the battle unfolded, the helicopters began to run low on both fuel and ammunition. The FARRP equipment dropped by one of the C-130s could not be made operational, thus leaving the helicopters with no means of refueling. The FARRP equipment aboard the two Combat Talons became critical to the helicopter gunship operation. By 0215 the helicopters had begun to land on the beaches to the east of Rio Hato to await fuel and ammunition. By 0230 the Rangers had pushed the PDF off the main airfield and had removed the two vehicles from the runway. The airfield was ready for the five-ship airland formation.

Using the ABCCC aircraft as a relay, the radio operator on board the lead Combat Talon received Oder's call clearing the formation to land. With clearance received, the lead Talon's navigator quickly computed the aircraft's landing time and passed it to the other four aircraft in the formation. The lead Talon's landing time was established as 0253 local, with number two Talon landing at 0256 and number three at 0259. The remaining two SOLL-II C-130s would land 10 minutes after the last Combat Talon, with five minutes spacing between the aircraft. With the battle still intense around the perimeter of the airfield, the lead Talon departed holding inbound to Rio Hato.

Aircraft 64-0567 was the only SOF-I-modified aircraft of the 14 Combat Talons. Its navigational equipment was far superior to that found on the older, less-capable MOD-70 Talons. Thigpen had requested the aircraft to lead the formation specifically because of its improved accuracy and reliability. The extended holding period had degraded the MOD-70 navigation system on Davenport's aircraft, but Thigpen's system was "tight" and was performing at peak efficiency. As the aircraft neared the 4-mile point on final, tracers from the approach end of the runway were seen by the crew arching up into the dark sky. Knowing that he had the Rangers' gun-jeeps and the critical FARRP system on board, Thigpen decided to continue the approach. Meanwhile, Davenport, in the number two Talon, was having problems with his MOD-70 navigation system and

was approaching the airfield well to the west of his planned track. Gallagher, in Talon 64-0572, was still in holding and was maneuvering to begin his approach.

When the first Talon touched down on the 4,300-foot runway, it weighed 145,000 pounds, which was exactly its pre-mission computed landing weight. The SOF-I system had brought the aircraft down the middle of the runway perfectly aligned for landing (See Figure 1). As the aircraft slowed to taxi speed, Thigpen made a 180-degree turn on the runway and taxied back to the perpendicular taxiway located 2,000 feet down from the approach end. As the first Talon cleared the active, Davenport was maneuvering for his landing. The MOD-70 system had taken the aircraft to the west of Rio Hato. Scanning outside the aircraft with NVGs, the crew had realized the system error and had made a hard left turn, followed by a right turn to final for landing. With the number one Talon clear of the runway, Davenport landed and rolled out as planned. Meanwhile, Thigpen had off-loaded his gun-jeeps, the STS vehicle, and the Ranger force on the parallel taxiway, and had begun to back the aircraft 300 yards down the parallel taxiway to a point abeam the approach end of the runway. As Thigpen began his reverse-taxi maneuver, Davenport cleared the active runway on the perpendicular taxiway.

The number one aircraft had to stop his back-taxi maneuver on a call from his loadmaster, Brackett. There was a tree growing too close to the taxiway, blocking the aircraft's path. Thigpen authorized Brackett to deplane and cut down the tree with the aircraft's crash ax. Meanwhile, being unable to taxi to his planned offload position because of the position of the number one aircraft, Davenport's loadmasters briefed their Ranger personnel of their new position, and off-loaded them on the perpendicular taxiway. As Davenport completed his off-load, Brackett had the tree cut down, and Thigpen continued his reverse taxi down the parallel. A second call to stop reverse taxiing came from Wilcox, the second loadmaster, and Thigpen again cleared Brackett out for a second time to chop down another tree. With the removal of the second tree, Thigpen was able to continue reverse taxiing to his preplanned FARRP location. While the first two aircraft were maneuvering to their final positions on the parallel taxiway, Gallagher landed at 0259, made a 180-degree turn on the runway, and taxied back to the approach end to download his assault force. Within five minutes of touchdown, Gallagher was again airborne in aircraft 64-0572 and headed back to Hurlburt Field.

Ten minutes after Gallagher departed, the first SOLL C-130E landed, made a 180-degree turn, and taxied back to the approach end of the runway. Once in position on the northern perpendicular taxiway, the aircraft off-loaded its personnel and cargo. The second SOLL aircraft was on short final when tracers appeared from west of the airfield. The crew initiated a low approach and went around. Once number five was clear of the runway, number four taxied into position and departed the airfield to the south. Approximately 10 minutes later, number five landed without further incident and taxied to the northern perpendicular taxiway. Once its personnel and cargo were offloaded, the SOLL C-130 reconfigured internally to a medevac configuration and remained in position ready to extract wounded personnel from the airfield.

At the southern end of the airfield, Davenport had reverse taxied down the parallel taxiway and had stopped in front of Thigpen's Talon. He had an identical FARRP system onboard his aircraft and was prepared to carry out the FARRP tasking in the event Thigpen's Talon was not able to do so. The lead Talon already had deployed a fuel hose and had set up a fuel pumping system that was connected to the aircraft's single-point refueling manifold. All available crew members were cleared off headsets to assist the two Ranger munitions specialists in transporting the 180-pound rocket containers approximately 100 yards to the helicopter refueling and rearming point. As soon as the FARRP was operational (approximately 15 minutes), AH-6 helicopter gunships began arriving for fuel and ammo servicing. For the next two hours, aircraft 64-0567 remained in its position and serviced the AH-6 gunship helicopters. As the two Talons sat on the parallel taxiway, the battle between the Rangers and the PDF continued. While ground forces engaged the PDF, the two AC-130 gunships hammered away at the enemy's defensive positions. Tracers filled the night sky as friendly forces moved to the west and to the south where most of the heavy concentration of PDF were located. At the north end of the airfield was the Pan American Highway, and just to the north of it sporadic firefights erupted.

After approximately one hour on the ground, Davenport reached "bingo" fuel status and prepared to maneuver for departure. Available photographs had not shown the full extent of the vegetation growing on the airfield. The photographs

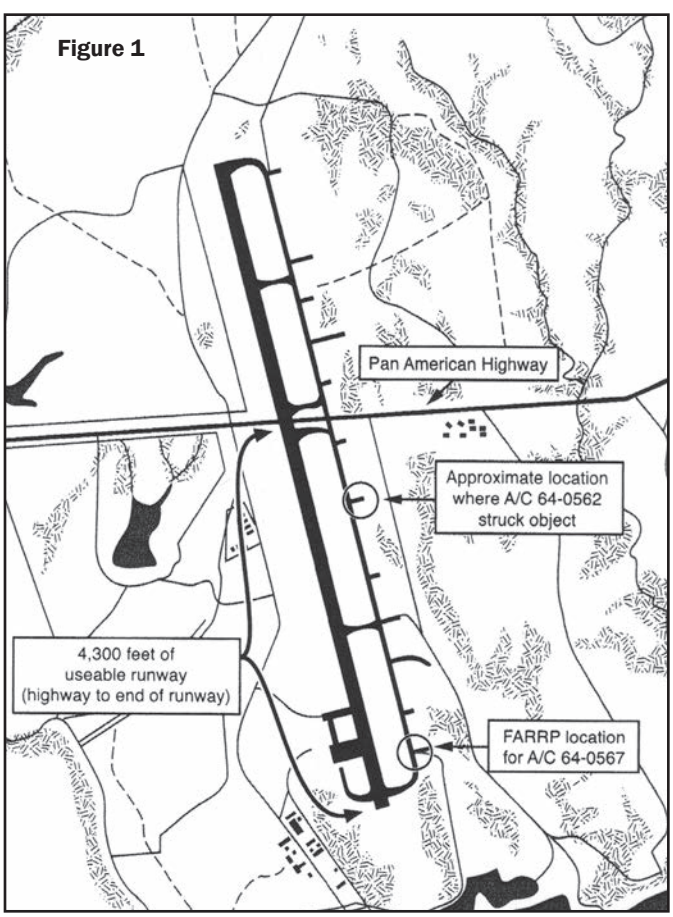


Figure 1

Davenport's Crew: Standing left to right: Long, Ballerstadt, Franco, O'Reilly, Davenport, Prior, Cochran, McCabe and Crisafi. Kneeling left to right: Crayne, Boulware and Dunn. Not pictured: Bonn, Hickman and Sobell.

indicated that the taxiways were 60 feet wide, with cleared areas on each side well past the wingtips of the C-130 aircraft. In actuality, vegetation had grown past the edges of the taxiways, leaving only about 35 feet of clear asphalt down the center. On either side of the taxiways, "elephant grass" grew to a height of approximately eight feet, which totally obscured any obstacles that might be lying within the wingtips of the C-130. And airdrops earlier in the evening had left the tall grass covered with parachute canopies. With the PDF still waging stiff resistance to the west of the runway, Davenport called the STS for clearance to taxi up the eastern parallel taxiway en route to the northern end of the runway. From pre-mission study, the Talon should have had no problem with this taxi route.

Davenport was cleared to taxi, and he began to move north. Approximately 2,000 feet up the parallel, the right side of the aircraft suddenly began vibrating violently as the aircraft taxied between what was once an interior fence line. The number three engine was shut down as the Talon came to a stop, but the vibration persisted. The number four engine was then shut down and the vibration stopped. Davenport continued his taxi utilizing the number one and number two engines until he reached the northern perpendicular taxiway. Here, he deplaned a flight engineer and his loadmasters to look for possible damage to the number four propeller. Upon examination, one propeller blade was found to be bent, probably due to striking a hard object on the ground. The engine could not be restarted with the bent propeller tip. After consulting with his crew and conferring with the air component commander (Col George Gray) at Howard AB, Davenport was cleared to restart number three engine and make a three-engine NVG takeoff.

All but essential crew members were downloaded on the northern taxiway to reduce the number of personnel on the aircraft during the risky maneuver. Crew members who deplaned from Davenport's aircraft moved south down the east taxiway and boarded the lead Talon, which was still conducting FARRP operations on the southern end of the airfield. Davenport was cleared onto the active runway, and he back-taxied north so that he could have as much runway available as possible for the three-engine takeoff. Of the original 8,000-foot-long runway, Davenport was able to use approximately 6,000 feet after his back-taxi maneuver. Skip Davenport, along with John O'Reilly as first pilot, Vinny Franco as navigator, Harvey Long as flight engineer, and Gary Crayne as loadmaster, successfully made the first-ever three-engine NVG takeoff under combat conditions in Talon history. (Davenport was later awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his heroism.) With only minor deviations, the aircraft performed as predicted, and the crew was airborne on its way to Howard AB. As the aircraft cleared the runway and struggled for altitude, tracers from PDF emplacements to the west of the runway were fired in its general direction. No rounds hit the aircraft, however, and the crew safely departed the area.

At the FARRP location, business was booming. The helicopters came and went as they needed fuel or ammo. They quickly expended their ordnance and returned to reload. About every third trip into the FARRP site, the helicopters topped off with fuel. As time passed, with all four engines running, the Combat Talon approached its bingo fuel level. For the aircraft to depart the airfield and make it to the tanker track north of Panama, the navigators had computed they required 14,000 pounds of fuel available. To go directly from Rio Hato to Howard AB required 8,000 pounds of fuel. The other determining factor for departure was the approaching daylight.

The entire airland operation had been completed in total blacked-out conditions. With daylight approaching the Combat Talon would be a sitting duck for PDF mortars that could be directed at it once the aircraft could be seen by the naked eye. With the helicopters needing fuel and rearming every few minutes, however, it was imperative that the FARRP be maintained as long as possible. As the Talon's fuel decreased below 14,000 pounds, the navigators recomputed the fuel reserves and determined that 12,000 pounds out of Rio Hato would allow one try at the tanker then a divert back to Howard AB if fuel was not received. From the tanker track to Howard AB required 8,000 pounds of fuel to land with 4,000 pounds of fuel remaining. (In the C-130E aircraft, fuel

gauges are not considered reliable with less than 1,000 pounds of fuel remaining in each of the four main fuel tanks. When the fuel gauges showed 4,000 pounds of fuel remaining, the crew had to assume that the tanks were empty. Therefore, all missions were planned to land with a minimum of 4,000 pounds of fuel remaining, plus required fuel reserves.)

With 13,000 pounds remaining and within 30 minutes of daylight, the FARRP operation was reluctantly discontinued and the aircraft was readied for takeoff. The heavy fuel hose was disconnected from the SPR manifold and left at the FARRP site along with additional ammo from Davenport's Talon. With takeoff clearance received, Thigpen taxied north on the active runway and made a 180-degree turn. As Thigpen's Talon lifted off approximately 2,000 feet down the runway, enemy tracers were seen off the nose of the aircraft. The crew transitioned immediately to the 250-foot terrain-following mode to minimize exposure to the small-arms threat. Within seconds, the Talon was out over the dark Pacific and away from enemy fire. The aircraft made a slow right turn en route to the northern coastline and tanker track.

