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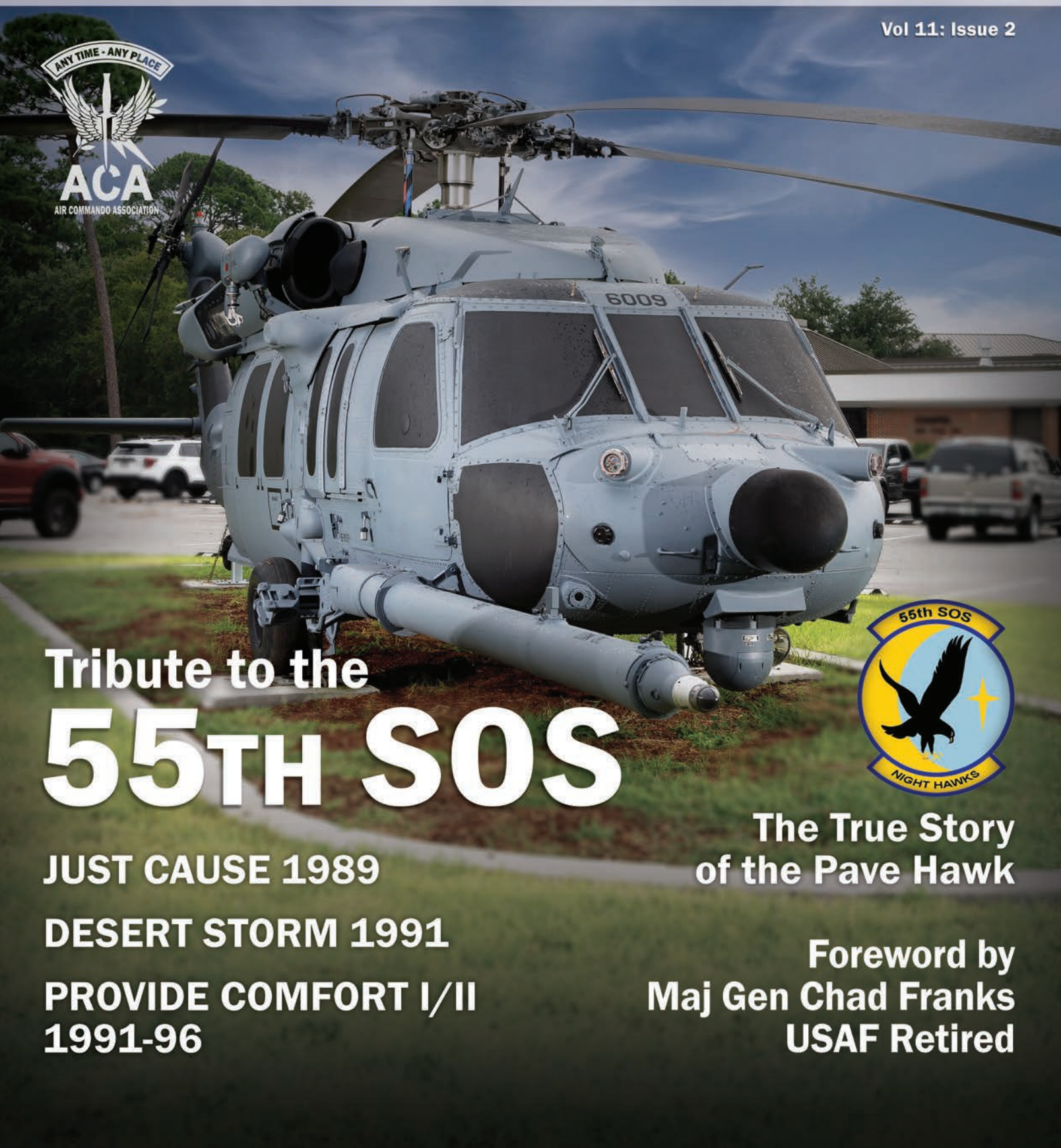

Tribute to the 55TH SOS

The True Story of the Pave Hawk

JUST CAUSE 1989

DESERT STORM 1991

PROVIDE COMFORT I/II 1991-96

Foreword by
Maj Gen Chad Franks
USAF Retired

Air Commando JOURNAL

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ON THE COVER:

MH-60G Pave Hawk 87-26009 at Hurlburt Field's Airpark, Hurlburt Field, FL.

(Photo by Scott Schaeffler www.ScottPhotoWorks.com)

Foreword

On a beautiful morning in October 1999, I found myself standing in formation in a shared maintenance hangar between our MH-60G Pave Hawks and MH-53M Pave Lows on the flightline at Hurlburt Field. I was a captain at the time and we were gathered on this day for the deactivation ceremony for the 55th Special Operations Squadron (SOS). The 55th SOS was AFSOC's only MH-60G flying squadron and we had recently returned from a combat deployment supporting Operation Allied Force. The command was transitioning to the CV-22 Osprey and the deactivation of the 55th SOS was the first step toward bringing this new capability to the command. I remember having very mixed emotions as I watched the furling of the 55th SOS guidon with all its campaign streamers. There were many former 55th SOS squadron members in attendance, as well as AFSOC leadership and our counterparts in the wing we had served with over the years. I had many emotions that morning…sadness, disappointment, uncertainty…but the dominant emotion was mission accomplishment.

I found myself filled with gratitude as I looked back on the accomplishments of the squadron. This incredible team searched for a congressman in the mountains of Ethiopia and helped remove Manuel Noriega from power in Panama. They helped expel Saddam Hussein and his forces from Kuwait during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm and supported Operation Northern Watch in Turkey to keep Saddam's forces contained. Our last combat deployment was Operation Allied Force where the "Night Hawks" were part of the operation that brought an end to Slobodan Milosevich's genocide in Kosovo, rescuing the first (and only) downed F-117 stealth fighter pilot and an F-16 pilot, who went on to be the future Chief Staff of the Air Force, then Lt Col Dave "Fingers" Goldfein. All these legacy missions, and others, are contained in this issue of the Air Commando Journal for your enjoyment.

The 55th SOS showed the tremendous strategic impact a relatively small squadron could have on the landscape of our country's conflicts. I am convinced that they had such an outsized impact due to the discipline and sense of purpose that permeated the squadron.

I first arrived at the 55th SOS in fall of 1995 and there was a sense of pride and dedication to the mission that was palpable throughout the squadron. It was a culture established by the Air Commandos that had come before me and embodied the SOF Truths that humans are more important than hardware and quality is better than quantity. It was a culture that had been established through hard and exhausting training with our fellow Air Commandos and joint special operations warriors. The intense training paid off time and time again as the squadron was called upon to bring their capabilities to bear and resulted in a legacy of excellence in the special operations community.

When we look back on the legacy of the 55th SOS, it is one personified by quiet professionalism, tactical excellence, disciplined operations, and a commitment to the mission. AFSOC recently dedicated a MH-60G into the airpark at Hurlburt Field to acknowledge the incredible work done by the men and women who operated, maintained, and supported the Pave Hawk mission. It is appropriate we acknowledge the role the MH-60G Pave Hawk community has played in the history of AFSOC and its outsized impact on the special operations mission. The 55th SOS's legacy stands as a reminder that an Air Commando properly trained and equipped cannot only be successful but also make strategic impacts for our nation…Anytime, Any Place.

Chad P. Franks, Major General, USAF (Retired)
Former Commander, 15th Air Force, Shaw AFB, SC

SITREP

Greetings Air Commandos, I hope each of you and your families are safe and healthy as we struggle to cope with rising costs and increasing interest rates.

Funding is essential to keep any activity viable—government, non-profit, or commercial, and your Air Commando Association is no different. Since my last SITREP a very exciting change has occurred. Retired CMSgt Mike Gilbert and his Warrior Law team successfully led the ACA through a complex IRS process to reclassify the ACA from a 501(c)(19) to a 501(c)(3) non-profit.

Bill Rone, SES (Retired)
ACA Executive Financial Advisor

What does this mean? By law, 501(c)(19) non-profits are very rigid and administratively challenging for membership verification and record keeping and are more closely scrutinized because many have "posts" that include revenue generating bars, food service, and entertainment areas, etc., and this is why we made the change to a 501(c)(3) non-profit.

The reclassification of the Air Commando Association to a 501(c)(3) is important because many donors who have limited their charitable donations to only 501(c)(3) non-profit charities can now consider donating to the ACA. Another benefit for the ACA reclassification to 501(c)(3) is it opens the door for individuals to make Qualified Charitable Distributions (QCD) from their IRAs to the ACA, free from federal income taxes. When we were a 501(c)(19), donors could not make tax free donations using QCDs…now they can!

The ACA has operated at essentially the same support level to the Air Force Special Operations Forces mission for many years. These two new revenue opportunities have the potential to provide relief and growth potential to the ACA. We can do better and Air Commandos deserve it.

As a 42 year "tight fisted" DoD Comptroller and volunteer "finance guy" for many non-profits, I clearly recognized how lean and efficient the ACA operates—and fights far above its weight class—with only two employees operating out of our small facility west of Hurlburt Field. If you are a commercial business or your employer, or any organization you serve, allows donations to 501(c)(3) non-profits, please consider donating to the Air Commando Association.

If you have reached the wonderful age of 70.5 years, I strongly recommend investigating making QCD contributions from your non-Roth IRAs to the ACA—or any worthy 501(c)(3) non-profit or church; they are federal income tax free. The year you reach age 72, you will be required to take Required Minimum Distributions from your IRAs—or lose 50 percent of those amounts each year to federal tax penalties. QCDs may be a good fit for your family situation.

NOTE: QCDs cannot be made from Thrift Savings Plan accounts. As I approached 70.5, I rolled my TSP to an IRA. I could have made incremental transfers from TSP to my IRA, but elected to simplify and roll 100 percent to my new IRA account.

The QCD process is relatively simple. A QCD must flow directly from your IRA custodian to your designated charity. Your custodian will report that amount to the IRS. When your taxes for that year are prepared, QCDs will be excluded from taxable income. The process is simple but each of you should consult your IRA custodian and tax preparer as you move forward. My wife and I have used QCDs for all donations to 501(c)(3)s and our church for three years. I enjoy avoiding federal income taxes on our withdrawals and the ability to donate 100 percent of my 1990 TSP withholding--plus investment growth to my favorite charities. If you have QCD questions, please contact me at (850) 380-6202 or email me at william.rone@yahoo.com.

I am pleased to report the ACA and our Air Commando Foundation are well funded for current operations and we have accumulated strong reserves for unexpected loss of altitude and air speed. Please see the 2022 ACA Convention financial briefing for a much better recap. I am honored to serve Air Commandos as a volunteer.

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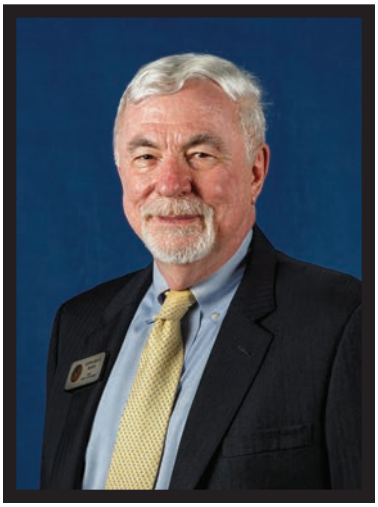
Tribute to

Lt Col Ed Reed

Air Commando Hall of Fame

The Air Commando Journal staff regrets to inform our readers that Lt Col Ed Reed, USAF (retired), passed away on 5 October 2022, at the age of 69. Colonel Reed is a member of the Air Commando Hall of Fame, Class of 2019. His remarkable career included extensive operations as a HH-53C pilot and later MH-53H Pave Low pilot including Operation Honey Badger, that followed Operation Eagle Claw, better known as Desert One, when US special operations forces came into their own as a joint organization in the early days of modern SOF. He qualified to fly the MH-53 Pave Low in 1980; #21of 457 total pilots to fly, arguably the most sophisticated helicopter of its time.



However, Colonel Reed is better known as one of the original "SOF Mafia" beginning when he was reassigned to Military Airlift Command headquarters and later at the Pentagon where he dramatically reshaped the Air Force special operations force with aggressive modifications efforts of the MH-53J, MH-60G, MC-130P Combat Shadow, C-141 SOLL II, and EC-130J. His ability and reputation to "find" money, execute it quickly, and produce real value for combat aircrews is well known and respected.

In the last portion of his career, Colonel Reed served at the 58th SOW where he envisioned, acquired funding for, and fielded the most sophisticated mission rehearsal, simulation, and training architecture in the entire DoD at the time. His vision of fully networked simulators flying in congruent data bases, with full interoperability, while employing realistic terrain following and masking, utilizing space-based intelligence and highly detailed data bases of actual enemy targets and target areas was unparalleled.