There were 11,000 pounds of fuel remaining at that time. Before departing Rio Hato, Thigpen's radio operator (Bonck) had coordinated IFR requirements with the ABCCC aircraft controlling air operations at Rio Hato. Thigpen was to refuel at 13,000 feet and onload 35,000 pounds of fuel, which was enough to fly nonstop to Hurlburt Field. As the Talon approached the tanker track, at least 10 fighter aircraft were on the same refueling frequency and also on Guard channel, and all were looking for a tanker. Ross had replaced Thigpen in the left seat of the Combat Talon, and Abbott was in the right seat. As the Talon continued north, the fuel gauges showed 10,000 pounds remaining. There was no tanker in sight and soon the aircraft would have to divert to Howard AB for fuel. Scanning outside the aircraft, the crew visually acquired a tanker below and slightly to the left of its track. The tanker was at approximately the same airspeed as the Combat Talon, but at about 6,000-feet altitude. The navigator made several calls on Guard channel after the tanker did not answer on the designated refueling frequency. Descending in an S turn, Ross maneuvered the Combat Talon to join with the tanker. As the Talon approached the KC-135 from the aft quadrant, it was visually apparent that the tanker was prepared to deliver fuel at 200 KIAS. In pre-contact another call was made on Guard, but the tanker still did not answer. Perhaps due to radio failure on the tanker aircraft, the two crews could not communicate with each other. The boom operator gave Ross a signal light to move forward, indicating that he was ready to refuel. Ross smoothly moved into the contact position and onloaded 35,000 pounds of fuel before disconnecting. Without any verbal contact with the tanker, the Talon crew had gotten its gas and was on its way back to Hurlburt Field.

Gallagher's Crew: Standing left to right: Vonsik, Reynolds, Gallagher, Balok, Linder, Foster and Joy. Kneeling left to right: Inkel, Tremblay, Harstad and Clark. Not pictured: Batts, Strang, Tagert and Gillian.

The remainder of the flight home was uneventful, although everyone onboard was exhausted from the previous night's operation. Upon landing at Hurlburt Field, Maj Gen Thomas Eggers and Brig Gen Jim Hobson met the aircraft as it parked in front of the 8th SOS operations building. It was 1000 local on 20 Dec 1989. Gallagher and his crew had landed hours before and had already departed the area for a much needed rest. Davenport and a portion of his crew were at Howard AB in crew rest with the aircraft undergoing a number four propeller change. The squadron had performed well during the operation and would be called upon again in the following days to support JSOTF operations in Panama.

In the days following the initial assault on Rio Hato, 8th SOS Combat Talons and their crews continued to support Operation Just Cause. The C-130 formation that had dropped Task Force Red Romeo had recovered at Howard AB. Many of the "slick" (non-AFSOC) C-130s had sustained battle damage during their airdrop and required repair. With the damaged propeller replaced on his Combat Talon, Davenport and his crew departed Howard AB on 20 Dec 2014. All 8th SOS Combat Talons were back at home station at that time.

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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LOCKHEED MARTIN

Tales of Pave Low: OPERATION PO

Acting upon the orders of President Jimmy Carter, on 25 Apr 1980, a United States special operations task force entered Iran to rescue 53 hostages being held at the American Embassy in Teheran. They had been seized the previous November by radical supporters of the Ayatollah Khomeini as his minions overthrew the Iranian government. This recovery force included eight RH-53Ds assigned to Helicopter Mine Countermeasures Squadron 16 aboard the USS Nimitz and flown by USMC crews. They would land with a task force of Special Forces soldiers aboard several US Air Force M/EC-130s at an airstrip called "Desert One," in a desolate area of Iran, where the soldiers would then board the helicopters for insertion into and extraction from several sites so that they could rescue the hostages. Unfortunately, after taking off from the Nimitz the crews encountered a severe sand storm which challenged them to their limits, and only six of the helicopters arrived at Desert One, where it was then determined that one machine had a serious maintenance problem and could not continue with the mission. The on-scene commander, Colonel Charlie Beckwith, knew that the operation needed to have an absolute minimum of six helicopters and aborted the mission. Unfortunately, as the helicopters refueled for their return flight to the Nimitz, one of them collided with one of the accompanying C-130s. In the ensuing chaos, eight troops were killed and five were wounded.

President Carter directed that another effort be prepared. Analysis of the Desert One debacle indicated that a specialized force of long-range, heavy-lift special operations helicopters was needed. US Air Force Vice Chief of Staff, General Robert Mathis responded, directing that nine HH-53H "Pave Low III" helicopters, recently modified to perform combat rescue in night and / or all-weather conditions, be reassigned from rescue duty to special operations with the 20th Special Operations Squadron (SOS) assigned to the 1st Special Operations Wing (SOW) at Hurlburt Field, FL. The aircraft were quickly flown to Hurlburt and hand-picked crews began training with them for participation in the second effort. However, the hostages were subsequently recovered through diplomatic efforts, obviating

the mission. Regardless, the Pave Lows remained with the 20th SOS, developed and maintained their long-range, heavy-lift special operations capability, and became a key element in the Special Operations Command (SOCOM), activated in 1987.

Throughout the 1980s, the 20th trained rigorously, and its crews and support elements constantly deployed for training with other special operations forces (SOF). Its aircraft were also being constantly upgraded with improved communications, navigation equipment, and other enhancements. However, it was not until the summer of 1989 that the unit was called upon to use this capability on an operational mission. In support of our efforts against narco-terrorists in Central America, the 20th received a classified tasking in the Caribbean region designated Operation Pokeweed. The 20th SOS commander, Lt Col Gary Weikel, was ordered to generate four aircraft to fly to the USS Forrestal, which would be on-station at a specified set of coordinates at a specific time south of Jamaica. There those four aircraft would pick up a team of SEALs and fly it to Panama for an attempt to capture Pablo Escobar Gaviria, the Colombian drug lord from the Medellin cartel. Intelligence sources indicated that he would be traveling to an island hacienda off Panama's Pacific coast.

The 20th had most of its aircraft and crews deployed to other locations, and Weikel had to work closely with his maintenance troops to get the required number of aircraft airborne. The plan called for a long overwater outbound leg to the Forrestal, with in-flight refueling provided by MC-130s at low altitude in bad weather; a landing aboard the ship to pick up the SEALs; a delivery leg; and a long flight home. Capt Joe Becker planned the mission, and Weikel led it. The 1st SOW commander, Col George Gray, was aboard one of the aircraft to witness his men in action. Capt Tom Trask was aboard as the copilot on the second aircraft with Capt Corby Martin, and Becker as a spare pilot.

The mission went well

OKEWEED 1989

By Darrel Whitcomb

"Lightening was going off everywhere; everyone's got vertigo. It's just black as . . . You couldn't see anything, even with goggles . . . except when the lightning bolts illuminated the sky.

— Capt Tom Trask
Copilot/20 SOS, 1989"

©2012 Darrel Whitcomb "On a Steel Horse I Ride: A History of the MH-53 Pave Low Helicopters in War and Peace"

for the first three refuelings, but then the aircraft ran into a heavy line of thunderstorms that could not be avoided. The helicopters needed one more refueling to make the aircraft carrier and no safe alternate airfields were in range. The remaining MC-130 had only the right refueling hose working. To best avoid the weather, the pilot dropped down to 300 feet above the water. As the crews fought to hook up and receive their vital fuel, Trask remembers, "Lightning was going off everywhere; everyone's got vertigo. It's just black as . . . . You couldn't see anything, even with goggles . . . except when the lightning bolts illuminated the sky."

During this refueling, Trask was in the right seat, with Martin in the left. The weather was so rough that they fell off the boom several times. Martin and Trask swapped the controls about every 90 seconds because fighting the turbulence was so fatiguing. Martin remembered,

The second tanker had no left hose; ... so it was right hose only. Tom Trask is in the right seat. He gets on the hose and says, "I've got vertigo." I said, "Tom, hang on, buddy. You're it. Just watch that wing," because I needed to take the helicopter when we came off in order to keep us from going into the water. We had plenty of altitude. I said, "Just fly it. Watch the wing." And he did; he stuck with it, watched the wing, got our gas, got off, and carried on. The visibility was bad; we were probably one or two discs off of lead. We had to fly a little low to keep him in sight.

Joe Becker came up and offered, several times, to swap seats with either pilot. Both refused because they did not want to have even a few seconds where two pilots were not in position to control the aircraft. Several other pilots also experienced severe vertigo and had to strictly discipline themselves to maintain full and thorough instrument crosschecks to control their aircraft. All they really knew was that they were flying to a set of coordinates in the midst of a large body of water; there they were supposed to find the Forrestal, which was proceeding to the designated position at over 35 knots.

There was a palpable sense of relief when they began to see the ship on their radars. Then they saw it through their goggles. The entire mission was taking place with the barest communications so that the possibility of detection was minimized. They could see that the carrier deck was clear, so the four helicopters landed on it, with Weikel putting his aircraft out on the angle deck. As they settled, no Navy personnel were visible. One of the Pave Low gunners jumped off of his helicopter and literally went over and banged on the deck door to the carrier island. Navy personnel then came out to secure the aircraft and instructed them to shut down their engines and come inside. The crews did so, logging 12.8 hours on the flight. The sailors were horrified to discover that one aircraft had landed on the angle deck, explaining that "nobody ever goes out there in the dark." Weikel had no way of knowing that.

Weikel and his somewhat shaken airmen then joined the ship's crew inside, only to be notified that the mission had been scrubbed when the intelligence sources reported that Escobar had not traveled as planned. Regardless, the Forrestal crew warmly welcomed the Pave Low guys aboard. In fact, Colonel Gray was personal friends with the ship's captain because they had previously served together on the staff at US Atlantic Command. The captain told the assembled Pave Low crews that he thought the plan was absolutely crazy and expected that at least one Pave Low and possibly crew would be lost in the operation. The commander of the carrier air group then debriefed the Pave Low crews on the complete operational aspects of the mission. Joe Becker remembered:

The one-star admiral ... came in and talked to us. He said that when he was briefed on the mission, he was absolutely certain that we were going to lose a helicopter, if not all four. He had strongly advised against it; didn't think it was possible for a helicopter to fly that far and find a ship in the ocean and successfully get on to her. But he was impressed and we did it.

When the admiral had finished, the captain allowed Weikel to conduct a crew-only debrief. It was an astounding event. Deeply shaken by the experience, Trask felt that he could not do this job for a living, that it was much too scary, and that he was on the very edge of his capabilities. He just could not believe that Corby Martin could be sitting there so calm and cool throughout the mission, while he was so shaken. Trask assumed, too, that he was the only one who felt this way. The crew debrief was an epiphany. Trask recounts,

We get into the debrief, ... in the ward room. They left us to do a crew debrief, and even Weikel, after everyone else had left, nothing but Pave Low pilots in the room, said, "Damn, that was the most scared I have ever been in my whole f---ing life!" Everyone kind of exploded with emotion about how rough that flight had been. Then I felt much better that at least I was not the only one who had been scared to death through that night.

The 1st SOW commander, Colonel Gray, also sat in on the debrief. However, he had a very different opinion. Sure, the flight had been rough, but they had made it, and he was ecstatic at their performance. Several years of hard training by the right crews matched with the right equipment had supplied the piece of the puzzle missing at Desert One – the MH-53s of the 20th SOS were now the validated long-range, heavy-lift special operations helicopter force for USSOCOM. It was a seminal event for the Pave Lows, and Gray sensed the signal importance of their accomplishment. Approaching Puerto Rico, the Pave Lows lifted and flew to Roosevelt Roads NAS. There Gray put the crew members up in a nice hotel for a few days so they could unwind before returning to Hurlburt. Just a few months later, those same crews and aircraft would be returning to Panama for Operation Just Cause.

About the Author: Darrel Whitcomb is the author of: The Rescue of Bat 21 (1998), Combat Search and Rescue in Desert Storm (2006), Call Sign - DUSTOFF: A History of US Army Aeromedical Evacuation from Conception to Hurricane Katrina (2011), and On a Steel Horse I Ride: A History of the MH-53 Pave Low Helicopters in War and Peace published in 2012 by the Air University Press.
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JUST CAUSE

The HC-130s' Introduction and Initiation to Special Operations

By Joe E Tyner, Col, USAF (Ret); contibutions by Lewis Jordan, Col, USAF (Ret)

In the early days of Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), the only long range vertical lift platforms were provided by the Air Force. Initiative 17, which had been signed by the Army and the Air Force Chiefs of Staff in 1984, had agreed that all rotary-wing support for special operations forces (SOF) would be provided by the Army. At the time, however, the 160th SOAR did not have the technologically sophisticated, air-refuelable MH-60s and MH-47s that it has today. In order to meet the need for long-range insertion platforms, many AF Rescue aircraft were transferred to Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC), including the HC-130 refuelers. In 1989 AFSOC was not a separate major command. All special operations and combat rescue aircraft fell under Twenty-third Air Force, under Military Airlift Command (MAC, now Air Mobility Command). AFSOC would formally activate as a major command in 1990, shortly after Operation JUST CAUSE.