The MH-60s were transferred to Air Combat Command in 1999 and the MH-53s retired in 2008, and Colonel Reed's legacy continues within the USAF Air Rescue community's HH-60G helicopters and the bedrock foundation and vision for the use of realistic simulation. His clear vision, unwavering commitment, and tremendous creativity in many roles in the service of the nation and Air Force Special Operations are worthy of emulation. The Air Commandos who have benefited from his contributions, salute him and say thank you. Rest in Peace.

The MH-60G Pave Hawk Hurlburt Air Park 2022

The inscription on the dedication plaque:

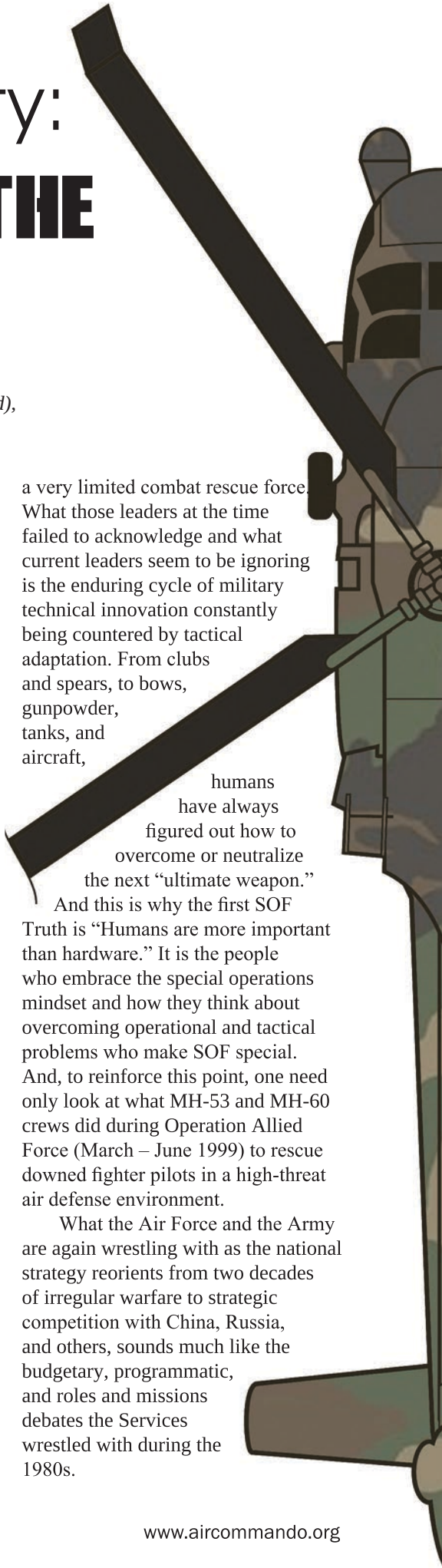
MH-60G Pave Hawk 87-26009 served in the 55th Special Operations Squadron, Hurlburt Field, FL. The 55th Special Operations Squadron was assigned to the 1st Special Operations Wing, 18 April 1989 – 22 Sept 1992, then subsequently assigned to the 16th Special Operations Wing 22 September 1992 – 11 Nov 1999. The Pave Hawk's primary mission was infiltration, exfiltration, resupply, and recovery of special operations forces. The US Air Force originally purchased UH-60A Blackhawk helicopters from the US Army and began upgrading the aircraft for its special operations mission. The highly modified Pave Hawk version included integrated inertial navigation/global positioning/ Doppler navigation systems, color weather radar, satellite communications, and secure voice systems. The range extension modification included installing an inflight aerial refueling probe and cabin mounted auxiliary fuel tanks. Aircraft defensive capabilities were improved by installing crew served 7.62 mm miniguns and .50 caliber machine guns. Finally, the addition of a forward looking infrared (FLIR) system increased the night low-level capabilities of the Pave Hawk.

The Pave Hawk aircraft supported special operations forces while conducting missions during Operation Just Cause in Panama supporting the naval special warfare task force. They were part of the initial special operations force deployed to the Middle East in support of Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm. The Pave Hawk aircraft and air crew provided emergency evacuation coverage for SEAL teams penetrating the Kuwait coast prior to the coalition invasion. Additionally, they were tasked with combat search and rescue coverage for coalition air forces in western Iraq, Saudi Arabia, coastal Kuwait, and the Persian Gulf. The Pave Hawk flew missions in Operation Provide Comfort and Northern Watch, supporting US Army Special Forces, and providing rescue alert coverage for allied fighters enforcing the no-fly zone in northern Iraq.

In March 1999, MH-60G 87-26009 was deployed to Brindisi, Italy, as part of the joint special operations task force supporting combat operations during Operation Allied Force. On the night of 27 March 1999, a US Air Force F-117 stealth fighter, Vega 31, was shot down by Serbian air defenses near Belgrade. The rescue task force consisted of two MH-53 Pave Lows and Pave Hawk 26009, launched from the forward staging base to the survivor's location. Overcoming communication issues, forecasted inclement weather, and rescue signal malfunctions, the crew of 26009 successfully recovered the pilot of Vega 31 and returned him to friendly forces.

Staff Officer Audacity:

THE TRUE STORY OF THE PAVE HAWK



By Richard Newton, Lt Col, USAF (Retired), as told by Ed Reed, Lt Col, USAF (Retired), Gary Weikel, Col, USAF (Retired), and Donny Wurster, Lt Gen, USAF (Retired)

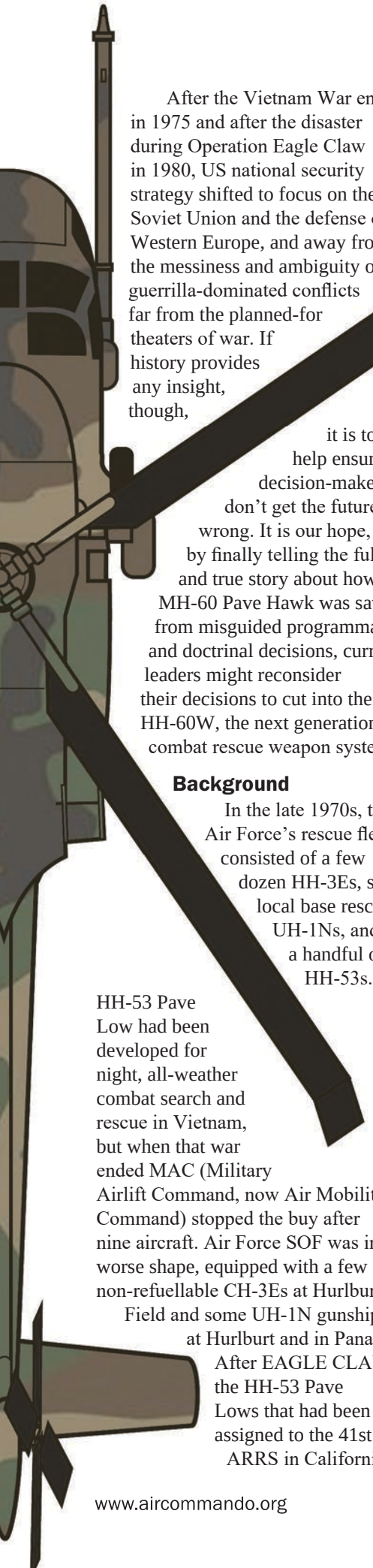
In 1981, the Air Force announced its plan to acquire 243 HH-60D Nighthawk helicopters to replace battle proven, but battle-weary, Vietnam era HH-53s, HH-3s, and UH-1s for the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service (ARRS) and Air Force Special Operations. Because of budgetary and Congressional pressure, the program was reduced to a high-low mix of 155 HH-60Ds and less capable HH-60Es. This tendency towards a mixed fleet of a few highly sophisticated, top-end aircraft and many more less-capable aircraft was a popular fad in the 1970s and 1980s – for example, the Air Force's original plan for the F-15 and F-16 buys. The helicopter modernization program was reduced again to 90 HH-60As, and finally, in 1986, the USAF HH-60 program was cancelled outright. Quietly, though, and off nearly everyone's radars, a small group of "insurgent" staff officers kept the H-60 program alive. Those officers used other people's programs, other people's money, and other people's people to eventually field USAF's MH-60G Pave Hawks that have served the nation so capably and honorably for the last thirty years. This is those insurgents' story.

Bottom Line Up Front

The Air Force's next generation combat rescue helicopter program, the HH-60W Jolly Green Giant II, is finally underway. In 2014, the USAF awarded an engineering, manufacturing, and development contract to the Sikorsky-Lockheed Martin team for four HH-60W helicopters and seven aircrew and maintenance training systems. In September 2019, the program moved into low-rate initial production (LRIP) and ten additional helicopters were ordered. The Air Foce currently has 65 HH-60Ws on order, with the final 10 aircraft to be purchased in FY 2023. The first two operational HH-60Ws arrived at Moody AFB, Georgia, in November 2020. After years of delays and the USAF's ill-advised CSAR-X program decision to pursue a rescue version of the Army's workhorse CH-47, it finally seemed as if the future combat rescue program was back on track. Then, in August 2021, the commander of Air Combat Command, Gen Mark Kelly, publicly questioned the viability of combat rescue on future battlefields, emphasizing that in the expected high-end conflicts against peer and near-peer adversaries the current and proposed combat rescue force would be hard pressed to recover downed airmen. As the great Yogi Berra once quipped, "It's like déjà vu all over again."

In 1985, the fighter dominated leadership of the Air Force, many of whom had flown combat missions during the Vietnam War, insisted that the successful combat rescue tactics developed and proven in Southeast Asia would be impossible on future battlefields against the then peer opponent, the Soviet Union. Their vision was to divest of all rotary-wing special operations capability and retain a very limited combat rescue force. What those leaders at the time failed to acknowledge and what current leaders seem to be ignoring is the enduring cycle of military technical innovation constantly being countered by tactical adaptation. From clubs and spears, to bows, gunpowder, tanks, and aircraft, humans have always figured out how to overcome or neutralize the next "ultimate weapon." And this is why the first SOF Truth is "Humans are more important than hardware." It is the people who embrace the special operations mindset and how they think about overcoming operational and tactical problems who make SOF special. And, to reinforce this point, one need only look at what MH-53 and MH-60 crews did during Operation Allied Force (March – June 1999) to rescue downed fighter pilots in a high-threat air defense environment.

What the Air Force and the Army are again wrestling with as the national strategy reorients from two decades of irregular warfare to strategic competition with China, Russia, and others, sounds much like the budgetary, programmatic, and roles and missions debates the Services wrestled with during the 1980s.



After the Vietnam War ended in 1975 and after the disaster during Operation Eagle Claw in 1980, US national security strategy shifted to focus on the Soviet Union and the defense of Western Europe, and away from the messiness and ambiguity of guerrilla-dominated conflicts far from the planned-for theaters of war. If history provides any insight, though, it is to help ensure decision-makers don't get the future too wrong. It is our hope, that by finally telling the full and true story about how the MH-60 Pave Hawk was saved from misguided programmatic and doctrinal decisions, current leaders might reconsider their decisions to cut into the HH-60W, the next generation combat rescue weapon system.

Background

In the late 1970s, the Air Force's rescue fleet consisted of a few dozen HH-3Es, some local base rescue UH-1Ns, and a handful of HH-53s. The HH-53 Pave Low had been developed for night, all-weather combat search and rescue in Vietnam, but when that war ended MAC (Military Airlift Command, now Air Mobility Command) stopped the buy after nine aircraft. Air Force SOF was in worse shape, equipped with a few non-refuellable CH-3Es at Hurlburt Field and some UH-1N gunships at Hurlburt and in Panama. After EAGLE CLAW, the HH-53 Pave Lows that had been assigned to the 41st ARRS in California were transferred to AFSOF, at the time under Tactical Air Command, and those Rescue crews trained for Operation Honey Badger, the proposed return to Iran and a second attempt to rescue the hostages. After the hostages were freed, the Pave Lows returned to MAC and in March 1983 the Air Force's combat rescue and special operations forces were consolidated in MAC's new 23rd Air Force (23rd AF).

Under MAC, plans were developed to convert all Rescue HH-53Cs to the newer J-model Pave Low configuration and dedicate those airframes to special operations. Doing so, however, meant that the CSAR mission was left to the remaining fleet of underpowered and antiquated H-3s. The USAF knew the rescue force needed to be modernized, so in 1981 the Air Staff created a program of record to procure 243 HH-60D Nighthawks, 219 for CSAR and 24 for AFSOF. The HH-60D was a highly modified Sikorsky UH-60 with a glass cockpit, terrain following radar, and a suite of modern navigation and defensive electronic systems. As a precursor to getting the Nighthawks into the USAF fleet, after HONEY BADGER the Air Staff bought 11 1981/1982 UH-60A Blackhawks for the 55th ARRS at Eglin AFB to replace the HH-3s that had backfilled the 41st ARRS HH-53s, to begin building H-60 experience into USAF service, and to replace the 1st SOW's aging UH-1Ns. The initial plan for AFSOF was a mixed fleet of 9 MH-53 Pave Lows and 11 UH-60 Blackhawks.