The US intervention in the Republic of Panama in 1989 proved the wisdom of the much debated policy decision to move some of the active duty HC-130 tankers and one squadron of USAF MH-60 helicopters from Rescue to Special Operations. JUST CAUSE marked the first combat operations for the HC-130s following their transfer from Rescue. The action also justified many of the planned special operations capability improvements for AFSOC's HC-130 fleet. I will share what I observed in the Rescue to SOF transition as a participating aviator and how JUST CAUSE helped that transition. I will focus on the 9th Special Operation Squadron and the HC-130, the aircraft I piloted.

I spent much of my Special Operations career in the 9 SOS as an instructor and evaluator pilot, and later was the operations officer and commander. I was a member of the squadron when it transitioned from the 55th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron (ARRS) under MAC to the 9th SOS under AFSOC. The SOF HC-130s dropped the "King" call sign used by Rescue forces in favor of "Combat Shadow."

On 22 May 1984, the Army and Air Force Chiefs of Staff signed a memorandum of agreement to use scarce resources efficiently by eliminating duplication of effort, resolving Service roles and missions, developing complementary systems, and giving priority to joint systems in their budgeting processes.

There were 31 Initiatives identified for immediate action covering air defense, air base defense, combat rescue, interdiction, reconnaissance, and intratheater airlift. #17 stated, "The Air Force will transfer the responsibility for providing rotary wing lift support for SOF to the Army."

During my time in the squadron, I deployed on several exercises and combat operations, was always proud of the 9th SOS's mission-hacking attitude, and most proud that the 9th SOS was the squadron of choice when helicopters needed air refueling—whether they were Air Force MH-53s or MH-60s, or US Army MH-47s or MH-60s from the 160th SOAR.

Prior to its transfer from Rescue to SOF, the 9th SOS maintained several specially qualified crews that habitually worked with SOF. This special qualification was known as Rescue-Special Operations Low Level (RSOLL). The RSOLL procedures had been developed during "HONEY BADGER," the program to rapidly develop new tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) in the aftermath of the failed mission to rescue American hostages from Iran. The RSOLL crews were qualified to use night vision goggles (NVGs) during formation flying, low level flight, and helicopter air refueling.

The stories told of HONEY BADGER and the development of RSOLL procedures sounded more dangerous than actual combat to a young pilot. The original RSOLL crews talked about many close calls during training missions and the very spirited, and occasionally physical, debriefings that followed. Only the most seasoned HC-130 crewmembers were qualified in RSOLL procedures. Even very experienced crewmembers who transferred into the Rescue community had to wait several years before receiving the RSOLL qualification.

The RSOLL crews were an important part of the joint special operations package. The elements of this team frequently deployed together for joint readiness training exercises (JRT), usually testing several complex scenarios. The joint expeditionary force was ready to go anywhere, anytime, and many Department of Defense support agencies were well aware of the priority to be provided to any of their support requests. It was a source of pride to know we were part of that highly trained national team.

In the late 1980s, as the 160th SOAR began to receive refuelable helicopters, the numbers of helicopters needing air refueling increased. This, in turn, required all HC-130 crews to be NVG qualified. In addition to AFSOC's HC-130s, several of the MC-130E Combat Talons were also capable of refueling helicopters, but their primary focus remained insertion, extraction, and resupply of SOF teams in denied areas. The Combat Talons could not devote the training time to the helicopter air refueling (HAR) mission set that the Combat Shadows could. Many of the Talons had their refueling pods removed for better performance and to remove wing loading restrictions during assault landings. The RSOLL crews were excellent providers of aerial refueling for large formation packages, but AFSOC needed many more crews trained to the RSOLL standard.

The RSOLL crews had developed procedures to fly HC-130s in close formation with NVGs, as well as procedures for NVG air refueling of large helicopter formations using communications-out procedures. Getting the RSOLL qualification was extremely difficult, and because of the squadron's tradition of limiting qualification to those aviators who had a long history in Rescue, the RSOLL force remained limited. Even as the quality of NVGs improved the RSOLL brotherhood did not approve of new Rescue crewmembers wearing them. Moving the HC-130s from Rescue to SOF slowly helped to alleviate this problem.

The transition to special operations began with 39th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Wing, commanded by Col Jim Hobson, becoming the 39th Special Operations Wing (SOW). The 55th ARRS, which consisted of MH-60s and HC-130s would keep the MH-60s and be redesignated the 55th SOS and the HC-130s would form a new squadron, the 9th SOS. The 9th SOS had the only RSOLL-qualified crews and their HC-130s were uniquely modified with a Palletized Inertial Navigation System (PINS) and the ALR-69 and ALE-40 defensive systems to provide threat detection, and chaff and flares defensive measures. The HC-130 training squadron at Kirtland AFB did not have the PINS, so new 9th SOS navigators were training in-house on these systems as part of their long orientation program. In the years before Global Positioning System (GPS), navigation required superior chart reading as well as radar mapping skills. The PINS had a tendency to drift and had to be updated often. Because of this, the 9th SOS was the only HC-130 squadron with a second navigator on its crews.

Col Hobson required all his HC-130 crews to be NVG qualified, effectively ending the RSOLL special qualification. This was a difficult process since the HC-130 schoolhouse had no NVG training and all training had to be accomplished at the 9th SOS. Col Hobson insisted that all crews meet the new standard and pushed some personnel changes to make it happen. The RSOLL term was eliminated in favor of "NVG formation qualified".

Operation BLUE SPOON was the code name during the planning for the Panama operation. Capt Fred Cowell and others did all the fuel planning for the 9-ship helicopter formation deployment from Eglin AFB and Hurlburt Field to Howard AFB, Panama. The deployment was very complex as the tankers' "bingo" fuel at the end of the second and third refueling tracks left only a small amount each tanker could pass to the helicopters.

In the spring of 1989, Joint Task Force Panama was created with the XVIII Airborne Corps as the headquarters. Throughout the summer and fall, during Operation NIMROD DANCER, elements of the Rangers and the 160th SOAR were quietly inserted into Howard AFB. On 3 October Manuel Noriega foiled a coup attempt. On 15 December, Noriega declared that Panama was in a state of war with the United States.

On 16 December, several US servicemen were fired upon by the PDF at a roadblock and one officer was killed. A Navy lieutenant and his wife who had witnessed the event and were seized by the PDF and taken to La Comandancia for questioning. The Lieutenant was severely beaten and his wife was assaulted. These incidents forced President George Bush's hand. The BLUE SPOON OPLAN was taken off the shelf and renamed Operation JUST CAUSE. On 17 December, the President gave the order to execute the OPLAN on 20 December. I remember thinking when

we were alerted, that the movement of helicopters to Panama was only meant as a show of force.

The 9th SOS was enjoying the Christmas holidays and preparing for our squadron Christmas party on 20 December. Several crewmembers were on leave, but despite the holidays the 9th SOS had several crews on a 12-hour alert status. The helicopter deployment required almost the entire squadron so everyone was alerted and local leaves were cancelled. The squadron did not have enough airplanes on hand so the training squadron at Kirtland AFB ferried two additional HC-130s to Eglin.

The deployment began on 18 December, only 12 hours after alert. The 9th SOS was responsible for air refueling and overwater rescue support for five MH-53s, four MH-60s, and two MH-47s between Ft Walton Beach and Panama. The route took us around Cuba and low enough to avoid radar detection. The plan required three air refueling elements on each of the three refueling tracks. There were at least two spare tankers for each track. Each HC-130 formation had at least two aircraft with pararescuemen (PJs) and an RAMZ (air-droppable Zodiac inflatable boat). The first track was the easiest as the tankers could depart Eglin and still have plenty of fuel for the refueling. These tankers would return to base, refuel, and then fly back to refuel the helicopters on the last track.

The second track was more complex and each tanker took off at Emergency Wartime Weights. The Combat Shadows routinely flew with internal 1,800-gallon Benson tanks. The aircraft gross weights at takeoff were 175,000 pounds, with nearly half of that weight being fuel. The plan was to hit the refueling track at 155,000 pounds gross weight to avoid an aircraft stall condition during the refueling. A couple of the tankers had to dump fuel prior to refueling the helicopters, though.

Weather on the second track was also a factor and the crews were a mix of formation and non-formation qualified crews. One helicopter had to do a lost-wingman procedure about an hour before the second refueling and only got back into position a few minutes before starting on the air refueling (AR) track. The formation did an excellent job of staying together and positioning themselves for this critical air refueling. There was no good alternate if the refueling failed other than helicopters diverting into Mexico where we knew the aircraft and crews would be impounded by Mexican authorities and likely compromise the mission .

The third and last refueling was after dark so we used all the squadron's NVG formation-qualified crews. Some crewmembers were not yet fully NVG qualified, but we solved this by putting instructors where needed.

Another problem we faced was fuel leaking from the Benson tanks. The normal configuration for HC-130s was one Benson tank installed. For this mission, though, a second Benson tank was installed to ensure we had sufficient gas for the helicopters and our Shadows. My aircraft developed a fuel leak, but knowing the fuel would be needed on the track, we worked it while airborne instead of returning for maintenance. The two PJs on board helped the crew chief tape up the leaks with aircraft tape and medical tape.

The NVG join-up for the last AR track was uneventful because we found a clear spot in the weather. The clear weather did not last, though, and with helicopters in tow we had to maneuver around clouds. This would not have been possible without the NVGs. Things got more complex when the third element of tankers hit bingo before passing all the needed fuel to the helicopters. The second element's spare tanker maneuvered to a position in the third element. After completing the refueling with the third element, the spare then had to return to the second element to complete the second element's refueling.

All these changes in aircraft positioning were occurring in bad weather with intermittent radio contact. The helicopter mission commander was getting frustrated because he was not hearing the entire request and was relieved when the second element was refueled. We were just about to depart the track when a first element helicopter requested additional fuel. The only spare that had fuel to pass was in the second element and had to catch up to the first element in order to pass the required gas. Finally, with all air refuelings complete, all tankers joined in close trail for Howard AFB.

The five ship formation of Combat Shadows was now on its way to Howard AFB and I found myself in the lead. The formation order was based on where we were after the last AR and since I was the spare that moved all the way to the front during the last AR, that made me the lead. Our plan was for a high speed downwind to Howard.

Once we contacted the tower we were directed to a downwind 500 foot higher than our normal pattern altitude. I extended my break, but after roll out my first thought was, "Oh I'm too steep. I hope my wingman can adjust … it's been a long night." As formation lead you want to land on the first few feet of the runway to give your wingman less dirty air, so I throttled back the max possible to hit the first few hundred feet of pavement. I was surprised no one commented on my bad downwind during the mission debrief. During the debrief we were told that Lt Col Art Jistel (9th SOS commander) had selected my aircraft and crew and Capt Lenny Smale's aircraft and crew to remain in Panama to support further operations.

The crews with our crew chiefs that were staying in Panama refueled and configured their aircraft for a quick launch. We then reported to Lt Col Jistel for an arrival brief. Walking to the hanger where we were to be briefed for the first time I realized this is no exercise or show of force. The hanger was filled with SEALS, Special Forces, and 160th SOAR Little Birds.

After a quick debrief we were instructed to return to the hanger at 1000 the next morning. It was already past midnight, but there were no complaints about crew rest. Both crews were to be billeted in a vacant house in the base housing area and we were issued cots and blankets.

The morning came quick and all were ready to get to the brief and prepare the aircraft. The officers and radio operator went to the mission brief and the loadmaster and engineers worked with maintenance to ensure the aircraft were ready for combat. The Combat Shadows'

mission was focused on helicopter air refueling and rescue support. Each aircraft had two PJs and a RAMZ ready for deployment.

We sat on the ramp in our seats as the combat phase began. The SATCOM (satellite communications radio) was busy with all the activity as we tracked events being accomplished on the execution checklist. The gunships were raising havoc at La Comandancia, the hostage rescue at Modelo prison was going well, airdrops were happening, and all seemed well until the word came that SEALs had been ambushed at a hanger at the Paitilla Airfield. The MH-60s launched to support with guns and medical evacuation.