In August 1983, though, the General Accounting Office (GAO) issued a report that signaled the beginning of the of the end of the Air Force's HH-60D program. The GAO cited a House Armed Services Committee (HASC) report questioning the wisdom of upgrading a $5-million UH-60A to a $20-million HH-60D. That $20-million price tag made the HH-60D significantly more expensive than the F-16s the Air Force was procuring, a tough pill to swallow for a fighter-dominated Air Staff. The HASC directed that the Air Force reexamine the program and come back with a more affordable option, and they also cut off all funding for advanced procurement items for the HH-60D. On the Senate side, their Armed Services Committee (SASC) questioned whether all 243 helicopters needed to be full up HH-60Ds and urged the Air Force to consider a high-low mix of HH-60D and less capable HH-60E models. The SASC concurred with the HASC's decision to not authorize advanced procurement funding.

At the same time, while the budget battles were ongoing, the Army and Air Force Chiefs of Staff, Gen John Wickham and Gen Charles Gabriel, had sponsored a small and very tightly controlled study group that produced a programmatic and roles and missions plan titled the Joint Force Development Process, colloquially known as "The 31 Initiatives." In the late 1970s, the Pentagon had chosen to pivot away from the nation's painful and frustrating experiences of low-intensity conflict in Southeast Asia to the conventional threat posed by the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. This redirection was not without strategic imperative. The 1973 Yom Kippur War had been a wakeup call for the US by demonstrating how far Soviet military equipment had technologically evolved while the US had been focusing on the war in Vietnam. That, plus the Warsaw Pact's numerical superiority over NATO forces gave the US Army and USAF pause and forced a reconciliation in traditional Service competition for programs and budgets. The need to defend Europe from the Warsaw Pact without going nuclear served as the catalyst that brought Army and Air Force leaders together in a spirit of cooperation and integration.

While originally intended to improve synchronization, take down barriers to joint warfighting, and eliminate duplicative programs, two of the initiatives, #16, Combat Search and Rescue (CSAR), and #17, Rotary-wing Lift Support for SOF, helped contribute to the death of the Air

Force's HH-60D Nighthawk program. Curiously, all USAF representatives to the Chiefs' study group were from the fighter community and did not include anyone from Rescue nor from AFSOF. The group's work was so secretive that the USAF rotary-wing community only found out about these two initiatives after the final, signed report was published in May 1984. And, in a bit of staff subterfuge, Initiative #17 was inserted into the report by a single Army colonel at the end of the study effort, after all other deliberations had been completed. Without any Air Force special operations or rotary-wing expertise on the study group to deliberate the issue, the last-minute insertion seemed harmless enough, especially when argued from the perspective that the Air Force had about 200 helicopters while the Army had over 6,000. Plus, it was consistent with the Chiefs' guidance to eliminate duplication among the Services and the USAF leadership's belief that future combat rescue was not viable. Thus, no one from the Air Force side of the study group objected to what would become an extremely controversial and divisive topic at USSOCOM for the next 20 years. Once the 31 Initiatives document was signed and published, an Air Force captain serving as an intern at the Air Staff was finally brought into CHECKMATE to work on the initiatives. To appease the Army colonel, though, the captain was not allowed to work on Initiatives 16 or 17.

The first Pave Hawk at Kirtland Schoolhouse. (Photo courtesy of Donny Wurster)

The Pave Hawk's Beginning—Some Minor Modifications

In the early 1980s, at Scott AFB, Capt Ed Reed was creating and circulating a series of point papers aimed to support the revitalization of the Air Force's rotary-wing capabilities. Working in a nearby office at HQ MAC, Major Donny Wurster was the Program Element Manager for the Nighthawk program. The staff reaction to Reed's papers ranged from head-in-the-sand disbelief to outright hostility at times. The MAC staff was determined to protect the troubled HH-60D program as it was currently written and to fight back against any threats posed by Congressional concerns and the "31 Initiatives." A barely known fact is that the Commander of MAC at the time, Gen Thomas M. Ryan, personally intervened with the CSAF, stating that Initiative 17 was a bad idea and should be withdrawn. Gen Gabriel brusquely denied General Ryan's request.

Meanwhile, Reed and Wurster cooperated to overcome the inherent flaw in the MAC staff's plan to protect the HH-60D program at all costs. Together they created three Statements of Need: HQ MAC SON 11-84 to develop and sustain a fleet of MH-53J Pave Lows, HQ MAC SON 12-84 to do the same for what became the MH-60G Pave Hawk, and HQ MAC SON 13-84 which converted and upgraded the Rescue HC-130s to the AFSOF MC-130P/N Combat Shadow configuration. These SONs were forwarded to the Air Staff for approval, but that approval was never granted because of the limited funds available and possible conflicts with Initiative 17. This did not deter Reed and Wurster, though, and they pressed on as if the SONs were programs of record. Maj Gary Weikel, in the SOF operations division at HQ USAF, served as Reed and Wurster's trusted agent and their "inside man" at the Air Staff. These three determined officers cultivated a small cadre of like-minded advocates and believers among various staffs and on Capitol Hill who quietly and unobtrusively worked the military and political staff processes to keep the MH-60G program alive.

Captain Reed, who was assigned to the aircraft modifications division at HQ MAC, began inserting small numbers of AF Forms 1067, Aircraft Modification Proposal, into HQ MAC's monthly review boards to upgrade the 55th ARRS's UH-60As, ostensibly for the Air Force's initial H-60 cadre to build their experience and develop tactics appropriate for the systems to be fielded with the HH-60D Nighthawk. Those AF 1067s were highly classified and distribution was limited to a small group of trusted staff officers at HQ MAC and at 23rd AF. Because the HQ MAC review board was made up of fixed-wing airlift officers who were more focused on MAC's biggest priorities, getting the C-17 fielded and the C-5s upgraded, small, low-dollar-cost, and non-controversial helicopter modifications were barely noticed. Within less than 6 months, Reed had gotten 14 aircraft upgrades approved and forwarded to the Air Staff where Weikel ensured all were eventually funded. Captain Reed then took those 14 approved modifications and inserted them back into MAC SON 12-84. Thus, and

unbeknownst to nearly everyone, the Air Force now had an MH-60G Pave Hawk program. The small, unnoticed, and therefore disregarded, Pave Hawk program began running parallel to and ignored by MAC's much more public, controversial, and highly scrutinized Nighthawk program.

Up at the Air Staff, Major Weikel had ensured Reed's Pave Hawk modifications were given the highest priority – Force/Activity Designator 1 – and were funded through a special access program, CREDIBLE HAWK, that was already converting Rescue HH-53Cs to the special operations MH-53J Pave Low configuration, and was also funding SOF fixed-wing modifications to the Rescue HC-130s. Cleverly, CREDIBLE HAWK's H-60 modifications took advantage of existing upgrades and programs from other weapon systems, ensuring they remained unnoticed by anyone looking for new program starts or expensive programs that might be used as "bill-payers" for more popular or higher priority programs. CREDIBLE HAWK upgrades to the UH-60s at Eglin AFB included the inflight refueling system from the original HH-60D Nighthawk that the Army was now funding for the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment's (SOAR) MH-60A, an external hydraulic rescue hoist from the Navy's SH-60B, night vision device lighting and heads-up display from the MH-53J Pave Low, navigation systems from the MH-53J, and the fast rope system from the SOAR's MH-60A. The Pave Hawk's weather and mapping radar was taken from the Army's VH-60A VIP version, but integrated into the Pave Hawk using a radome designed for the civilian version of the UH-60 that Sikorsky was selling to the People's Republic of China. It is interesting to note that during the mid-1980s, the communist Chinese owned more H-60s than did the USAF, a fact that Reed was told to never repeat inside the Pentagon.

Another factoid worth recording is that the insurgents' original plan was to equip a number of AFSOC MH-60s with the Army UH-60As external stores support system (ESSS). Adding the ESSS to the USAF MH-60s would have had the advantage of using an already certified capability to integrate forward-firing machine guns, 2.75-inch rockets, and a number of air-to-ground and air-to-air missile systems into the airframe. Doing so would have given special operations lift helicopters from both AFSOC and the 160th SOAR a compatible and highly-capable armed escort capability. Few people know, and those who do won't acknowledge, that the operational concept for what became the 160th SOAR's MH-60 Defensive Armed Penetrator was written for Army Special Operations Command by an AFSOC major who was studying at the Army Command and General Staff College. Unfortunately for the special air warfare enterprise, though, an Army general at US Special Operations Command at MacDill AFB, Florida, took a very parochial perspective and killed the Air Force's armed escort plan because of what he perceived to be a threat to Initiative 17 and the eventual transfer of all SOF rotary-wing responsibilities to the 160th SOAR. The Army's rotary-wing armed escort program was eventually fielded, but it was delayed several years because the Army had taken such a confrontational approach.

Now We Have a Program, But What's Next?

By using the aircraft modification system behind the scenes to upgrade the 55th ARRS UH-60As for the demands of special operations support, the Air Force was able to gain a modern helicopter that met nearly all requirements that had gone into the original HH-60D design at a cost that made Congress happy – about $6-million per aircraft. Up on Capitol Hill, the insurgents' network had made the case to key staff members on the HASC and SASC that there was little to no difference between the aircraft mission requirements for SOF and for combat rescue – long-range penetration of hostile airspace, at night, at extremely low altitude. In addition, AFSOC demonstrated a long and successful tradition of interoperability and cross-pollination between the two Air Force helicopter communities during operations in Southeast Asia – at Son Tay and during the Mayaguez operation, and during post-Vietnam operations such as JUST CAUSE. It became apparent to the Congressional staffs, at least, that the Army's argument to separate combat rescue and SOF aviation was a distinction without a difference.

In March 1986, Ed Reed, now a major, was reassigned to the Pentagon to manage Air Force helicopter programs in the Directorate of Operational Requirements. Frustrated by the challenges of pushing mission requirements upward from HQ MAC, Major Reed chose to delay returning to active flying and was charged with moving the three statements of need he had previously authored and the SOF aircraft programs he had created while at MAC through the Air Staff. He saw his first tasks as expanding the MH-53J and MH-60G programs. The staff, however, had other ideas. Because the three MAC SONs (MH-53J, MH-60G, and MC-130P/N) were still labeled "Draft," Reed found little support for what were already ongoing programs. Faced with the prospect of months, or even years, of difficult staff work and resistance from the conventional Air Force, Reed used whiteout to remove the work "Draft" from all the SONs. Nearly all resistance to the three programs suddenly disappeared and no one ever questioned if the SONs had been formally staffed and approved.

Reed also developed close professional relationships with many long-term civilian staff members in the Office of Secretary of Defense and in other key offices around the Pentagon. They shared their corporate knowledge with him, especially how to find and gain access to different pots of money. They showed him a number of management "tricks" that enabled him to draw on other people's money to fund parts of the MH-53 service life extension, safety modifications to the three aircraft, and additional aircraft upgrades.

By 1987, about 6 months after

the Air Force Council cancelled the HH-60 program, the first 10 MH-60s were sitting on the ramp at Eglin AFB, assigned to the newly renamed 55th Special Operations Squadron (SOS). Because the procurement and modification of these 10 helicopters had been done outside the formal Air Force system, and the engineering work done at Warner Robins Air Logistics Center was done without contractor support, there were no formal USAF publications accompanying the aircraft. The 55th SOS pilots took on the responsibility for writing the different chapters. Maj Wurster was serving as the 55th SOS's assistant director of operations and his wife, Ronda, typed the initial version of the MH-60G Operations Supplement. That document was sent to Warner Robins for approval, where they blessed it, replaced the cover with a Warner Robins cover, and sent it back for squadron use. The Warner Robins engineering team that brought the 14 modifications together into a single program won the Air Force's Science and Engineering Award in 1988.

The reality of having an Air Force combat rescue force without any modern helicopters pushed the previous naysayers at MAC and 23rd AF to reconsider their opposition to the MH-60. They quickly lined up behind the only viable solution available, the MH-60G Pave Hawk. Ed Reed led the Air Staff effort to divert former HH-60D procurement funds to instead procure nine additional Pave Hawks for AFSOC, much to the chagrin of HQ MAC who wanted the new helicopters to go to Rescue. Congress and OSD's newfound enthusiasm for the MH-60G signaled to the Air Force that they could now begin to program for new, HH-60Gs. Wurster and Reed explained that the HH-60D program had left such a "bad taste" in Congress' mouth that if they hoped to have any success they needed to let the HH designation go. Based upon Reed, Wurster, and Weikel's success using modification monies instead of new aircraft procurement funds, the Air Staff chose to continue that model and function as a program integrator instead of a defense contractor.

The 3-Step program to bring the new MH-60Gs into the Air Force went as follows:

• Step 1: The Air Force bought standard UH-60s from Sikorsky using a multi-year program. The only differences between the Army UH-60s and the Air Force versions were an Air Force paint scheme, different crashworthy seats, and the Navy SH-60B folding stabilators.

• Step 2: The "slick" UH-60s were flown to Sikorsky's Troy, Alabama, modification facility where the inflight refueling system and 117-gallon internal auxiliary fuel tank were installed.

• Step 3: The remaining 12 of the 14 modifications Ed Reed had inserted into the 1984 statement of need, plus any subsequent modifications that had been approved, were then installed on the aircraft by the Naval Aircraft Depot at Pensacola, Florida.

Just as had been done during the modification of the HH-53B/C fleet to MH-53J configuration, there was no prime contractor assigned. This saved the Air Force a tremendous amount of money and was a key factor in getting the flyaway cost of the aircraft down to almost a third of what the HH-60D cost had been.

In 1987, Congress mandated that the 41 remaining HH-53s in the Air Force should be converted to MH-53 Pave Low configuration. Reed tucked the Pave Hawk paperwork right behind the Pave Low program so that the two efforts were worked near simultaneously. It did not hurt that many of the systems were the same on the two aircraft. In 1988, the MH/HH-60G program went into multi-year production. Reed avoided subjecting the new aircraft to extensive formal flight testing by insisting that the new airframes were a continuation of the existing 1981/82 model upgrade program. The Army, however, took the opposite tack, claiming their MH-47Es and MH-60Ks were new aircraft, even changing the tail numbers of the upgraded helicopters to reflect the year they were modified. This significantly delayed fielding of the 160th SOAR's upgraded aircraft.

Once HQ MAC was on board with the new HH-60G, the Air Force Reserves (AFRES) and Air National Guard (ANG) jumped in and began requesting HH-60Gs to replace their HH-3Es. Congressional approval for the HH-60G expanded as delegations from those states with Guard and Reserve helicopter units got behind their units' requests. Congress in general also coalesced around the HH-60G, concluding that the Air Force had listened to their concerns regarding the exorbitant cost of the Nighthawk and finding a way to field the cheaper and just as capable Pave Hawk.

In FY 88, Congress inserted funding for 12 ANG Pave Hawks. That request was increased to 18 in the budget cycle when Sen Ted Stevens from Alaska added money to fund 6 additional Pave Hawks for a new Alaska ANG squadron. Congressional support continued, and in FY 89 the Air Force's request for 6 aircraft was increased to 18 via Congressional adds. Nine of these new helicopters would go to the active force and the other nine to AFRES. The Air Force's request for an additional 4 MH-60s in FY 90 was again increased by Congress, this time to 16 helicopters evenly split between the active and reserve forces. The final addition to the FY 90 budget was for an MH-60G Weapons Systems Trainer. When Major Reed was questioned by the Director of the Air Force Council why these helicopters needed a simulator, Reed's answer was a simple, "Because it flies, sir." Reed was dismissed from the meeting, but the simulator stayed in the budget.

Wurster replaced Reed at the Pentagon and Reed moved to Kirtland AFB, New Mexico, where, with Wurster's budgetary overwatch, Reed built the world class training system that exists there today.

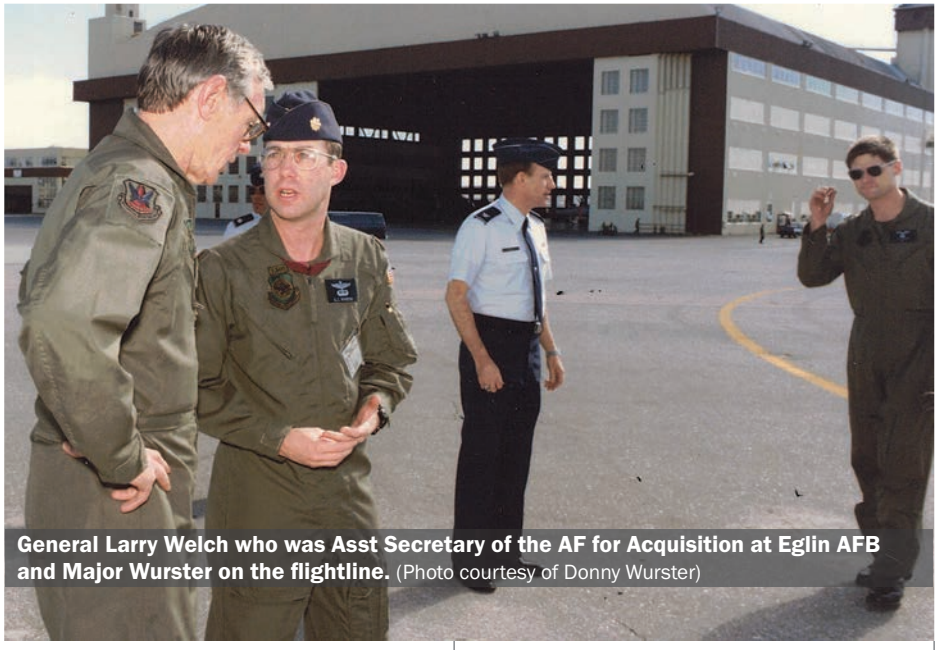
During one budget year, the Army needed to cut its procurement funding for UH-60s destined for the Army National Guard, a move which threatened the Air Force's helicopter program. Recognizing that the Army's advanced procurement funding for

those aircraft was adequate to buy out the remaining 16 helicopters destined for the Air Force, Wurster engaged the Comptroller in the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD). The logic was that if the Army had no helicopters in the next budget, then they would not need the advanced procurement money. That Army money could then be reprogrammed to buy out the rest of the Air Force helicopter program. Based upon the wisdom of that argument, the OSD Comptroller directed that the last 16 helicopters currently on contract for the Army would be delivered in Air Force configuration to complete the USAF's program of record. It is ironic to note that those helicopters had the latest upgrades and were originally slated to go to the 160th SOAR.

Reed had left enough money in the program that Wurster was able to discretely add GPS, ring laser gyro, full FLIR provisions, and a digital data bus with control display units to the Pave Hawk configuration beginning with the 89 models.

From the first MH-60Gs arriving on the Eglin AFB ramp in 1987, over the next 10 years the Pave Hawk program eventually fielded a force of 100 new HH-60Gs and modified the original UH-60s to Pave Hawk standards. The Air Force only ever asked for 27 of the new helicopters, the rest were all added by Congress.

In May 1989, one of the more innovative proposals came out of the 55th SOS – using A-10s to refuel the MH-60s inflight, while also providing their traditional rescue escort "Sandy" role. The squadron proposed mounting the already approved US Navy "buddy stores" refueling pod to the A-10's left inboard station and a 600-gallon external fuel tank to the right inboard station. The proposal would have doubled the range of the MH-60s while adding capability to the Sandy A-10s. As creative and inspired as the idea was, though, nothing ever came of it.



General Larry Welch who was Asst Secretary of the AF for Acquisition at Eglin AFB and Major Wurster on the flightline. (Photo courtesy of Donny Wurster)

Conclusion

The 1980s were a tough time for the Air Force's helicopter force. The USAF Chief of Staff and the commander of Tactical Air Command were looking for ways to divest nearly all of the Service's rotary-wing capabilities at the same time as the Reagan-era budget increases were beginning to peter off. The two four-star generals simply did not believe in the viability of future combat rescue. The hugely expensive HH-60D program became a bill-payer for the new fighters coming into the Air Force. At the same time, the Army and Air Force Chiefs of Staff agreed to transfer responsibility for rotary-wing SOF to an Army aviation community that had not yet created the technical, tactical, and training base it would need to sustain the people and systems necessary for long-range special operations airpower.

In the face of seemingly overwhelming adversity, three "insurgent" AFSOF officers changed history. Capt Ed Reed, Maj Gary Weikel, and Maj Donny Wurster, very quietly and at times, surreptitiously, used other people's money, other people's programs, and other people's people to save the Air Force's H-60 program, replace outdated special operations helicopters with modern and upgraded MH-60Gs, and create a fully funded and fully resourced program that provided the Air Force and the nation the highly capable combat rescue helicopter force that has served with valor and distinction for more three decades.

The FY23 President's Budget Request reduced the programmed HH-60W Jolly Green Giant II buy from 113 to 75 aircraft, a budgetary adjustment and major programmatic disruption. Even more disturbing, though, is to hear the current Air Force leadership echoing their predecessors' gloomy and incorrect prediction that the current combat rescue force will not be viable on the future modern battlefield. No one has a perfect crystal ball, but it is short-sighted to assume that serving and future special operations and combat rescue crews will not find ways to overcome the next generation of air defenses. Luckily, in the mid-1980s, three dedicated Air Commandos took it upon themselves to save the capabilities that Air Force leadership was so eager and willing to get rid of. There are soldiers, sailors, Marines, and airmen, including a recently retired Air Force Chief of Staff, who are alive and with their families today because those three Air Commandos refused to take "no" for an answer.

About the Author: Lt Col (retired) Rick Newton volunteers as an editor for and occasional contributor to the Air Commando Journal and Air Commando Press, while also researching and writing about air power and irregular warfare.

ETHIOPIA

PROOF THE 55TH SOS WAS READY TO GO ANY PLACE, ANY TIME!

By John G. Taylor, Col, USAF (Retired) & Robert Gubash, MSgt, USAF (Retired)

On 7 August 1989, Congressman George Thomas "Mickey" Leland of Texas, Chairman of the House Select Committee on Hunger, and his delegation of eight Americans and seven Ethiopians were flying in a chartered Twin Otter aircraft from Addis Ababa to Fugnido, Ethiopia, to visit a small refugee camp about 480 miles southwest of Addis Ababa near the Sudanese border — they never arrived.

Two days later at 3:15 in the afternoon, I received a phone call from Brig Gen Ed Brya, the US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM)/J3, asking me if I had four aircraft and six crews ready for an immediate overseas deployment, I said, "Yes Sir!" and everything started moving for the 55th SOS. US Central Command (USCENTCOM) was tasked to assist the Ethiopians in the search for Congressman Mickey Leland's overdue aircraft. USCENTCOM called our headquarters, USSOCOM, for rescue and recovery support. USSOCOM tasked 23rd Air Force at Hurlburt Field, which in turn called the 1st Special Operations Wing (SOW). After General Brya's "heads-up," I asked Capt Mike Kraut to begin preparing the 55th for deployment.

While we waited for our C-5A Galaxy to arrive, the 655th Special Operations Maintenance Squadron personnel, led by Capt Mike Reed, began preparing our aircraft and equipment for C-5 loading and transport. Meanwhile, the 1st SOW commander formed a special operations task force composed of over 80 security police, communicators, maintainers, medics, intelligence, logistics experts, and aircrews augmented by AF

MH-60 Hoist Ground Team

pararescuemen, or PJs,from Eglin AFB to support extended recovery operations halfway around the world. The 1st SOW also added several pallets of fresh water and I signed for a $10,000 cash contingency fund, to be kept on or near my person throughout the deployment. 23rd Air Force planners also called and deployed two 67th SOS HC-130s with crews, maintainers, and PJs from RAF Woodbridge, UK, to begin the search operation.

Congressman George Thomas "Mickey" Leland

Of note, this mission was the 55th SOS's first major deployment effort since our standup under AFSOC earlier in the year. The 55th SOS was tasked because we had the only aircraft in the USSOCOM inventory that were rapidly deployable, air refuelable, and hoist-equipped. Our MH-60s were also outfitted with a weather radar and satellite communications (SATCOM) capability.

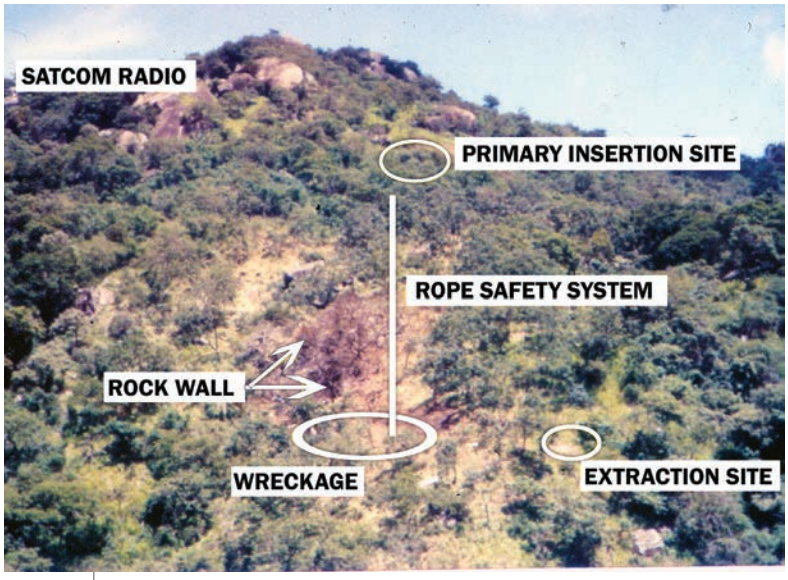
Adding to the pre-deployment excitement, the Secretary of the Air Force, Donald B. Rice was visiting NW Florida Air Force bases, expressly focused on "meeting the special operations forces first-hand." He had already flown on a 20th SOS MH-53J Pave Low helicopter, a 16th SOS AC-130H Spectre gunship, and a 8th SOS MC-130E Combat Talon. While the Secretary didn't fly with us, he got the opportunity to watch the 55th SOS prepare to deploy for the first time. Maj Gen Robert Patterson, 23AF commander, and Col Jim Hobson, 39th SOW commander, were also on hand. Congressmen Alan Wheat of Missouri, and Gary Ackerman of New York, and House Sergeant-at-Arms, Jack Russ were visiting with the Secretary and were given permission to join us on the deployment to Ethiopia. One down-side for the congressmen was the opportunity to join all of us for our pre-deployment gamma globulin inoculations directly into our buttocks, which made the long, long journey to Ethiopia even longer! The unique group of airmen and congressmen boarded the C-5 and we were airborne at 0330, 10 August, about 12 hours after notification.