While we sat near the end of the runway, we heard that the C-130s that dropped Rangers into Rio Hato were inbound for landing. We also heard that gunships were taking out AAA during the airdrop, but also heard the formation was taking some hits. The formation stayed together through the AAA and made a successful airdrop. I was proudly thinking that part of the airdrop formation was my old squadron from Little Rock AFB, the "Red Devils" of the 50th Tactical Airlift Squadron.

We heard that aircraft number three in the formation had to shut down one of his engines and another had a badly wounded member on board. The lead C-130 asked if the damaged plane wanted to break out of the formation. As there were airplanes and helicopters all over the sky, the damaged aircraft pilot's response was, "No, I want to get this formation down as soon as possible and it would be best for all aircraft to land together without delay." After the formation landed we understood why he decided to not disrupt the formation—his aircraft was not the only aircraft that had received combat damage.

The C-130s were now taxiing on the taxiway directly next to where we were parked. We saw the fuel running out of the wings of more than one of the aircraft and one was especially bad. We all hoped that they would keep moving without delay, but the ramp was congested and sure enough the worst leaking C-130 stopped right beside us. As the fuel puddle expanded under the C-130's wing, it appeared to be flowing toward us. My loadmaster, MSgt Matt King departed our aircraft and manned a fire bottle between us and the expanding puddle of fuel. His plan was to delay the fuel if it came too close and give our aircraft a chance to get away if the fuel ignited.

As Matt was doing "fire control," our PJs, John Smith and Don Shelton, went to the nearby casualty collection point (CCP) and treated Rangers from Rio Hato and a number of injuries from the Torrijos-Tocumen International Airport airdrop, as well as SEALs from Paitilla Airfield. They later flew into Rio Hato and augmented PJs that had been airdropped or airlanded at H-hour. They remained at Rio Hato well into the afternoon of the next day, then returned via an MH-53 assisting casualties onboard. They remained in the PJ pool for future tasking after their return from Rio Hato. The RAMZ stayed on board our aircraft in case they were needed and the PJs were retasked to us.

We were very relieved when the C-130 formation continued the taxi to the opposite side of the runway. I heard later about the heroic actions of the Little Rock maintenance crews getting soaked by JP-4 as they applied battle damage repairs to those C-130s' wings. The damaged airplanes needed to return to the US since Howard had so little ramp space. The efforts of C-130 maintainers from all the SOF and MAC units at Howard resulted in all but one of the C-130 formation being able to depart that night.

New helicopter taskings happened quickly now. The MH-60s were supporting the compromised SEAL mission. One MH-53 was tasked to give chase to a suspicious helicopter crossing Panama. Some weather was forming and because of the MH-53s' sophisticated navigation systems they were now moving troops and supplies, conducting medical evacuations, and providing fire support for several events. Both HC-130 crews launched and moved to tracks that we felt were most likely needed. We maintained contact with each other and tried to ensure that when the helicopters needed gas at least one of us would be in the air. We would pass fuel and then do a max speed return to Howard for an overhead landing, refuel, and re-launch as quickly as possible.

On one return to Howard, I was maneuvering the aircraft for an overhead at over 200 knots when my copilot, Capt Hank Sanders noted that we were flying near a cloud. Then I heard, "Oh s—t, that's not a cloud, it's an airplane!" It was in fact a fully blacked out C-5 on final. He was descending to the runway when we turned underneath him. I pushed down and away and made a 360 turn to sequence behind him. I don't believe the C-5 crew ever saw us.

We finally landed the next morning and got back to the room for a little crew rest. We kept the aircraft forms open and the aircraft ready for an immediate launch. We barely had a nap when we were called back to launch the aircraft because of a threat to aircraft at Howard. We launched to provide AR support to the helicopters. Once we landed we again moved back to the quarters only to be recalled again. Noriega was on the run. The helicopters were now tasked to support surrender negotiating teams, small PDF containment missions, and troop movement and logistical support, along with supporting the search for Noriega.

On one occasion after being launched for AR support, we heard an Army MH-60 make an emergency landing because of fuel. They were waiting for the "Fat Cow," an MH-47 with extra tanks for ground refueling. They reported a large crowd walking down the hill toward their helicopter and did not know if they were friendly or a threat. We were close by and after confirming their location, we flew our tanker in an AC-130 gunship pattern overhead. White flags came out immediately, so I guess the population had heard about the gunship actions over La Comandancia.

After four days, more Combat Shadow crews arrived and we moved from combat operations to security operations. Manuel Noriega was captured in early January 1990 and Operation JUST CAUSE ended on 31 January. Security and reconstruction operations began and the HC-130s remained in Panama for several weeks.

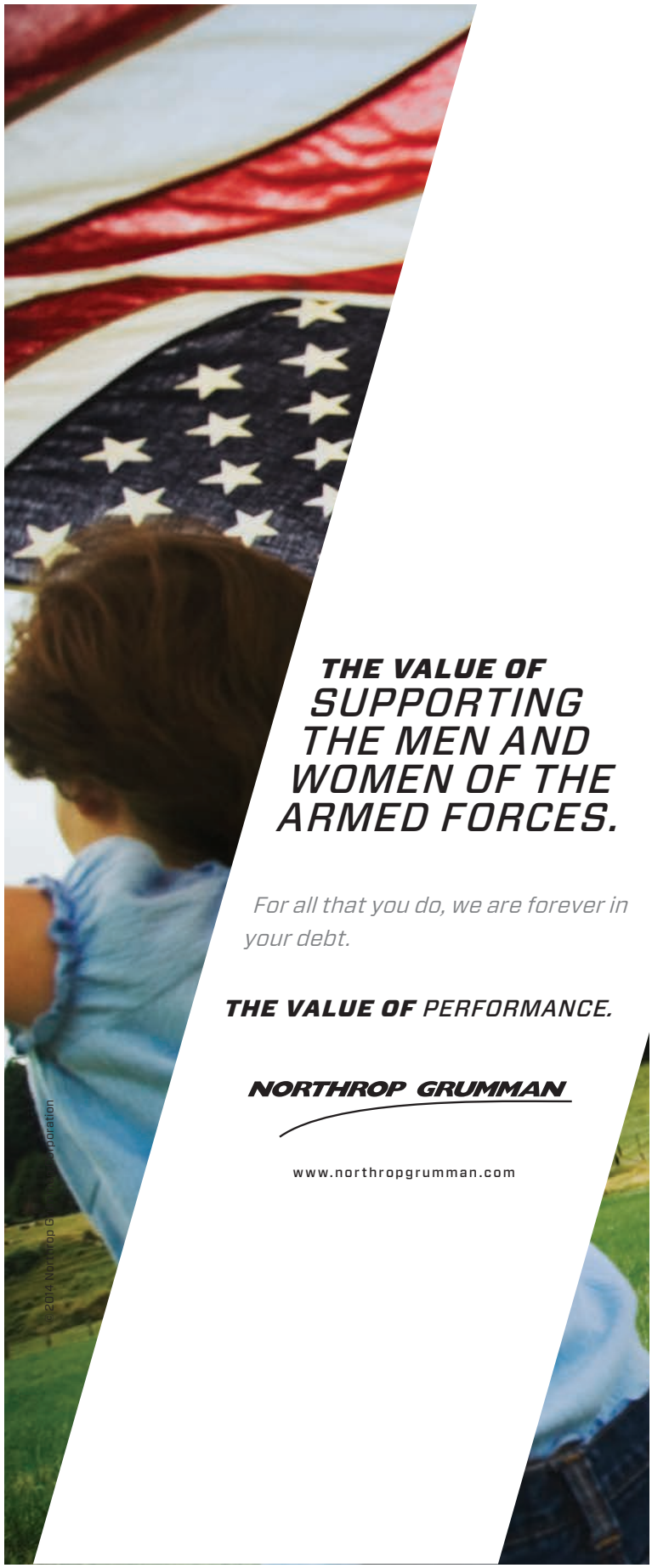
Operation JUST CAUSE was

Two crews and two HC-130 aircraft initially deployed to Panama for Operation JUST CAUSE. In a 96-hour period the crews flew 65 aerial refueling passing 478,000 pounds of fuel. The crew pictured left to right SSgt Kevin Grant, MSgt Matt King, TSgt Raymond Gouthro, Capt Lewis Jordan, SSgt Tony Miller, Capt Hank Sanders, Capt Fred Cowell, and Maj Joe Tyner. Pararescue not pictured--John Smith, Don Shelton
Crew two is not pictured: Capt Lenny Smales, Capt Jim Sikes, 1 Lt Michael Culjak, 1 Lt Randy Stevens, MSgt Bob Andrus, TSgt Bob Russell, TSgt Lewis Waters, TSgt Jeffery Privett

a great initiation for the 9th SOS and the Combat Shadows into SOF. Because of what we learned during JUST CAUSE, AFSOC's HC-130s were modified with the Special Operations Forces Improvements. These included better countermeasures and a forward looking infrared. Many of the Shadows were modified to receive gas from a KC-135 or KC-10. The 9th SOS also received more aircraft and crews.

Since Operation JUST CAUSE, the Combat Shadows have proven themselves in every conflict. Combat Shadow crews have taken pride in being the tanker of choice for SOF vertical lift. In addition to helicopter air refueling, Combat Shadows have also contributed to SOF combat operations with NVG airland and airdrop capabilities to insert, extract, and resupply special operations teams around the world. As AFSOC's C-130 fleet is recapitalized with the new MC-130Js, it is worthwhile to look back and reflect on the outstanding history of the HC-130's transition to AFSOC and the superb contributions of the Combat Shadow community.

About the Author: Joe Tyner, Col, USAF (Ret) was a career Air Commando and former Commander of the 9th SOS and Dep Commander of the 16th Operations Group. He had multiple combat deployments with over 6000 hours flying time of which over 3000 were in the Combat Shadow.
Contributoring author Lewis E. 'Jordie' Jordan Jr., Col, USAF (Ret) began his career as a navigator in HC-130s. Served as Commander of the 17th SOS, the 352 SOG and CJSOAC. His last assignment was Dep A5/8 at AFSOC Headquarters.



The Battle of Shok Valley

Combat Controller Zach Rhyner

By Gene Adcock, CMSgt, USAF (Ret)

The Battle of Shok Valley, also known as Operation COMMANDO WRATH, was a joint US-Afghan raid designed to kill or capture Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the leader of Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin (HIG) in the Shok Valley of Nuristan Province of Afghanistan on 6 April 2008. Ten Special Forces soldiers and their combat cameraman were awarded the Silver Star for bravery, the greatest number of such awards for a single battle since the Vietnam War. In addition SrA Zachary Rhyner, ODA 3336's attached Air Force Combat Controller, was awarded the Air Force Cross.

The battle plan called for the Afghan commandos of the Afghan National Army (ANA) led by American Special Forces soldiers, to be inserted into the valley via helicopter. From there they were to move on foot to the terraced slopes around the fortified town and take the HIG forces by surprise. However, the coalition's CH-47 Chinook helicopters were unable to land on the terraced terrain, so their soldiers were forced to jump from the hovering helicopters. Due to the austere and barren nature of the valley HIG forces immediately spotted the incoming US and ANA forces and had several minutes to set up ambush positions.

While attempting to infiltrate the stronghold along a sheer-sided agricultural terrace, SSG Luis Morales was the first to observe armed insurgents moving along the ridge and opened the first salvo of automatic fire on the enemy. The unit came under heavy enemy rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) and machine-gun fire from HIG positions. The initial salvo of machine gun fire was aimed at the command element in the American line. Immediately, the unit's interpreter was killed and one of the Special Forces communications sergeants was badly wounded. Now pinned down, the US and ANA forces responded with small arms and sniper fire. After an Afghan commando was incapacitated while attempting to render aid to the wounded and pinned communications sergeants, the ODA's combat cameraman, SP4 Michael Carter, ran through the open to recover the wounded soldier while the element's commanding officer, CPT Kyle Walton, provided cover fire. The two then switched roles in providing cover in order to recover the second wounded soldier. While the lead elements engaged HIG positions, Walton knew he would require close air support and so again provided cover while Carter ran out to recover the unit's communications gear.

With the communications gear restored, the ODA's attached combat controller began directing close air support from orbiting F-15E Strike Eagles and AH-64 Apache attack helicopters onto HIG targets. Over the course of the battle, SrA Zach Rhyner, the combat controller, would direct over 70 danger close air strikes. Rhyner also used the F-15s as observation platforms, their avionics systems acting as reconnaissance tools. While the air strikes were hitting the fortified town, a massive explosion occurred in one of the buildings, causing a temporary lull in the fighting. The rear elements of the Special Forces detachment used this as an opportunity to maneuver into new positions and begin sniper fire on HIG heavy weapons positions. While providing first aid to SGT Behr, the ODA's intelligence sergeant, Luis Morales, was struck in the thigh. SSG Morales calmly applied a tourniquet and returned to giving care. A second shot went through Morales' boot at the ankle blowing out bone and severing the Achilles tendon (Morales would later lose his foot). In the ensuring firefight, SGT John Wayne Walding has his leg nearly severed by single shot. Walding applied a tourniquet to his leg, auto-injected morphine, folded his mangled leg upward into his crotch, and tied two bootlaces to his belt in order to retain his ability to move and shoot.

By this time, the F-15 overhead reported a massive reinforcement element moving into the valley. As daylight faded, and now burdened with several wounded soldiers, ammunition running short, and the weather beginning to turn, the ODA began to scout an exfiltration route to an extraction zone. Carter and the ODA's team sergeant, Scott

Then SrA Rhyner (USAF Photo)

Ford, were scouting a route down the sheer terraces when Ford was hit twice by sniper fire, one of the shots nearly severing his left arm. As the combined Afghan and American forces withdrew down the mountain, the ODA's sniper, commanding officer and their combat cameraman remained behind to collect or destroy weapons that could not be carried. The ODA sniper covered the withdrawal before making his way to the extraction zone.

In all, the battle lasted for seven hours. The primary target of the action, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, was not captured.

Zach Rhyner Actions

SrA Rhyner was part of the 100+-man combined assault force whose mission was to enter Shok Valley and capture a high-value target, the man who was funding the insurgency. SrA Rhyner is credited with saving the 10-man team from being overrun twice in the battle.

Air Force Capt Stewart Parker, special tactics commander at Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan, was the command-and-control link to the Joint Terminal Attack Controllers (JTACs) on the ground as they went into Shok Valley. "This was the first time US special operations forces entered the territory," said Capt Parker. "These were extraordinary conditions and the situation was dynamic."

Shok Valley is located below 60-foot cliffs. The mission objective was at the top of the mountains surrounding the valley. "Initial infiltration began that day with snow on the ground, jagged rocks, a fast-moving river and a cliff," said SrA Rhyner. "There was a 5-foot wall you had to pull yourself up. The ridgeline trail was out of control."

The expectation was to encounter fire from about 70 insurgents. Consequently, one Air Force JTAC-qualified combat controller was attached to each team to call in air strikes, if needed.

"We were caught off guard as 200 enemy fighters approached," said Air Force SSgt. Rob Gutierrez, a combat controller with the second team in the fight. "Within 10 minutes, we were ambushed with heavy fire from 50 meters. The teams were split by a river 100 to 200 meters apart, north to south."

SrA Rhyner was in charge of coordinating the air assets.

"I have never seen a situation this bad," said Capt Parker, who was monitoring the situation back at the base. "The intelligence said the enemy was 40 feet away from Zach and his team at one point. It was dangerous."

Within the first 15 minutes of fire, SrA Rhyner was wounded along with three team members. "I was pulling security when I got shot in the leg," he said. "The rounds hit my left thigh and went through my leg and hit another guy in the foot." Rhyner immediately felt pain and adrenalin. "There was nowhere to go. I grabbed the wounded guys, but we were trapped by the enemy," he said. "I was calling in air strikes and firing, while moving the wounded down [the cliff]."

Sgt Gutierrez could see insurgent fire coming from the buildings on the hilltops above them and was trying to get across the river to meet up with Rhyner. "Zach and I were in constant radio contact," he said. "I could hear the automatic weapons fire, sniper fire, and rocket-propelled grenades with multiple blasts. We tried to push to the north to collocate with Zach's team, but every time we pushed up river, it put us in an open line of fire."

"My team ran across the freezing river. The water came off the mountains and we were 100 to 200 feet beneath the enemy, like fish in a barrel," said Sgt Gutierrez.

As the enemy surrounded them, SrA Rhyner, who was being treated for his injuries by Capt Kyle Walton, the Special Forces team leader, directed multiple rockets and gun runs from AH-64 helicopters against enemy positions.

"Zach was coordinating tremendous amounts of fire on both villages simultaneously," said Gutierrez. "Zach was in charge of the air strikes, since he was closest to the fight and could see even what the F-15 pilots could not."

Forty-five minutes to an hour had gone by since the fight began.

"We were pinned down and I could see the enemy all over the hills running around," said Gutierrez. There were no stable targets. I kept the Apaches and the Hellfire missiles pressed to the north."

Accurate sniper, machine gun, and rocket-propelled grenade fire poured down on the assault force in a complex ambush initiated simultaneously from all directions as the team ascended the near-vertical terrain. He called in more than 50 close air strikes and strafing runs.

Three hours into the fight, Sgt Gutierrez reached SrA

Rhyner's position.

"SrA Gutierrez and I met on the cliff during the battle briefly. We shared a laugh, but it was a busy, bleak situation," said Rhyner.

SrA Rhyner had been calling in air strikes for three hours while he was injured, however he still felt responsible for the others who had been hurt. With disregard for his own life, he tried to get the injured to safety, still in the open line of fire.

"I left injured personnel in a house and I had to get over there," he said. "I was frustrated being wounded. I tried to get the bombs there fast and talk to the pilots who didn't see what I saw on the ground."

Five or six hours into the fight, as it was getting dark, intelligence informed the JTACs that enemy reinforcements were 10 kilometers away carrying rockets and missiles.

"We continued to fight our way up the hill and the [helicopters] came," said Sgt Gutierrez. "Zach was talking to the helos and gave the coordinates to lay the bombs on the village, while I kept the A-10s and the Apaches out of the way."

SrA Rhyner called in a total of 4,570 rounds of cannon fire, nine Hellfire missiles, 162 rockets, 12 500-pound bombs and one 2,000-pound bomb, constantly engaging the enemy with his M-4 rifle to deter their advance.

"Zach acted fast and shut down the fighting," said Gutierrez. "The wounded were taken out on medevac."

Back at command and control, Capt Parker heard that the helicopters were on the ground with the wounded but he could not move the helicopters due to terrain and weather conditions.

"Radio transmissions would block the signal due to terrain and vertical cliffs," he said. "Helicopters were vulnerable and there was pressure to do everything we could to get the teams out quickly

Fog started rolling into the valley.

"The helicopter couldn't fly [due to altitude] and the situation called for 'aggressive patience,'" said Capt Parker. "More than 50 percent of the US forces were wounded and it was pretty grave."

Toward the end of the fighting 40 insurgents were killed and 100 wounded.

SrA Rhyner was directly credited with the entire team's survival due to his skill and poise under intense fire.

"SrA Rhyner was out of training less than a year and was in one of the most difficult situations" said Capt Parker. "It is an absolute testament to his character and the training these guys get in the pipeline. It tells me we are doing something right."

"If it wasn't for Zach, I wouldn't be here," said Sgt Gutierrez.

About the Author: CMSgt Gene Adcock retired as Chief Combat Control Inspector, Military Airlift Command, Office of the Inspector General on 31 January 1977. As a combat controller he deployed to Vietnam in 1965 and three times during the period 1969 - 1971 to Laos in support of Project 404. He was awarded two Bronze Stars, the AF Meritorious Service Award, six Air Medals and the AF Commendation medal with Combat "V".
Adcock is the author of CCT @ The Eye of the Storm – a history of combat control teams; President of the Combat Control School Heritage Foundation.

Secretary of the Air Force Michael B. Donley presents Staff Sgt. Zachary Rhyner the Air Force Cross March 10 at Pope Air Force Base, N.C. Sergeant Rhyner of the 21st Special Tactics Squadron received the medal for uncommon valor during Operation Enduring Freedom for his actions during an intense 6.5-hour battle in Shok Valley, Afghanistan, April 6, 2008. (U.S. Air Force photo)

OPERATION ACID GAMBIT

The Rescue of Kurt Muse from Modelo Prison

By William Walter, CMSgt, USAF (Ret)

Two hours before H-hour of Operation Just Cause, the USAF Air Operation Center (AOC) at Howard AFB alerted AC-130A, "Proud Warrior," commanded by Maj Clay McCutchan for a mission. His crew's mission was to search the perimeter of Howard AFB and the forested hills west of the base for possible mortars.

Immediately after Proud Warrior took off, Captains McMillan, call sign AP-06 and Hughes, AP-07 took off in two AC-130Hs from the 16th SOS. Much later, AC-130A "Ultimate End," commanded by Captain Mike Wilson took off. Both AC-130A gunships were airborne alert assets while both AC-130H gunships were supporting Operation ACID GAMBIT, the rescue of American Kurt Muse from Cárcel Modelo, one of the most brutal prisons in Panama. Muse had been convicted and tortured on charges of espionage and subversion while languishing in Cárcel Modelo for nine months.

As the clock ticked down the seconds leading to H-hour, the multiple, simultaneous actions about to occur were led by the two AC-130H gunships: AP-06, "Iron Maiden," and AP-07, "Bad Company." Both Spectres would orbit downtown Panama City using the "TOP HAT" technique, this not a normal tactic of the AC-130 gunship but was developed specifically to allow two gunships to fire on multiple, closely situated targets in Panama City. (See fig. 1, page 44) By flying concentric pylon turns, offset by altitude, two AC-130s could concentrate their devastating fires on the same target. One gunship flew a wider turn "at the brim" while the second one flew a tighter turn "at the crown."

The gunships' pre-planned targets included a large barracks building near La Comandancia, the headquarters for Manuel Noriega's Panamanian Defense Force (PDF). As the crew of AP-06 approached downtown Panama City, the IR sensor operator, TSgt Glenn LeMay, located and searched the top of a nearby 16-story building close to Cárcel Modelo to ensure it was clear of snipers. Once LeMay determined that the roof was clear, Capt McMillan rolled into orbit above the prison. The low-light-level-TV (LLLTV) sensor operator, MSgt Jerry Andersen, illuminated the roof of the prison for 30 seconds with the GLINT illuminator (a gallium arsenide laser illuminator—invisible to the naked eye), to the to give the pilots of the four 160th SOAR "Little Birds" holding nearby a visual reference of the exact location of Cárcel Modelo. The GLINT was essentially a covert spotlight for the blacked out MH-6s flying on night vision goggles.

As the MH-6 pilots quickly inserted the Special Forces (SF) operators onto the roof of the prison, a fire support officer (FSO) with the team placed a TEMIG (tactical electro-magnetic ignition generator) beacon on the roof to mark the operators' position. (See sidebar.) The FSO remained on the roof scanning for threats and incoming fire, and reported that all was quiet with no threats found … but that relative tranquility would change quickly. As the MH-6s proceeded to a pre-planned holding point, McMillan and Hughes' shifted their focus to their pre-planned targets near La Comandancia. Just before both AC-130s opened fire, an SF operator breached the rooftop cupola of Cárcel Modelo with an explosive charge.