The 67th SOS HC-130s led by their commander, Lt Col Bill Goodwin, began search operations on 10 August flying along Congressman Leland's intended route as they proceeded to their initial landing at Addis Ababa. The next day, 11 August, they took off for the first complete day's search effort, just prior to our arrival from Eglin AFB.

As we were off-loading our MH-60Gs at Addis Ababa, Mr. Tim O'Brien, an official from the US embassy became "very alarmed" when he noticed that we were bringing fully armed aircraft, which included mini-guns, into a Marxist country. Mr. O'Brien and I had a very serious discussion about the Ethiopian government and I decided that the mini-guns could be very detrimental to our mission, so I sent the weapons pallet and four weapons maintainers home on a departing C-141; we did keep our sidearms. The embassy arranged for billeting in a nearby hotel and I sent all operators into crew rest after being awake for over 21 hours. Meanwhile, Captain Reed's maintenance team prepared the helicopters, TSgt Hollis Tompkins established secure communications with the appropriate agencies, and TSgt Hamann's security police secured our mobile operations center. When the helicopters were ready and we had a functioning operations center, the team leaders set up a shift schedule so their members could get some rest.

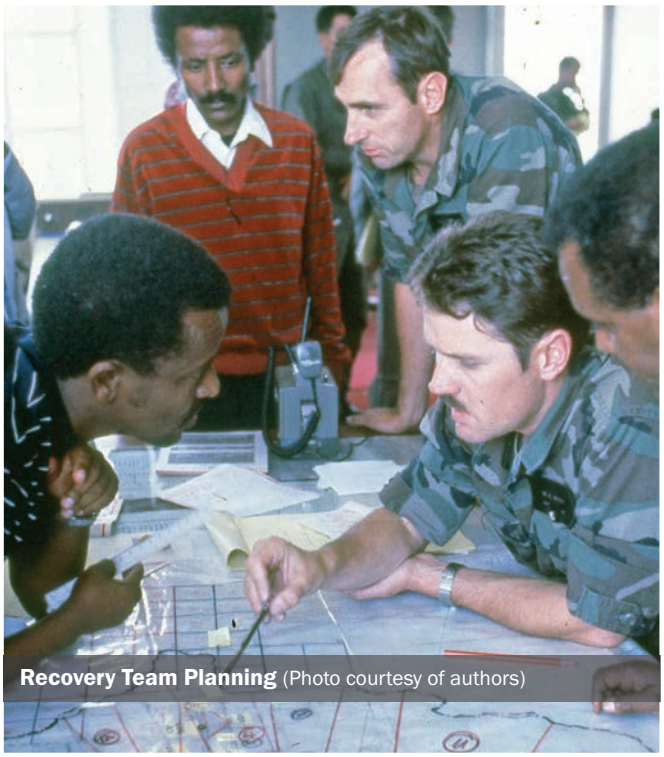
The 1st SOW task force was integrated immediately with the assets from RAF Woodbridge and Maj Joe Oscilia developed a plan to augment the Ethiopians' search effort. The next day, the HC-130s flew an extensive route search and investigated several possible electronic locator transmitter (ELT) sites. The Pave Hawks thoroughly searched the high terrain around Addis Ababa using the HC-130 tankers for inflight refueling to extend the search effort to over 9 hours per aircraft on the first day. The crews reported that the terrain around Addis Ababa, even at elevations above 11,000 feet, was too populated to have had a downed aircraft on the ground for any extended period without someone reporting it.

On 13 August, we changed the plan significantly and focused on the much more remote high terrain nearer Fugnido, the delegation's planned destination. I wanted to get a lay of the land and see what was going on, so I flew with Maj Tom Finnegan and SSgt Bob Gubash in a two-ship formation flying to the new search area. Capts Karl West and Eric Snadecki who were flying the other two-ship and their PJ, SSgt Scott Copper, spotted the wreckage of the Twin Otter near the top of a 6,000-foot mountain, approximately 30 miles from the small refugee camp. Capt West relayed the sighting via secure satellite radio to Addis Ababa, USCENTCOM, USSOCOM, and the Pentagon.



Congressman Ackerman was on Captain West's aircraft and was also able to communicate the discovery to his colleagues in Washington, DC.

When our formation received word of the discovery,



Recovery Team Planning (Photo courtesy of authors)

we flew directly to the site to provide additional support. Our flight engineer, Bob Gubash, lowered our PJ and an Ethiopian doctor flying with us down to the crash site from a 150 foot hover. With daylight fading fast we knew that there would be limited time to spend on site, so Sgt Gubash hoisted both men down on the same device. The doctor had a worried look on his face and we were sure that he had never been near, let alone ride, a hoist before. There were no survivors so we recovered the doctor on the forest penetrator and left our PJ to assist with site security for the night. Captain West had Congressmen Ackerman with him, so his formation started back to Addis Ababa to get the congressman to the American embassy. My aircraft completed one last air refueling to top off our tanks, before we released the HC-130 to escort West's aircraft back to Addis while we remained overhead the crash site for as long as possible to provide support to the PJs as they continued to secure the area. We received word there were forecast thunderstorms at Addis Ababa and as we got near our bingo fuel, we set our sights on heading back.

It was getting dark as we got closer to Addis Ababa and we could see numerous towering thunderstorms in the area, both visually and confirmed on our weather radar. We didn't have any extra fuel to play with the weather, so I decided that we should try to find a village with electricity to land near... it was getting very dark by then and the terrain was black. We finally spotted a small village with a few electric lights. We did a low-level recon pattern and found an "empty" soccer field on the village outskirts. We made a formation landing in the middle of the field and in a matter of moments the field was surrounded by the villagers. I was reluctant to begin shutting down our aircraft in case our spectators were unfriendly. As a precaution, I asked Sgt Gubash to take his extended intercom cord outside and approach a taller than average man, who looked like he might be a leader, to try to determine if they were friendly and whether he could keep the people back while we shutdown. As Bob approached the crowd, they immediately engulfed him disconnecting his intercom cord...we had no idea what to do...was the crowd friendly or hostile...what was happening to Bob? After what seemed like hours, really just a few minutes, Bob came out of the crowd to tell us that when the crowd embraced him all they could say was "Are you Russian or American?" When he said American, they became overjoyed! Sergeant Gubash asked the Ethiopian doctor to accompany him to help clear away the villagers. The crowd was treating us like celebrities with many hugs and excitement, but Gubash and the doctor were still unable to clear the crowds away. Soon a couple of village constables, armed with old WWI British Enfield rifles, arrived on the scene. They were having difficulty moving the crowd away from our helicopters as well, so they fired a couple rounds from their old rifles into the air and the crowd seemed to disappear.

After we shutdown, a city council commissioner approached the aircraft and spoke to us in English, telling us we were in Endibir, about 50 miles from Addis Ababa. We told him that we would have to spend the night because we were low on fuel and the weather was bad at Addis Ababa. He welcomed us and asked if we would like to join them in their thatched-roof homes, I deferred and said that we would be best served staying with our aircraft. I did ask one of our pilots to go into the village with one of the leaders to

Eithiopian doctor and Congressman Gary Ackerman on board Pave Hawk. (Photo courtesy of authors)

find a phone and call the rescue coordination center to let them know all was well because we were having issues with our UHF and SATCOM radios; probably because of the severe storms. By this time, our Ethiopian doctor was able to smooth things out with our hosts. They were initially very upset that we did not want them to kill and roast a calf for us, but the doctor explained that we had plenty of food (MREs). Soon, other local officials joined us near the helicopters. They brought along some chairs and built a campfire. As we spoke with the men, they seemed very pleased to find out we had been searching for Congressman Leland because he

was well known and respected in Ethiopia The conversation soon turned to flying, education systems, their families, and America. Early next morning, a Catholic nursing sister stopped by to see if we were okay, she implied that if we had been Russians, we would not have lasted the night!

As the villagers began to wake, we were surrounded by small village children who were clad in shorts and T-shirts printed with various American sayings, spelled incorrectly, but the kids were very friendly. By this time, it had cooled off quite a bit and I noticed the children were all barefoot and were shivering from the cold. I asked the doctor to encourage them to go home and warm up, but he explained that this was the most exciting experience of their lives and they were perfectly happy to just be near Americans and their flying machines.

An aerial view of a local village (Photo courtesy of authors)

Later on, the doctor arranged for us to visit some of their homes, so we walked with children to their village for a tour. We entered a circular adobe walled home, partitioned in half by another adobe wall with a curtained entryway. In this outer area there was a wood fire with no visible chimney, which puzzled us since we had seen smoke rising from the huts when we flew over during the search operation. We found out that the thatched roof is about three feet thick and was made from long thin sticks that allowed the smoke to pass up and through while diverting any rain water to run down the length of the sticks to drip off the end to the exterior. The children's families served us some fire roasted corn on the cob and an Ethiopian flat bread which was delicious. The children followed us back to the helicopters and as the sun rose it got quite foggy, which made it mid-morning before we heard an HC-130 flying overhead followed by a couple of Pave Hawks...we cranked up our radios and told them we were fine and that we were ready to return to Addis Ababa. The HC-130 escorted us back to Addis Ababa, while the other two helicopters continued on to the crash site. It wasn't long before we were back at the Addis Ababa airport safe and sound.

For each of us, Ethiopia had become a very special place in our hearts...the people were wonderful, the countryside so lush and green...it had been a very special adventure. Our unplanned overnight stay was also featured in a 15 August 1989 *Washington Post* article titled "Copters drop in for Ethiopian Cookout." The article began "Lt Col John Taylor was in trouble…." The article went on to describe our Ethiopian layover with several incorrect, but entertaining details, and also mentioned the extra adventure we had during our time in Ethiopia. However, the "icing on the cake" for me and SSgt Gubash was our 2–3-minute interviews on world-wide CNN.

On 14 August, MSgt Jaso from Detachment 4, 1730th Pararescue Squadron at RAF Woodbridge, and TSgt Bill Sine from Detachment 2, 1730th Pararescue Squadron at Eglin AFB, began implementing their outstanding recovery plan. They secured the site, encircling it with safety ropes, and immediately added their unique capabilities to the recovery team. Because of the severity of the terrain, the only way into and out of the site was via hoist from up to 75 feet above the terrain. A PJ accompanied all recovery personnel on the hoist for their safety. The PJs lived on the mountain until the recovery operation was complete. It took over 100 hoist operations to relay personnel, recover victims, and recover their belongings. The successful recovery would not have been possible without the tremendous capabilities of our great PJ team. I'll also note that 23rd AF augmented the RAF Woodbridge HC-130 tankers with additional crews and HC-130s from Eglin AFB because the crash site was at the very limit of the MH-60G's range, and required constant aerial refueling. By 16 August, the recovery operation was complete, including the National Transportation Safety Board site investigation.

On 18 August, after over a week of virtually around the clock support, the aircraft and personnel returned to their respective bases. The 16 crews flew over 80 sorties logging 460 flying hours in 9 days. This was only possible because of the special people of 23rdAF, which had almost 200 Air Commandos involved in this humanitarian mission with nearly 150 of them from the 1st SOW, proving the wing's motto, "Any Time, Any Place."

The final highlight of the mission was my opportunity, with help from TSgt Jaso, to provide a "flight suit" briefing for the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, General Tony McPeak, and the other general officers on the Air Staff.