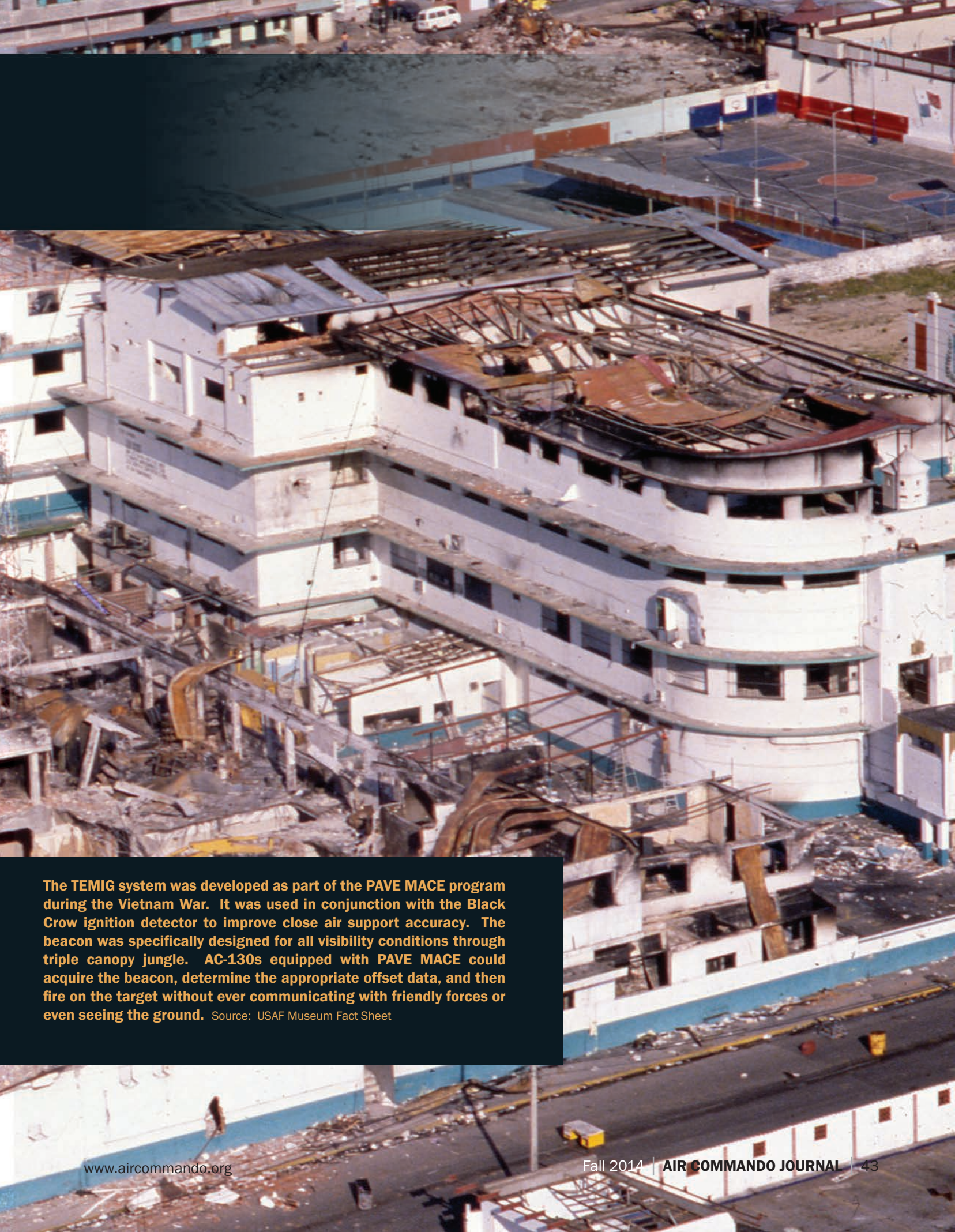
Precisely at the pre-planned time, Capt Bill Lane, the navigator on AP-06, radioed "clear" to AH-6 pilots, signaling them to start firing on target B1, La Comandancia. Immediately, the attack helicopters began firing 2.75 inch high explosive (HE) rockets into the front door of La Comandancia. Simultaneously, AP-06 and AP-07 began to fire on five targets labeled B2 through B6 located near La Comandancia. (See fig. 2, page 44) Striking these five buildings was intended to draw the attention of the PDF away from the prison and to prepare the battle area for the mechanized elements of Task Force Gator which would follow on later in the day.

As fire intensified on both sides, the PDF opened fire on the gunships with a 14.5mm AAA gun located near the golf course at nearby Ft Amador. Observing the potential threat MSgt Larry Bower calmly announced the potential threat as "no factor" as crews remained focused on the task at hand.

According to plan, both crews were to fire at a "high level of effort" for five minutes, then stop to allow extraction of the SF operators and Mr Muse from the prison roof. That plan however, would change because of the dynamic situation unfolding near Cárcel Modelo.

While McMillan and Hughes' crews fired 105mm HE and 40mm Misch metal incendiary rounds as close as 100 meters of the prison, fragments and chunks of concrete were impacting Cárcel Modelo. During this time, SF operators inside the prison quickly made their way towards Muse's cell, and upon confronting the PDF guard assigned the task of executing Muse killed him on the spot.

At the same time, the FSO on the rooftop



The TEMIG system was developed as part of the PAVE MACE program during the Vietnam War. It was used in conjunction with the Black Crow ignition detector to improve close air support accuracy. The beacon was specifically designed for all visibility conditions through triple canopy jungle. AC-130s equipped with PAVE MACE could acquire the beacon, determine the appropriate offset data, and then fire on the target without ever communicating with friendly forces or even seeing the ground. Source: USAF Museum Fact Sheet

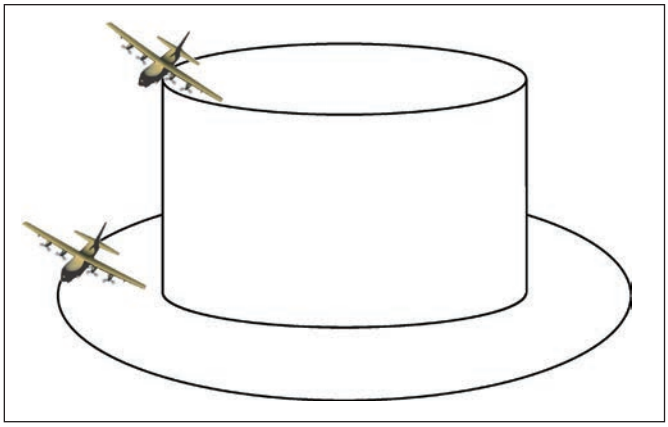


Figure 1, Top Hat Tactic

determined PDF soldiers in La Comandancia posed a threat to the rescue force. With less than two minutes before the extraction of Muse and his rescuers, the FSO attempted to contact AP-07, the gunship at the lower altitude. Because the noise of the explosions pounding the targets was deafening, the FSO had to yell into the microphone as loudly as he could. AP-06 answered his call for fire and accepted the fire mission. AP-06 proceeded to fire as many 40mm and 105mm rounds directly into La Comandancia, as fast as they could in the remaining minute. As 40mm rounds pierced the sheet metal roof of La Comandancia, large showers of sparks spewed from the windows of the top floor, providing an intense light show and suppressive effect on the PDF. The sound of the explosive rounds impacting reinforced concrete in the "urban canyon" had both a lethal and suppressive effect on the PDF near La Comandancia, but a number of PDF held their positions. The FSO commented:

I asked him (AP-06) to start at one end of La Comandancia and work to the other. Night became day when they opened up. That was the best fireworks display ever! Next thing I remember is the call from the AC saying they were complete, and after that it was time to leave the roof. I remember thinking afterwards, that was the first time since I was in the unit I had AC-130 fire impact that close to our position. I believe it was at or under 100 meters. Sweet!

Precisely on time, both AC-130 crews stopped firing while the operators brought Muse to the roof for extraction by helicopter. It had been a long five minutes of continuous fire from both AC-130H crews and the entire operation had taken only six minutes. The mission however, was not complete yet.

After the operators, the FSO, and Muse boarded their MH-6 on the Carcel Modelo rooftop, the pilot of the heavily loaded helicopter discovered he could not gain altitude. Once the MH-6 cleared the rooftop of the prison, it sank towards the street as the pilot literally "drove" down the street in ground effect and turned left, away from the entrance to the prison. After a hard landing onto the street, the operators and Muse jumped off and pulled security until the pilot determined he could take off again.

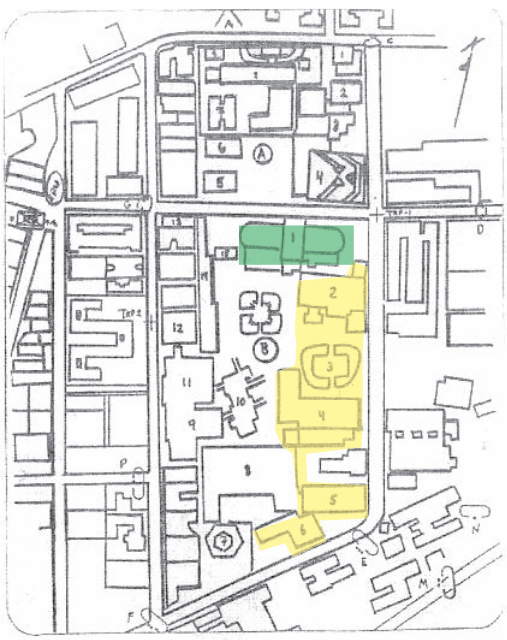


Figure 2, AC-130 targets B2-B6 highlighted in yellow, La Comandancia highlighted in green. Courtesy US Army Military History Department at Ft. Leavenworth.

After all passengers re-boarded the MH-6, the pilot took off and began to gain altitude. As the helicopter cleared the rooftops, it took machine gun fire on the left side, "stitching" it from the rotor to the tail boom. Army SSG Pat Savidge was shot in the leg and SSG Kelly Venden was shot in the abdomen. Of the seven aboard the MH-6, four were injured in the ensuing crash—two bullet wounds, one crushed foot, one rotor strike to the helmet, and one minor arm injury, but Muse and the two MH-6 pilots were unharmed. The operators protected Muse as they set up a hasty defensive position. Three fellow operators and combat controller, MSgt David Schnoor, in a TF-Gator M113 successfully completed their back-up plan to extract Muse and the rescue team.

About the Author: Bill Walter, CMSgt, USAF (Ret) is a former AC-130H Aerial Gunner and a veteran of Operation JUST CAUSE. He is currently the President of the Spectre Association. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Air Force, DoD, or US government.

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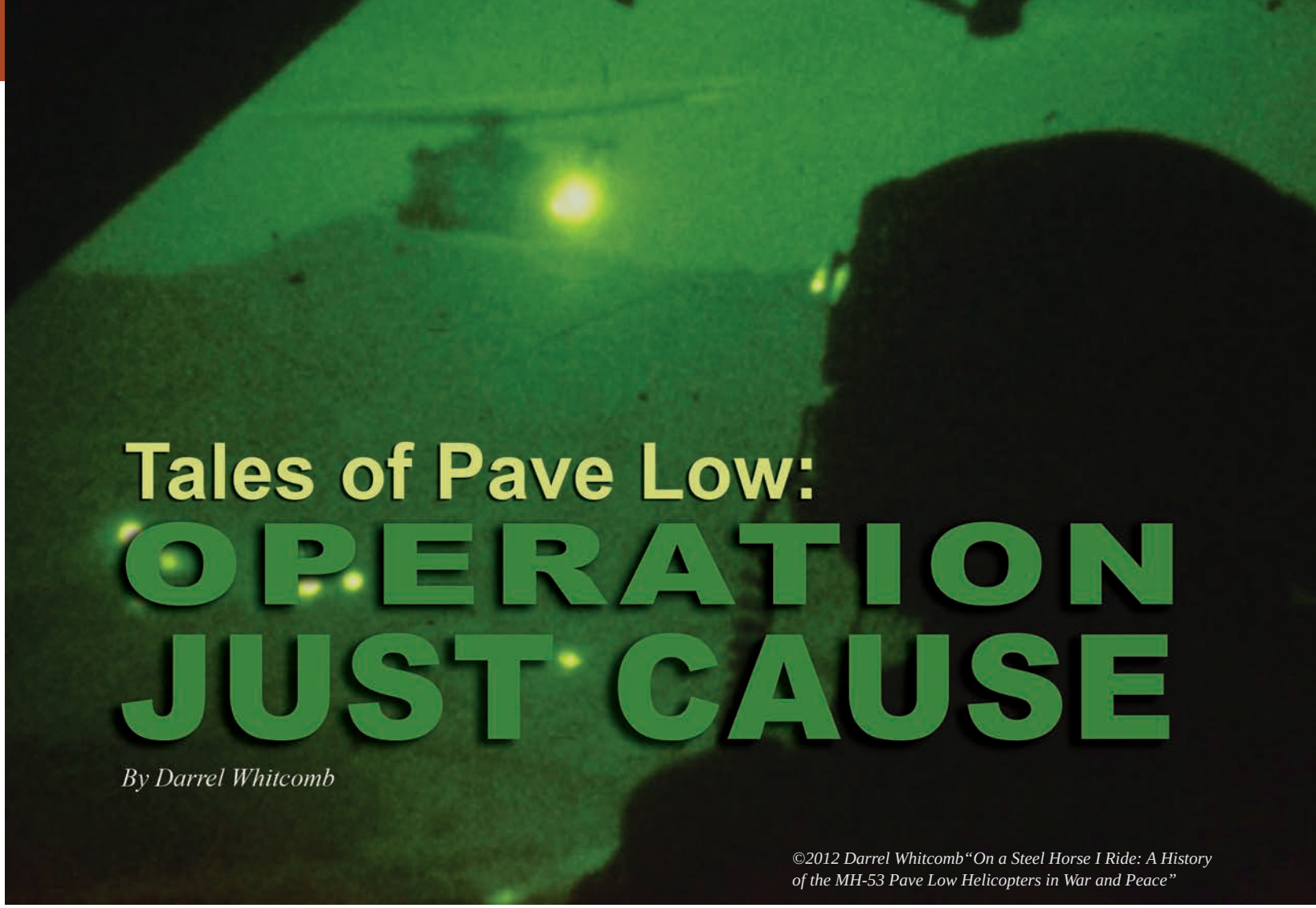


Tales of Pave Low: OPERATION JUST CAUSE

By Darrel Whitcomb

©2012 Darrel Whitcomb "On a Steel Horse I Ride: A History of the MH-53 Pave Low Helicopters in War and Peace"

USSOCOM planners designated the 1st SOW to support both the JSOTF and conventional forces in the operation. The 1st SOW commander, Col George Gray, would lead his force of over 500 Airmen with 9 AC-130A/Hs, 3 MC-130Es, 2 HC-130s, 4 MH-60s, and 5 MH-53Js. On 18 December, Lt Col Gary Weikel, the 20th SOS commander, was aboard one of the MC-130s with the command element. Lt Col Mike Russell, the 20th SOS director of operations, led the Pave Lows and three US Army MH-47s as they flew nonstop from Hurlburt with HC-130 tankers to the Canal Zone. Capt Tom Trask was aboard Russell's aircraft as a relief pilot and additional pilot for the operation. All of the Paves had extra crews, ammunition, and maintenance equipment in their cargo compartments because Weikel anticipated 24/7 operations and hard flying. Many of his crews had already flown in Panama because of the frequent deployments there, and Weikel felt an added confidence in his aircraft because he knew that they had been partly optimized for Central American operations since the Pave Low's earliest operational testing.

Capt Jack Hester and Capt Joe Becker were flying the number three aircraft in the Pave Low flight. The formation flew through quite a bit of weather to get to Panama. During one of the refuelings, they climbed up to 10,000 feet to conduct it in the clear. The CH-47s did not need to refuel and stayed down at low level, below the weather. When the Pave Lows all had their fuel, the flight descended back into the weather to rejoin the CH-47s below. As Hester and Becker were descending, Hester experienced severe vertigo, and Becker took control of the aircraft. Unfortunately, their windscreen fogged up as they descended, and they lost sight of the other aircraft. Of necessity, Becker then turned the aircraft away from the flight as per the "lost wingman" procedures and announced his predicament on the radio. They then climbed back up above the clouds and watched as the rest of the flight also popped up into the clear air. Once they were reestablished as a formation, they were able to descend back down to rejoin the CH-47s. The entire process took about 100 miles but was just one part of the 14-hour flight.

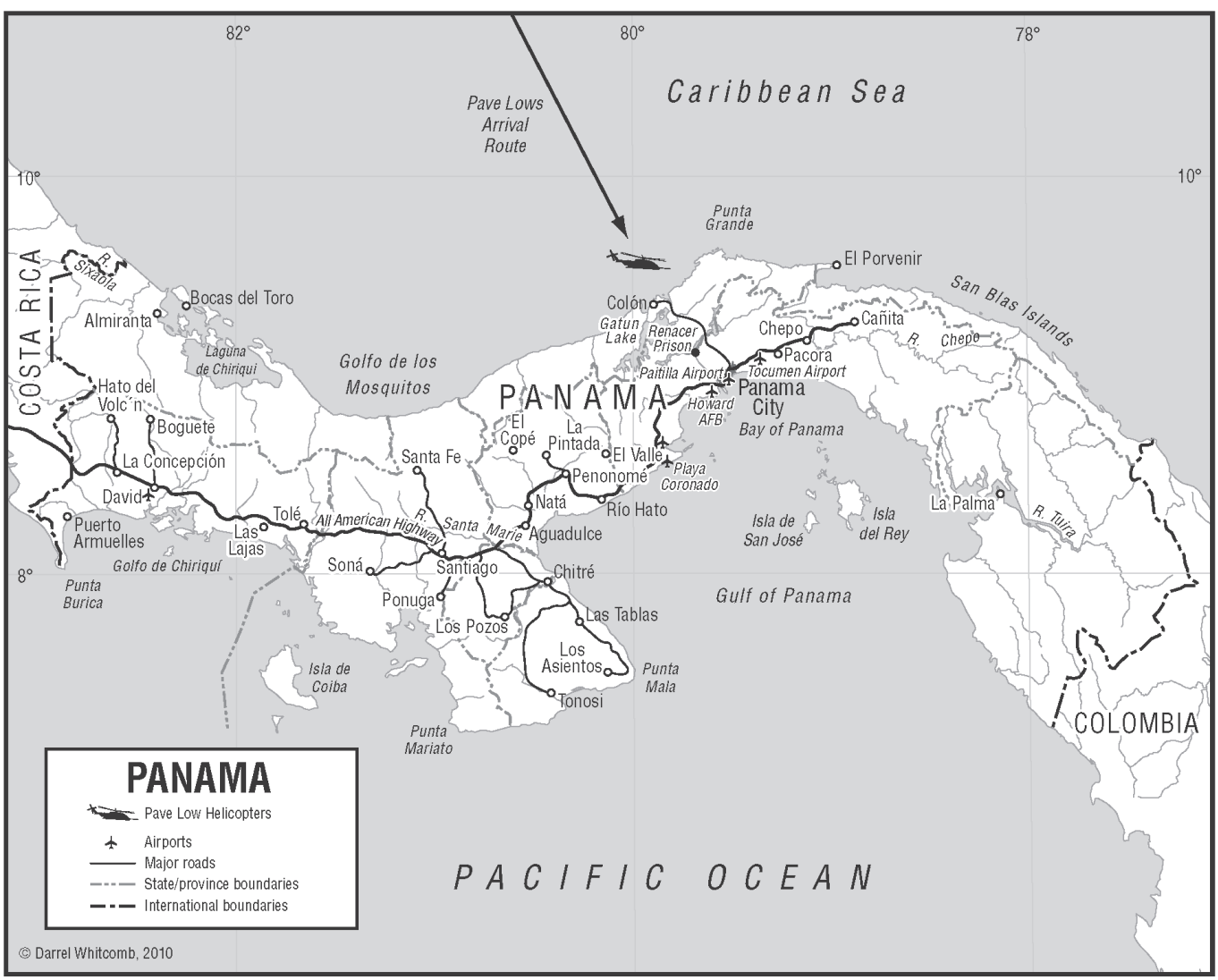
Capt Steve Otto and Capt Bob Leonik were flying another Pave Low. As they were getting ready to go at Hurlburt, their assigned extra pilot could not be contacted. They spotted Capt Mike Kingsley, who was out on the ramp preflighting spare aircraft. He was not slated to deploy because he had scheduled some leave for a family reunion in California. His wife and child

had already departed, and he intended to leave the next day. However, as directed, he had reported to the squadron with all of his required mobility equipment. He was ordered to board Otto's aircraft and flew as their relief pilot on the flight to Panama. Above the flight of Pave Lows and CH-47s heading south, a gaggle of over 250 USAF aircraft of all varieties was moving the massive force into the small country.

Arriving at Howard AFB, Panama, the Pave Low teams went into crew rest at a house on base for anticipated operation within 24 hours. For the last several months, the 20th had been training with several special ground units to conduct a grand raid to capture Noriega at his big villa, possibly obviating any other significant operations. The unit participated in several full rehearsals, even from home station, flying all night to an old Army maneuver area in Louisiana, where a replica of one of Noriega's hacienda locations was constructed. The members of the 20th arrived in Panama ready to do the mission. In fact, the conduct of a big, fully orchestrated grand mission—the "Big Mish" as some called it—had been in a way the stock in trade for the 20th since Honey Badger. Trask had flown in the rehearsals but would be preempted on the mission by Colonel Russell. The five designated crews were ready to go.

In the early morning hours of 20 December, US forces attacked the PDF and "dignity battalions" of street thugs at locations and facilities across the country. US Army Rangers and a brigade from the 82d Airborne Division parachuted onto the Torrijos-Tocumen Airport and several other sites. In conjunction with several other conventional force task forces and the special operations elements, they overwhelmed the Panamanian forces. In one especially vicious engagement, US ground and air forces, including AC-130s, attacked a strong Panamanian force in La Comandancia, the PDF headquarters, and literally destroyed the facility. Several of the Pave Low crew members climbed up on the roof of their quarters and watched the gunships work. It was not hard to see since it was only two miles away.

However, when the attacks were launched, intelligence sources indicated that Noriega had gone into hiding, and the big raid on Noriega's villa was cancelled. The Pave Low crews were told to stand by for tasking. Needless to say, the disappointment within the Pave Low ranks was palpable. Russell recalled the impact on the crews: "That mission was cancelled. [Headquarters] went into an ad hoc mission [mode]; they put us into crew rest, and the planning group came up with a mission. You put crews



against it; you planned, worked with the customer, and flew the mission. We spent the next week doing that."

US forces were organized into task forces of varied sizes. From the initiation of combat operations, the Pave Low crews were told to be ready to support Task Force Red (75th Ranger Regiment), Task Forces Green and Black (other Army special operations forces), and Task Forces Blue and White (Navy SEAL Team 4 and special boat units). With no idea how long the operation would last, Russell then split his force into night and day crews. They were ordered back into crew rest so that they would be ready to go in 12 hours. Capt Mike Kingsley was paired as a copilot with Capt Tim Minish as a day crew.

At the initiation of hostilities, the Pave Lows began to receive taskings. Captain Hester and crew were first to fly. He joined with two MH-60s led by Capt Gene Haase from the 55th SOS. Hester's aircraft had been configured as the medevac aircraft for the raid on Noriega's villa, and he launched to carry several soldiers to support Navy SEAL Team 4, badly shot up at the Paitilla Airfield, until it could be extracted. He could also provide gun support for the SEALs with his .50-caliber machine guns, which were more powerful than the miniguns the MH-60 carried. Flying with Hester was SSgt Dave Duffy as the left gunner. He saw more than his share of enemy gunfire that night. However, he did not return fire because all of the incoming was inaccurate. Instead, the crew trusted the cover of the darkness. This was the first-ever actual combat mission for a Pave Low.

Captain Trask and crew launched to track a helicopter thought to possibly be carrying Noriega. After completing that assignment, he and the crew began to respond to continuous taskings until they were out of fuel and had to return to base. Pave Low crews were then directed to insert small teams and snipers at locations in Panama City. Capt Tom Aldrich and Major Gene Correll and crew were next to go. They launched with a load of reinforcements for raiding forces that secured the key Pacora River Bridge northeast of the city, attacked several prisons, and released American and Panamanian hostages. Furthermore, they provided overhead direct fire support for SEAL teams at Paitilla Airfield so that Noriega could not use a private aircraft based there to escape.

Captain Trask and his crew also conducted several fire support missions. At one point, Trask's gunners asked him what rules of engagement (ROE) to use for determining when or when not to fire their guns. No one had given Trask any ROEs. He thought for a moment and then concocted what he thought sounded reasonable based upon previous training and experiences. He so instructed his gunners, and they followed his rules explicitly. He could not have been prouder of them.

On the second day of the operation, Pave Lows supported Army Ranger operations at the Tocumen Airport and exfiltrated soldiers from a sharp fight at the Pacora River Bridge. Captain Trask and his crew flew another support mission for Navy SEALs at Paitilla, as did Aldrich and Correll. Both crews flew top cover for the SEALs to prevent snipers from firing at them as other SEALs in rubber boats resupplied their unit. That night, Capt Randy O'Boyle led two Pave Lows carrying a force of 174 heavily armed Army Rangers and other special forces units to the American Embassy when it was threatened by Panamanian forces. Trask and his crew flew as part of a larger formation of helicopters carrying 140 troops sent to secure a bunker where Noriega was reported to be located. However, the mission was aborted when, again, intelligence reported that Noriega had moved.

Capt Lou Caporicci and Captain Becker supported another SEAL operation but in a different way. The SEALS wanted to use an MH-6 to quietly insert a small team into a beach house. However, the MH-6 did not have any precision navigation capability. Consequently, Caporicci and crew used their GPS and the TF/TA radar to vector the "Little Bird" crew to the target and then break off so as not to alert the defenders. The Pave Lows and crews could be utilized to do many things, giving new meaning to the motto "Pave Low leads."

Pave Lows were used in another mission when they combined with a mixed fleet of helicopters to move 150 Rangers to attack the Caldera Airfield so that Noriega and his senior leaders could not use it to flee. They orbited over the Ranger force to provide direct fire support and engaged and destroyed some Panamanian antiaircraft guns that tried to challenge them. Capts Rob Schmaltz and Mike Kingsley flew one of these missions. They picked up their Rangers in the enclosed quadrangle of square-shaped barracks. As they attempted to take off, though, they realized that they were too heavy to get up and over the building. Kingsley was flying and

followed the guidance of his scanners as they talked him down onto the helipad. His seat flight engineer then calculated how many Rangers had to dismount to allow a safe takeoff. He told the pilots, "If we estimate that each Ranger weighs 300 pounds with their ruck [sic] and everything, we'll be able to reduce our weight by 1,500 pounds, and we should be able to get over the barracks." They immediately unloaded five Rangers, and the heavily laden aircraft then cleared the high walls. Kingsley was deeply impressed with his crew, remembering, "The coordination was amazing with the gunners and flight engineers . . . being able to safely guide our helicopter. Throughout my career . . . my life has been saved many times by these brave men in the back of the helicopter."