About the Authors:

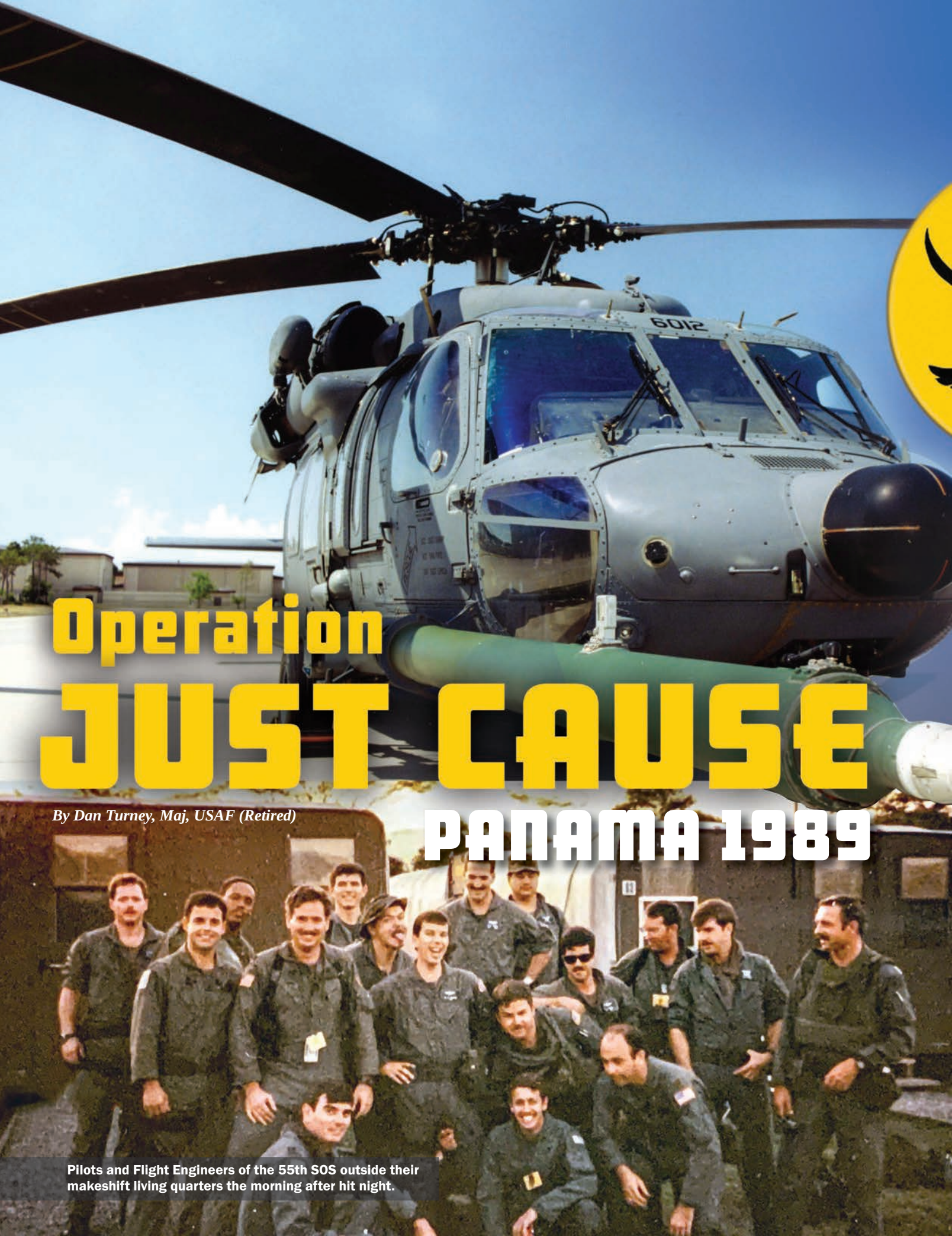
Colonel Taylor served over 26 years in the Air Force with over 10 years in special operations. He logged more than 3,500 hours with over 1,000 hours in fixed-wing before upgrading to helicopters with over 500 hours each in Hueys, Kaman Huskies, RAF Whirlwinds, and Blackhawks. He was the first commander of the 55th SOS and served in Operation Just Cause. He also served as the 1st SOW/DO for Operation Desert Shield and assistant director of operations during Operation Desert Storm.

Master Sergeant Robert Gubash served over 22 years in the Air Force with over 9 years in special operations. He logged more than 3,500 hours in Blackhawk helicopter. He was first assigned to the 55th ARS, soon to be re-designated 55th SOS, where he served in the search for missing Congressman Mickey Leland (Ethiopia), Operation Just Cause (Panama), Desert Shield/Desert Storm (Saudi Arabia), and numerous other deployments to Kuwait, Turkey, and Bosnia/Herzegovina.

Operation JUST CAUSE

PANAMA 1989

By Dan Turney, Maj, USAF (Retired)



Pilots and Flight Engineers of the 55th SOS outside their makeshift living quarters the morning after hit night.

This is an article about the planning, deployment, and execution of Operation Just Cause by the 55th Special Operations Squadron (SOS) based on my recollections as the MH-60G Pave Hawk lead planner for the 1st Special Operations Wing (SOW) and Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). Included in the article are several vignettes written by the pilots who flew the missions during the first few days of Operation Just Cause.

First, a little background. I was privileged to be assigned to the 55th Aerospace Rescue Recovery Squadron which was redesignated the 55th SOS in March 1988. I was one of the initial pilot cadre for the MH-60G. I had experience in the UH-1N Huey, as did some of the first 30 or so pilots. Several other pilots had experience in the C/HH-3E Jolly Green Giant and we were joined by very motivated first assignment officers and enlisted members. These were exciting times, for sure, as we all worked hard to get qualified and develop new tactics to become a fully combat capable squadron. While we focused on crew performance, our 10 aircraft were in a constant state of depot modifications for air refueling capability, upgrading avionics technology, and improving weapons systems and payload. Initially, the flying regulations, as well as the maintenance technical orders (TOs), were based on US Army publications, contractor technical data, and MH-53 Pave Low procedures. During this turbulent time, we accomplished all necessary initial and mission qualifications, testing, and tactics development with our 55th SOS in-house aircrews and aircraft. These were ground-breaking events for the initial cadre and achieved without the outside support of a formal schoolhouse or test and evaluation units. I wonder if it will ever be allowed again with more modern, manned aircraft? With this backdrop, we're now on to Operation Just Cause.

After 18 months with the squadron and now a fully qualified Pave Hawk pilot, I was transferred over to the 1st Special Operations Wing' s Special Mission Plans (DOS) office as the first MH-60G planner. All the wing assets had planners assigned to DOS and all were experts on their weapon systems. This was well before any USAF Weapons School trained weapon officers were assigned to Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC). It wasn't long before tensions began building between the US and Panama and the JSOC issued a call for planners to report to Ft Bragg, North Carolina.

As you can imagine, this was a number one priority for JSOC and the planning cell was very large, but manageable. Besides the 1st SOW, the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR), 75th Ranger Regiment, and Army and Navy special mission units, there were representatives from Air Force airlift and refueling units, and other special units. Security was tight, as expected, and everyone was required to sign non-disclosure statements.

The JSOC staff began the planning cycle by dusting off an old operation plan (OPLAN) called Banner Savior. New objectives were introduced, and the planners were broken into different groups such as: assault and supporting forces; helicopter and fixed wing assault; helicopter and fixed wing airlift; strategic airlift; and refueling and logistics support, etc. A JSOC staff member was lead for each group and the beginning of Operation Just Cause was starting with a new OPLAN called "Blue Spoon." The fact that both plans had initials that were BS wasn't lost on anyone.

The concept of a dedicated combat search and rescue (CSAR) asset provided by the 55th SOS was a new capability to JSOC. Normally, all rotary wing assets were filled with the assault force. It was a challenge, early in the process, to keep our MH-60G Pave Hawks dedicated to the CSAR mission, but I was able to protect that capability and agreed to leave follow on tasking flexible after H-hour. Remaining fully focused on H-hour kept the planning on track, but we were quickly tasked to support specific target sets. I was careful not to overcommit our MH-60Gs. The golden rule of a planner is to never exaggerate capabilities, or else the customer will never trust you again. Well, I reached back to the 55th SOS commander, Lt Col John Taylor and his deputy, Lt Col Jerry Garlington, and we reached a decision to commit to a four-ship package based on aircraft and aircrew availability. The key to this strategy was deploying enough aircrew to provide a 24/7 capability. This turned out to be critical about Day 2 of the operation and kept the 55th SOS in the fight while the 160th SOAR crews had to stand down for some crew rest.

As the target sets were fleshed out, it quickly became apparent that our four aircraft would be committed on the first night. Of course, there was some risk with committing all four birds and leaving no spare, but we planned on falling back to three, plus a spare package, after H-hour. Also, the 1st SOW planners knew we had some backup with the MH-53 Pave Lows, if needed…and we did!

The four targets we were tasked to support at H-hour were the Army Ranger and 82d Airborne parachute drops at Rio Hato and Torrijos-Tocumen airfields and two Noriega takedown assaults with TF Black and TF Blue. The Pave Hawks would provide medical evacuation (MEDEVAC) support to the PJ-manned joint casualty collections points (JCCP) and CSAR for the AH-6, AC-130, and airdrop aircraft at the airfields. The other two Pave Hawks would fly in the formation of the TF Black and TF Blue packages to provide CSAR support for the aircraft and assault forces.

As the air plans were developed, I remembered an old saying that goes something like, "Amateurs talk tactics, while professionals talk logistics." Well, the aircraft deployment plan almost forced the 55th SOS MH-60s out of the Blue Spoon OPLAN. The Army MH-60s and A/MH-6 'Little Birds' were slated to deploy by C-5 to Howard -- in Panama. The 160th's MH-47Ds and our MH-53Js aircraft were to self-deploy directly to Howard AFB with multiple

air refuelings from the 1st SOW's MC/HC-130s. I suppose the J4 staff (logistics) planners assumed that since the Pave Hawk was air refueling capable, we would also self-deploy with the other helicopters. Remember, the 55th's MH-60Gs were new to the JSOC package and the staff wasn't fully aware of our capabilities or limitations. I spoke with the J4 air planners and mentioned our MH-60s could not fly the distances of the MH-47/MH-53 refueling tracks with three planned en route refuelings. The MH-60's shorter legs required shorter refueling tracks with at least four inflight refuelings with additional M/HC-130 tankers. I told the J4 we could deploy our four MH-60s on a single C-5 with aircrew and maintenance. I also requested an additional C-130 to deploy the ADVON and command staff ahead of the C-5. This was all news to the J4, and he told me the Air Tasking Order (ATO) request for strategic airlift had already gone out and no additional airlift aircraft were available. I explained to the J4 that our four MH-60s were committed to Blue Spoon for H-hour missions, that we rehearsed with the respective packages, and that American lives depended on the 55th

Pave Hawk with blades folded is loaded onto a C-5.

being there. I felt that the Air Force could find one more C-5 for this mission and we could use the 1st SOW "slick" C-130 to self-deploy the ADVON. Thankfully, they didn't throw me out the door and agreed to send a supplemental ATO requesting another C-5, which was approved…but it was a close call.

As the months passed by, Blue Spoon was refined and rehearsed. One large joint exercise was conducted at Hurlburt Field in early December which turned out to be the final rehearsal. Everything went fairly well and even the F-117s participated making a simulated attack on their assigned target. With Christmas coming up, folks started thinking of the holidays and felt that surely nothing would happen until after the New Year.

In mid-December, I led a two-ship up to Norfolk, Virginia for a few days of shipboard qualifications and training. It was a routine training deployment until I got a call from Lt Col Garlington saying BS (couldn't say Blue Spoon in the clear) had been activated and return home as soon as possible. I promised we would head home first thing following morning. Even though it was a Friday night, I made a telephone recall at the hotel contacting some of the team, leaving messages for others and. as it worked out, everyone was ready, and we headed back to Eglin in the morning. I was excited, but the crews didn't know it at the time they were going to war.

Our deployment went as planned with the ADVON going in a day prior to the main force on the C-5. The J4 did a fantastic job of securing vacant base houses for aircrew and the maintenance team was billeted with cots in the main hangar. Our ADVON and aircrew quarters were in a small one- and two-man shipping crate like shelters or temper-tents, which worked great; we had the coldest air conditioning that I've ever experienced.

As the maintenance team unloaded our MH-60Gs from the C-5, the aircrews went into crew rest. A humorous scene comes to mind that's worth sharing. After months of Blue Spoon planning and now the beginning of Operation Just Cause, I just figured everyone at Howard AFB knew what was going on. Of course, that wasn't the case. I borrowed a couple of our maintenance crews to help me load up 9mm and 5.56mm magazines for our aircrews. We were sprawled out on the floor of the hangar with ammo and magazines scattered everywhere when a group of Howard AFB Security Police came walking up with curious expressions. Without making introductions, I asked their sergeant if he could spare some folks for a little while to help us out. He said, "Sure, captain" and three of his guys sat down with us and I passed them couple of cans of ammo and stacks of magazines and said, "Thanks for your help, let's load 'em up." One young Airman looked at me and asked if they had to count and document the rounds as they loaded? I said, "Nope." Then he asked if this was an exercise? Again, "Nope." You could see the smile on the young Airmen's face from across the hangar.

The planned H-hour of 0100 was moved up to 0030, 20 December 1989. It was on and I found it almost calming after all the months of planning. The aircraft were turning, the crews knew their missions, and maintainers were standing ready for any issue. I knew the plan probably wouldn't survive the first hour (and it didn't) without changes, but we in the tactical operation center were ready. I just had to go outside the TOC to witness this history being made before returning to the radios. The noise was incredible, all the helicopters and C-130 aircraft running. The smell of all that JP-4 fuel and the fumes made my eyes water. The deep rumbling just shook the tarmac…it was absolutely incredible.