However, Weikel was upset with this operation. It was conducted during the day, when his aircraft and crews were much more vulnerable. He felt that they should have had escorting fighters or gunships, a lesson hard learned in SEA. He was also appalled at the poor communications procedures between the various units. Operation Urgent Fury had highlighted the necessity of joint communication capability, and the USAF and USSOCOM had purchased outstanding radios for their units. However, radio discipline among the units was almost nonexistent, with callers interrupting one another constantly and not using proper, complete call signs. The sloppiness caused a great deal of confusion in far too many instances.

Monitoring the action closely, Weikel called back to the 20th and had it prepare six more Pave Lows, crews, and support personnel for deployment to Panama. Weikel wanted to bring them down because he was especially concerned about the wear and tear on his airmen, as he and Russell adjusted the squadron operations schedule to allow for 24/7 operations for an undetermined length of time. Despite his efforts, JSOC headquarters refused the request, and the extra helicopters and personnel were not deployed.

Lt Col Russell had to do some creative scheduling to provide for 24/7 operations. This was critical because after two days of heavy fighting, helicopter support was becoming scarce. The 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment had also deployed significant assets to Just Cause: 22 A/MH-6s, 7 CH-47s, and 19 MH-60s. However, each aircraft brought only one crew vice the two per aircraft that the 20th SOS brought. Consequently, after about 36 hours of continuous operations, the 160th commander, Col William Miller, had to ground his crews for necessary crew rest. Regardless, the Pave Lows continued to fly.

As the fighting tapered off, the Paves began to receive taskings to fly logistical missions and sat alert to fly medevac. Pave Lows used their precision navigation system to lead forces dispatched to other cities and locations throughout the country as the search for Noriega and his key commanders widened. Working closely with AC-130s and Army attack helicopters, they covered special forces ground units as they convinced Panamanian units to surrender. Two Pave Lows also supported special forces units that attacked and defeated Panamanian elements at a major military compound near the small city of La Coronada, 20 miles west of Panama City, and other classified missions.

Within four days all operational objectives were met, and the governmental leaders elected in May 1989 were rightfully installed in office. At that point, General Thurman's focus shifted to rounding up the scattered and disparate remnants of the PDF and capturing Noriega, who had sought refuge in the Papal Nuncio in Panama City.

On 23 December, Pave Lows carried Army forces as they conducted a raid on PDF facilities at Playa Coronado. That same day, two Pave Lows inserted a force into Panama City to recover several Panamanian hostages and supported a task force pursuing dispirited enemy elements at Nueva Guerre. Throughout, too, the Pave Lows received constant requests to fly general support missions for the various task forces.

On 24 December, Captains Trask and Becker flew a mission with CMSgt Tom Green as flight engineer and SSgt Jim Kradel as one of the gunners to carry a special forces element to capture a "Major Hernandez," reportedly a high-level intelligence officer in the Noriega regime. The crew flew two sorties in support of the operation, which netted Hernandez and three other enemy soldiers. On most missions the Pave Lows would be leading the task force, taking advantage of their precision navigation capability. However, after the first day, there was little actual combat. Like Kradel, most gunners never fired their weapons.

As the Panamanian forces dispersed, General Thurman was concerned that a residual force would move into the high mountains in the western sections of the country and develop a guerilla force to be led by Noriega. He initiated Operation Surrender, designed to talk enemy forces into peacefully laying down their weapons.

On Christmas Day, Colonel Weikel, Captain Otto, and crew were directed to fly a reconnaissance mission to look for evidence of enemy activity. They took off with several Army special forces troops on board and proceeded along the Pacific coast before turning inland west of the city of David. The crew then had to maneuver to avoid rain showers and thunderstorms as they climbed above the rising terrain. As they entered the clouds, they used the TF/TA radar and skimmed 100 feet above the terrain. Flying over the objective area, the crew realized that nobody with conventional helicopters could have gotten there. Checking in with their command headquarters, they were directed to proceed to David and help facilitate the surrender of a PDF force at a military facility in the city, commanded by Col Del Cid.

Approaching the city, Weikel could see a small baseball stadium near the facility. In the darkness, he landed the aircraft right on the pitcher's mound. Some of the Army special forces troops then got off and went to talk to the Panamanian forces commander while Weikel and his crew stayed alert. They had a full complement of ammunition on board for their mini and machine guns, as well as their personal weapons.

After speaking with the local forces, the Army troops reported that the area was safe and decided to remain there. They asked that an additional security force be flown in the next day. Weikel had shut his engines down to save fuel. Suddenly, the stadium lights came on, shocking the crew.

Local civilians began to swarm into the stadium, even climbing over the fences. The crew was alarmed as the mass approached the aircraft. Weikel ordered everybody to stand by his station and arm the guns. He had no idea of the intentions of the crowd and had to consider that it was possibly going to attack the aircraft and crew. He ordered his crew not to let anybody board the aircraft and began the start sequence for the number two engine. However, it rapidly became evident that the people were deliriously happy to have the Americans in their midst with their "Star Wars" machine. Some of the Army troops on board then disembarked and spoke with the people. Several reached up to Weikel, and he shook their hands. "Vayan ustedes con Dios," they shouted, as they pushed their children forward to shake hands. It was a love-in, thought Weikel.

When his Army team commander told him that all was secure in David and that he and his team intended to stay, Weikel started the other engine. He had the people back away from the aircraft and turn off the stadium lights so that the crew could adjust their eyes for night vision, and then they lifted off into the now clear night sky for the flight back to Howard AFB. As they reached altitude, one of the flight engineers called on the intercom and wished the rest of the crew a Merry Christmas. Weikel recalled that "on that night, coming back on Christmas night, just leaving the town of David, we left some deliriously happy people who were delighted to have a chance to sort out their lives and families once again." It was, he later remembered, a "sweet but intense feeling of accomplishment and personal satisfaction."

While Weikel was in David, the other four Pave Lows joined several Army aircraft to airlift a company-plus-sized force into the David airfield just to make sure that the PDF actually did what they had agreed to do. Instead of opposition, though, they received the same type of friendly greeting.

On 27 December, two crews led by Lt Col Mike Russell flew a medevac mission to the San Blas Islands off the east coast of Panama to rescue an eclectic group of 19 sick international students at a resort. The crews had to work their way through heavy rain and thunderstorms for six hours before depositing the students at the Howard AFB hospital.

With the sequestering of Noriega in the Papal Nuncio, calm was rapidly restored to Panama. Pres. Guillermo Endara had been sworn into office as American forces began their attacks and subsequently ordered the Panamanian military to stand down. Except for a few die-hard elements, it did so. US Army civil affairs units then began to arrive, and Operation Promote Liberty was initiated to restore public safety, health, and population control measures. On 3 Jan 1990, Noriega surrendered to US forces and was extradited to the United States for trial. Operation Just Cause was winding down, and the airmen of the 1st SOW, along with their USSOCOM and conventional forces compatriots, were sent home.

During the operation, the crews of the 20th flew 193 sorties and logged 406.1 hours of flying time. But their accomplishments are told in more than statistics. As Captain Trask explained, since Honey Badger, the 20th had taken its new technology and trained earnestly to use it. Its focus had always been on leading the big mission, and it trained to do that for nine years. The Noriega seizure was just the latest iteration. But when that mission was cancelled, the squadron very quickly had to re-role to do whatever needed to be done. Then it was not so much the technology that the crews used; it was their basic skills as air commandos equipped with high-technology heavy-lift helicopters. "Humans are more important than hardware," Congressman Earl Hutto from Pensacola, FL, had postulated back when he was an advocate for creating USSOCOM and supported the Pave Low. Operation Just Cause validated that point.

The variety of missions that the crews were called upon to fly demanded the larger set of skills that they had been mentored to maintain all those years by leaders such as Bill Takacs. In many cases, they were back to doing what their predecessors in the 20th and 21st SOS had done in Southeast Asia 20 years before—only now with the ability to do it day and night, good weather and bad, if the mission demanded it. They weren't Pave Low; they were air commandos equipped with Pave Low, and the quickness with which they re-roled and carried on in Panama proved it, especially to themselves. They had been tested and had excelled. Two Green Hornets in particular were lauded for their efforts during the operation. Maj Jeff Walls received the Lance Sijan Award for 1990 in recognition of his overall performance and efforts to protect and recover a US Army Ranger team pinned down by enemy forces. Additionally, Capt Randy O'Boyle was selected as the air commando MAC pilot of the year for leading several direct-assault missions into downtown Panama City and other enemy positions.

On 16 Jan 1990, Just Cause officially ended. USSOCOM's official history states that "JUST CAUSE clearly validated how SOF were trained, equipped, and organized: this operation showcased joint SOF capabilities, the high training standards for operators and staffs alike, and the value of interoperability procedures." Bragged Colonel Weikel in the unit's biennial history for the second half of 1989, "We've developed procedures to more effectively support elite classified units, who may operate as isolated elements after our long-range infiltrations... Another self-initiated development involves the innovative use of our airborne ground mapping radar to provide vectoring assistance to elite US Navy forces as well as other aerial platforms... We are the recognized experts in USAF SOF helicopter operations." Perhaps SSgt Dave Duffy, the left gunner aboard Jack Hester's aircraft the first night, said it best in a far simpler way. "Just Cause was the beginning of a new pace for the squadron. None of us were the same. It wasn't just training anymore."

About the Author: Darrel Whitcomb is the author of On a Steel Horse I Ride: A History of the MH-53 Pave Low Helicopters in War and Peace published in 2012 by the Air University Press. This excerpt and all others from: On a Steel Horse I ride: A History of the MH-53 Pave Low Helicopters in War and Peace by Darrel Whitcomb is used by the ACJ with permission.

SIX MINUTES TO FREEDOM

The Thrilling Account of the Rescue of Kurt Muse

Born in the United States, raised in Panama, Kurt Muse grew up with a deep love for his adopted country. But by the late 1980s, Panama was suffering under the regime of Manuel Noriega. Innocent people disappeared. Beatings and murders became commonplace.

For Kurt Muse, accepting such a dictator was not an option. For two years, Kurt and a few friends operated clandestine radio stations on low-tech equipment smuggled into Panama. At first, they broadcast on a small scale. But in late 1987, the group realized that they could override any transmission from a government-run radio network, and Radio Constitucional was born.

Muse and his compatriots chose Noriega's Loyalty Day address, simulcast on every radio station in the country, for its first transmission. Just as Noriega began his self-serving message, Radio Constitucional seized the airwaves, urging the people to rise up in defense of their freedom. Kurt knew that if his identity was revealed, he and his family would be in grave peril. But he had no idea what kind of terror, confusion, and betrayal lay in store for all of them.

This remarkable tale of Kurt's arrest by Noriega's henchmen and his months of imprisonment; the squalid conditions he faced in Panama's infamous Modelo Prison; his eyewitness accounts of his fellow inmates' torture; and the plight of Kurt's family as they fled for their lives is told in the book *Six Minutes to Freedom* by Kurt Muse and John Gilstrap. And it reveals the astonishing details of the long-awaited day when helicopters arrived in a firestorm of bullets to whisk Kurt Muse from under the noses of thugs who had been ordered to kill him.

Kurt's thrilling and highly personal story—the story of an American hero on foreign soil, who risked his life for his beliefs and for freedom…and became the only American civilian ever rescued by the elite Special Forces, is available online at websites such as Amazon.com.

Kurt Muse is a popular motivational public speaker who has appeared before many groups across the country. He recently spoke at the Air Commando Association's Heritage Seminar during the 2014 ACA Convention in Fort Walton Beach, FL.

John Gilstrap is the author of four thrillers, Scott Free, Even Steven, At All Costs, and Nathan's Run.

Excerpt from the book Six Minutes to Freedom published by Citadel (May 29, 2007).

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We need your help to do that. We seek quality articles, well written, factually based, and reflecting your experiences living the special operations mission in all of its complexities. Submissions can be of any length, although 1500-3000 words would be an average suggestion. All articles will be edited as per the Air University Style and Author Guide (found online at www.aircommando.org under the Journal tab, and at the Hurlburt Field library).

Hard-copy manuscripts can be mailed to: *Air Commando Journal*, P.O. Box 7, Mary Esther, FL 32569-0007. However, we prefer that they be submitted electronically to: info@aircommando.org. We use MS-Word. We also appreciate accompanying photos. Photos should be high resolution (300 dpi) and must indicate the source, have a release for use, and a brief description. If your submission is copyrighted, we will indicate that on the article.

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Air Commando embraces his wife upon his arrival home at Cannon Air Force Base, N.M. (USAF photo/ Staff Sgt. Matthew Plew) (RELEASED)