The men who flew the missions are the best witnesses to the missions and several have provided their first-hand accounts in the following pages. From my perspective, I believe the plan went as well as could be expected. Of course, there were "on-the-fly" changes and redirections, but overall, we accomplished our taskings and more. The

Rio Hato and Torrijos-Tocumen packages saved American lives. The Noriega assaults didn't capture him, but the chase was on. Two Pave Hawks even extracted a Ranger team left behind by the primary exfil package. The biggest change and challenge on the first night were the casualties taken by the SEALs at Paitilla airfield. There was no dedicated CSAR for this airfield assault because we just didn't have enough assets available at H-hour. However, between the 55th and the 20th SOS MH-53 planners, we believed we could flex if we had to…and we did. When things didn't go as planned for the SEALs at Paitilla airfield, we were able to pair an MH-60 and an MH-53 together to provide CSAR support to the SEALs. The aircrews flew in reinforcements and supplies and evacuated the wounded, providing medical care enroute back to the Howard AB JCCP for more formal medical care.

Beginning on Day 1 we went to two, day crews and two night crews on alert. We flew in additional aircrews and maintenance support from Eglin to allow down time for the initial deployers and to build additional combat experience within the squadron. This certainly paid off a few months later when we deployed to Saudi Arabia for Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. The later missions in Panama involved several MEDEVACs and resupply missions. There was even one counter-sniper mission, and we supported Delta force in the hunt for Noriega.

I flew one mission on Day 3 when Army Special Forces requested that a Ranger company deploy to their location to provide security support. We were on the day alert schedule that morning and joined up with three MH-53s and a MH-47. My aircraft was chalk 5 behind the MH-47 and we flew over to the Ranger compound to load up the troops. It looked like every Ranger (well over 100) that could walk was geared up and waiting to get on a helicopter to get in the fight. I was in awe watching how many Rangers got on that MH-47 in front of us. All five of the aircraft were all at our maximum gross weight. I can't say exactly how many soldiers were in the back of our MH-60, but we had to close the cabin doors to keep them from falling out. As the four heavy-lift helicopters took off, it was amazing to see them knock down palm trees with their downwash. It got even more exciting about 30 minutes into the flight when we felt a jolt and my flight engineer (FE) announced our #2 engine cowling panel had come open - not good. The panel is large enough for a mechanic to stand on it and if it separated in flight, it would likely hit the main rotors and/or the tail rotor system, which would have been catastrophic. We declared an emergency to the flight lead and made a precautionary landing on a deserted beach. The Pave Lows and Chinooks circled overhead while our Rangers jumped out to form a protective perimeter around our aircraft, but before I could shut down the engines, the FE told me he had secured the cowling. What? Okay…so we got all the Rangers back on board, rejoined the flight, and completed the insertion without any more drama. When we got back to Howard, we asked our crew chief to inspect the aircraft and after we got a thumbs up, we resumed our alert posture. I am still amazed how our FE was able to close that cowling without shutting down… best left for future war stories.

Our mission tasking wound down around Christmas and there was talk of redeployment. Then we all had a great surprise when the 1st SOW flew in Christmas care packages from our families. There wasn't a dry eye in the house. The maintenance folks even made a Christmas tree out of multi-colored chem-lights, and it was nice.

Sometime after Christmas most of us returned to Eglin and Hurlburt and after a short break we resumed our crew training, aircraft modifications, and testing, but with a little more swagger than before we left. Remember, this was the first combat mission for the 55th SOS and every one of the aircrew and maintenance team. We were proud we did our duty with skill and honor and returned home as combat veterans. I was, and still am, proud to be part of this brotherhood.

I would like to close with a quote from Lt Gen Bruce Fister, USAF, (Ret) from the Fall 2014 Air Commando Journal (Vol 3-3). "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 in Just Cause are today's Air Commando leaders."

By Eugene Haase, Maj Gen, USAF (Retired)

As I sat in the TOC, I remember being kind of pissed off because missions were handed out for hit night and my crew wasn't assigned one. We were placed on alert for the evening…whatever that meant. I figured we'd just sit close to the radios, grab some chow, and listen to the war happen. H-hour came and went. The Spectre gunships were blasting the Comandancia in downtown Panama City. The 160th SOAR helicopters flew special mission units to take down a prison where an American, Kurt Muse, was held hostage. Several assault packages were out hunting for Manuel Noriega based on intelligence received in the hours leading up to the start of Operation Just Cause, but, as a young captain I really didn't have the big picture. In classic JSOC fashion, if you weren't directly involved in the operation, you found yourself on the sidelines, clueless as to what was going on. However, when Colonel Orrell, the 1st SOW director of operations, came bursting into the operations center where we were "hanging out," things changed. SEAL Team 4 was tasked to take out Noriega's personal jet

located at the Paitilla Airfield in downtown Panama City, but the SEALs encountered much heavier enemy resistance than anticipated and were in a fierce firefight and had taken multiple casualties.

The alert package was a 55th SOS MH-60G and an MH-53J, and we were to fly to Rodman Naval Base, just northeast of Howard AFB, pick up SEAL reinforcements, and infiltrate them into the reportedly "hot" Paitilla Airfield. The official tasking came a few minutes later and we were told to launch… "Now!" As we hurried out to the aircraft, we had no idea what lay ahead; we just knew the SEALs needed our help.

Both aircraft were already "cocked and locked" - our lingo for having already run up and ops checked them earlier and placed in a quick launch configuration. Once we got to the aircraft and got the rotors turning, we were ready for departure in a matter of minutes. I started our Doppler navigation system, which was notoriously inaccurate, as we taxied out. I never got it to full-up status before takeoff and it later proved to be a problem. As I struggled to get one last system update before takeoff, the thought occurred to me that I might actually have to navigate with an outdated map in a country I'd never been to before, at night while possibly being shot at…but oh well, off we went!

Manuel Noriega's disabled jet (Courtesy of author)

The flight to Rodman was uneventful. Our MH-60G was in the lead. As we descended into the landing area, nothing more than a parking lot, I saw lots of wires strung across poles out in front of us. Our "backenders" did a magnificent job of calling us into the landing zone avoiding all the wires. There was not enough room in the makeshift LZ for both helicopters, so the Pave Low remained in the air providing top cover. It was a good feeling having them overhead at the ready to provide fire support if required, but as they made a pass in front of us, I saw something streaming from the back of their aircraft. It looked like smoke, I thought they'd been hit, but it turned out they were dumping fuel so they'd have enough power to get in and out of the tight LZ. The SEALs started heading toward our aircraft… a long line of them. We took as many as the flight engineer said we had room for and then added a couple more. We departed the LZ and switched positions with the MH-53 as they loaded the remainder of the SEALs. When they lifted off, we joined up and headed for Paitilla airfield.

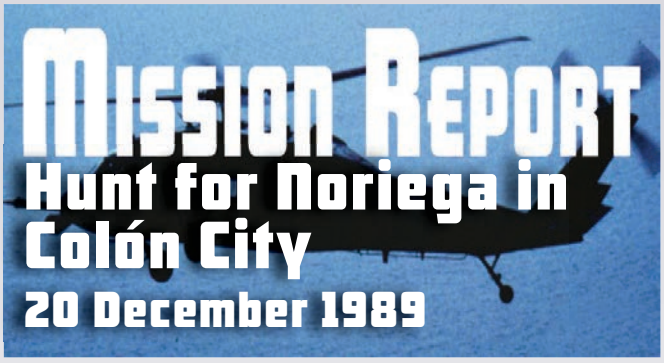
This is when it got exciting. We headed south out over the water because we thought that was the best course of action since we didn't have time to do any serious route study or get an intelligence update on possible enemy locations. I knew from the time we departed Howard that our doppler system was not fully aligned. Finding Rodman was easy, but finding Paitilla, without any help, was going to be a challenge. I had a sinking feeling in my stomach and then we turned east, just past the Bridge of the Americas, and started taking fire. The left scanner called out "tracers, 9 o'clock, coming at the aircraft." I looked left, yep…pucker factor 10…but we were pretty certain they were just firing at the noise. The lights of downtown Panama City were blinding as we approached and rendered our night vision goggles useless. The cover of darkness was of no help tonight. Between the bright lights and my uncooperative navigation system, the airfield remained hidden. But, when in doubt "phone a friend" and our friend in chalk two was the MH-53J Pave Low, the most sophisticated helicopter in the world with a great navigation system with GPS. I called them on our secure inter-plane radio and asked if they could provide a vector toward the airfield that was obscured by the city lights. The vector was passed without hesitation, and we headed straight for our target. The uncomfortable feeling in my stomach passed, but only for a couple of minutes. Right before we touched down at Paitilla the left scanner announced, rather abruptly, that a white van was rapidly approaching the aircraft. I don't recall seeing any enemy fire as we descended into the LZ, but our left scanner was spring loaded to neutralize the threat if needed. To this day I don't know who was in the white van or what their intentions were. Regardless, we landed first and offloaded our SEALs and took on several casualties, while the MH-53 provided overhead cover support. When we cleared the LZ, the MH-53 landed and off loaded their operators, while we provide overhead support until the Pave Low lifted off. Unfortunately, there were causalities that evening at Paitilla and sadly, four brave SEALs lost their lives.

The flight back to Howard AFB was uneventful, but solemn. While all of us had just experienced our first taste of combat, we knew four courageous special operators made the ultimate sacrifice and would not be going home to their families.

As I reflect on the events that night, the thing that stands out is how fast everything happened. We went from being the alert crew to being right in the middle of the action in a matter of minutes. Things went right for us that evening. The wires at Rodman, the AAA from the bridge, the timely vector from our Pave Low brothers, the mysterious white van, and finally the sobering ride back to Howard with four SEALs who lost their lives for a just cause. Good training, good teammates, good aircraft…it all came together and resulted

in getting a mission done in the heat of battle with little to no upfront intel, except for a set of coordinates and a request for help. There was no time for nerves, no time to ask 20 questions. In the end, we were just two crews trying to do the best we could, with minimal information, without ever really knowing what we were getting ourselves into, but we went to support our Navy teammates.

Finally, I dedicate this article to the memory of Colonel Clair M. Gilk, USAF (Retired). Colonel Gilk was my aircraft commander on the Paitilla airfield mission. Clair passed away unexpectedly on November 2, 2021 - husband, son, friend, and one of the best pilots I ever had the good fortune to fly with. Rest in Peace, my brother.



By Colonels Tom Finnegan and Mike Hodge, USAF (Retired)

Introduction

This vignette conveys our memories and best recollection of events that occurred over 30 years ago. I don't think we, at the time, recognized the significance of Operation Just Cause on the maturation of the 55th SOS.

I arrived at Eglin AFB in December 1985 after completing Squadron Officer's School and joined the "O'Club for Lunch Bunch" as we affectionately called the group of us waiting for an opportunity to check out in the UH-60. Over the next, most exciting six years of my career, I would check out in the UH-60, be actively involved in development, testing, and validation of the MH-60G, and help develop associated tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) while participating as initial cadre member of what became the 55th SOS.

As 1988 opened, development of the 55th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron (ARRS) and MH-60G were progressing at a frantic pace. The 55th ARRS was the USAF's only MH-60 unit and, as a consequence, conducted transition training, upgrade training, continuation training, RDT&E, tactics development, initial and full operational capability milestones. These tasks were accomplished while supporting worldwide operations and training with a stated inventory of 10 aircraft though few were ever available due to ongoing aircraft modifications and systems upgrades.

As 1988 and 1989 progressed, the 55th ARRS was increasingly aligning with special operations and associated special operations missions, including supporting JSOC. Throughout this period many enhancements and upgrades were made to our H-60s. These improvements included the addition of: air refueling, radar, and advanced navigation systems; fast rope bars; upgraded weapons systems; improved self-defense systems; and other upgrades that bolstered the Pave Hawk's combat capabilities. With each enhancement, came a need for testing and evaluation, development of TTPs, along with training and operational evaluations. The demand on the squadron was incredible. If it were not for such a select and motivated group of officers, NCOs, and Airmen, all with a common vision and inspired by great leadership from Lt Col Bennie Orrell, Lt Col John Taylor, and Lt Col Jerry Garlington this could have easily turned into a disaster.

1989 was a year of exercises. It seemed every two weeks we were off to another exercise, often with the 20th SOS or the Army's 160th SOAR, sometimes with other elements within JSOC. I was gone from home almost 300 days that year, as were many others. There were times we were tasked to provide 12 MH-60Gs simultaneously, which would not have been an issue, except we had fewer than 10 in the unit.

Many of the exercises we participated in seemed more about demonstrating capabilities than anything else. For example, one exercise, with the 20th SOS MH-53s, centered around flying from Hunter AAF in Savannah, Georgia to take down an airfield at Vance AFB, Oklahoma and return to a National Guard Camp in Arkansas. Watching eight MH-53s and four MH-60s take over Vance AFB with over 200 hundred Army Rangers while AC-130s flew overhead was quite an impressive sight, but to what purpose and why such a long flight?

In another exercise, we flew with the Army's 160th SOAR into remote locations in Colorado and conduct assaults on what appeared to be domestic residences. During that exercise a number of AH-6 "Little Birds" crashed and the commander, BG Gary Luck, asked if we could assume some of the close air support (CAS) roles of the AH-6s. General Luck's request was unexpected, but I think it showed that the 55th was earning the trust and confidence of the JSOC forces by our performance during the exercises.

The series of exercises culminated in a massive event flown over the Eglin ranges, most of Northwest Florida, and southern Alabama in early December 1989. There were about 135 aircraft participating in a complex orchestration of air refueling, insertions, and extractions of hundreds of Rangers, SEALS, and other special operators— all to be executed with precise timing and not kill anyone. During the exercise inbrief, many of us could not believe that many aircraft could safely fly in that small an area without someone running into another aircraft. But as that December 1989 morning arrived and the exercise concluded, all seemed to go well.

What we in the 55th SOS didn't know was "why" we were participating in these exercises. Our planners always did a great job of compartmentalizing information for various missions and in this case, they were performing at above average. At our crew dog level, no one had any idea what it all was about.

Operation Just Cause

As we closed in on Christmas 1989 most members of the

55th SOS looked forward to some down time. My wife and I had plans to drive to Richmond, Virginia with our young son to spend Christmas with my family. On December 19th, the phone rang with a very brief and succinct notice that the squadron was recalled. All I could think of was, "You gotta be shitting me, again?!"

Along with the others who were recalled, I dutifully told my wife I would be back in a few hours as this must be some kind of cruel exercise. When I arrived at the squadron, I could tell something was different. There was a tension and excitement in the air and the helicopters were already folded for C-5 transport and you could see pallets marked with live ammunition and other items we didn't normally take to exercises. After some time, we were told to get on a bus to go to Hurlburt Field. Once there, we noticed a great deal of activity at Hurlburt: C-130s running, C-141s around the field, and a buzz of other activities. All of this was highly unusual for sleepy Hurlburt Field. Once we got to Hurlburt, we loaded onto a C-141 and still had no idea what we were doing or where we were going. We all had different ideas. I thought we were going to Columbia to help the government engage the narco-traffickers. Finally, once settled in on the C-141, we were told that we were going to Panama to take down the Noriega regime…suddenly, this was serious business.

When we landed at Howard AFB, Panama, we saw our MH-60s had already arrived and our maintainers had them unfolded and configured for combat. We aircrew were taken to air-conditioned tents where we tried to get some rest, but as you might expect the excitement of the moment made sleeping a challenge. On the afternoon of December 20th, we were called into a hanger, which was a beehive of activity, to receive briefings on our missions for that night so we could do our pre-mission planning and other pre-flight activities.

My crew (co-pilot Billy Dunn, FE MSgt Barry Jewett, along with two PJs) was tasked as #2 MH-60G in the CSAR package supporting the task force charged with capturing Manuel Noriega. Capt Rob Hawvermale, his co-pilot Maj Tom Finnegan, and their two PJs led our two-ship element, call signs Mike 21 and 22. We flew as part of a larger formation of Army MH-60s, AH-6s, and MH-6s. Our target was Noriega's favorite beach house. The CIA had arranged for a couple of hookers to keep him "occupied" while we executed a precise "snatch and grab" operation. Our flight of two, configured for CSAR, had two missions. First, provide life support and transport for the "precious cargo," Manuel Noriega. Second, provide CSAR support to the larger flight should something go wrong. As I recall the strike time was supposed to be about 0200.

At midnight, we went to the final planning meetings, mission briefs, and refined the assault tactics plan. These all had an uncanny resemblance to the flight paths, terrain, and domestic residences we had assaulted earlier in the year in Colorado. Likewise, the distance flown between Hunter AAF

and Vance AFB was similar to the Hurlburt Field to Howard AFB flight that the MH-53s and MH-47s flew the day before. This wasn't lost on me, and I quietly tipped my hat to the planners who orchestrated that exercise. A year's worth of exercises suddenly made a lot of sense.

Sometime around 0100 we headed to our aircraft and found the flightline in a state of controlled commotion and activity. The ramp was full of MH-47s, MH-53s, 160th SOAR Blackhawks, AH-6/MH-6 Little Bird helicopters, maintenance crews, ammunition loaders, and of course our MH-60Gs. Our crew chiefs were always professional, but they were being particularly meticulous with every aspect of preparing our Pave Hawks for battle.

Both of our crews settled into the cockpits, got the APUs started, ran checklists, and checked the radios, while we waited for the start engine time. Suddenly, we got a call to shut down and head back to the planning area. What?

When we got back to the planning area there was a great deal of consternation among the planners, intelligence types, and leadership. Noriega had rejected the CIA's tempting candy and was on the move to Colón. His exact destination unknown, but intel had a lead on where they thought he was going. The problem for us was that Colón was on the opposite side of Panama (on the north coast) from our original target and we never rehearsed taking him, much less executing, in an urban environment. That said, the Army planners put together a quick and simple plan to use Rangers as blocking teams to surround Noriega to cut off any route of escape and then "close the circle" on him. So, a new concept of the operation for the air and ground operations was developed and we added the new route to our maps; within 45 minutes we headed back to our aircraft.

During our run-up, we developed a maintenance issue, which required us to move to the spare aircraft. It wasn't actually a spare, because the aircraft was assigned to a mission later that night. We had a short debate between the crews over the 'ownership' and I declared, without any authority to do so, that our mission had priority and maintenance could fix our original bird before the other crew's take-off time and that settled it. We moved our equipment between the two aircraft and Billy and I climbed into the cockpit of the spare. I can still feel the laser beam glare on my back as we appropriated another crew's aircraft. In the meantime, our mission formation departed without us and as soon as we got settled, we called Mike 21and said we'd catch up with them.

Back in the early days of the MH-60G there was a small square, sliding vent window, which allowed fresh air into the cockpit. It let very little fresh air in, and it was notorious for creating a venturi effect that would suck unsecured things out of the cockpit when we flew above 100 knots. After we finished running up, we expedited our departure to catch up with the rest of the formation. In our haste, we hadn't gotten the cockpit 100 percent organized and suddenly, above the noise of the engines, Billy and I heard the distinct sound of something being sucked out of that small window. Billy turned to look at me, I looked down for the map and we both realized that sucking sound was the map departing the cockpit.

Now with our eyes wide open, I told Billy, "Don't worry, I have the route memorized and once we catch up to Mike 21and all we have to do is follow them." I'm pretty sure Billy gave me a disgusting "sure you do" reply. To ease his anxiety, I pressed it and told him it was all pretty simple, "Go to the Panama Canal, turn right and follow the lights of the Panama Canal until it ends…Colón is on the other side." And that's what we did. As we flew over the canal, we could see all kinds of activities occurring elsewhere; assaults on the Comandancia, AC-130 fires, limited actions along the canal,

Panama Canal

and what appeared to be some Army helicopters on a routine training mission. I guess not everyone got the word there was a war on.

When we arrived over the end of the canal, we could see our formation flying in an orbit and called Mike 21 for permission to join up. As we got closer, we could see the AH-6 Little Birds making attack runs at targets in the city. Then suddenly, this was no longer familiar territory.

After some time, circling and watching the AH-6 gunships shoot things up, we were given the green light to begin the assault. Now, as a side note, I must admit, the radio chatter from the Little Birds was something to behold, all professional, calm, and business like. You would think these guys conducted live-fire every day of the week. The chatter from the 160th SOAR flight lead was equally professional and calming. As for me, I was neither calm nor cool, but trying very hard to appear so and not let anyone know that I was as tense as a cat in a dog kennel. At this point our job was to remain in our orbit until called in by the ground force commander to recover Noriega, so we circled for what seemed like hours. With the new plan, as the last bird in the formation, we had the job of scorekeeper—ensuring every team that went in, came out. As the sun started coming up, it was increasingly apparent Noriega was not to be found. The mission commander declared "we were done" and started the process of collapsing the perimeter, recovering the Ranger teams and heading back to Howard AFB. It looked like our night was over.

As I tracked the recovery of each team and the departure of the 160th SOAR MH-60s, which were running low on fuel, I had a sinking feeling that we were leaving a team behind. This couldn't be possible, the 160th SOAR never left a team behind and certainly someone surely noticed they did not have a team on their bird as they departed the area. I mentioned to Billy that I think there's still a team on the ground. Like me, he couldn't believe it was true. I called Mike 21 and told him my suspicion and he asked me to triple check. About this time a Ranger team came up on the radio with something to the effect of, "Hey, where are you guys going?"

My suspicion was confirmed, but without my mission map, I was clueless as to where this team was. Eventually, we determined they were at the base of a multi-story apartment complex in a defensive circle. Mike 21 led us over to the suspected location and we could see the team on the ground and in a moment that will forever paint my reputation, I pulled one of the classic humorous moments of military history and volunteered Mike 21, as flight lead, to go recover the team while we hovered and protected him from someone shooting out of the apartment building. This was very much on par with a "you take the hill, I'm going back for more ammunition" moment, since all a bad guy had to do was drop a rock out of the apartment and take out Finnegan's bird. On top of that, of all the dumb tactics to employ, hovering to cover a multi-story building just made both of us ripe targets. Another lesson learned from our first combat engagement… there would be others.

Once Mike 21 recovered the team, we headed back to Howard with a happy group of Rangers. Again, the 55th SOS flexed and filled in the gap.

As we flew toward Howard, the sun was coming up. We had strict rules of engagement that we could not fire upon Panamanians unless they initiated the engagement. As we left the LZ, we flew over what was clearly Panamanian Defense Forces setting up a .50 caliber gun position, but we could not engage per the ROE. Later that day, that gun emplacement would shoot down an MH-6 Little Bird killing all on board. It was a hard lesson to learn. We didn't have a formal means to report intelligence gathered during missions, so this information was probably never passed to others.

By now all of us had been up for over 36 hours. Exhaustion and an adrenalin drop following the night's excitement hit Billy and I at the same moment. I don't remember who was actually flying the helicopter, but we both fell asleep in the cockpit at the same time and were startled awake by the Low Altitude warning from "Bitching Betty," the voice warning system. When we landed at Howard, Colonel Orrell and Colonel Taylor greeted us. We explained to Colonel Orrell that we were exhausted and could not safely take another mission. He, along with Colonel Taylor, gave us big smiles and congratulations for a successful first night. We never told them that we both fell asleep while flying.

While Mike 22's day was over, Mike 21 was tasked to fly another mission. They were to fly a short distance across the Panama Canal to Torrijos-Tocumen Airfield, to recover a wounded soldier and MEDEVAC him to Howard where a field hospital was near the airfield. Hawvermale and Finnegan looked at their fuel which was running low and determined for such a short flight they would be okay. Little did they know they were flying into an airdrop and would be delayed. They eventually recovered the wounded soldier and returned to Howard with the low-level fuel lights flashing as they landed.

One of the things I remember from this was the crew chiefs washing out the cabin of the aircraft with a fire hose to get the blood, bandages, and other artifacts out of the aircraft. It never occurred to me that this was how it was done. We would see this many times over the next few days as the 55th crews would MEDEVAC more wounded soldiers from across Panama.

Following a long night, we debriefed, and initiated the telling of war stories. Much to our pleasure, AAFES had opened a shopette near our quarters that was full of cold Budweiser… and so continued our introduction to combat.

Pave Hawk and Crew Chief (Photo courtesy of USAF)

We would fly many more interesting and exciting missions over the next many nights. Some of the 55th SOS crews remained in Panama for an additional four months to assist with clean-up of the PDF and reconstruction.

Operation Just Cause was a marker in the sand for the 55th SOS that established us as one of the premier squadrons in the USAF. I am forever grateful for being dragged out of my comfort zone, mentored by so many fine officers and NCOs, and having the opportunity to work with Airmen associated with the unit and our CAMS teammates. "We Come in the Night"

Postscript: We dedicate our story to Komodo 11, a USAF HH-60G, lost in Afghanistan the night of March 23, 2003. Aircraft commander Lt Col John Stein and PJ MSgt Mike Maltz were previous members of the 55th SOS and were flying with 1 Lt. Tamara Archuleta, SSgts John Teal and Jason Hicks, and SRA Jason Plite. Komodo 11 was flying a humanitarian rescue mission for two children in Afghanistan. While enroute to the pickup, Komodo 11 crashed in mountains terrain while air refueling taking the lives of all aboard in an instant. Rest in peace!

Mission Report
Christmas Day in Panama 1989

By John G. Taylor, Col, USAF (Retired)

The 55th SOS had conducted combat operations for several days in Panama when my operations officer, Lt Col Jerry Garlington, asked me to fly a demanding mission on Christmas Day. When we arrived in Panama, I, as the commander, asked Jerry to maximize flying time for our younger pilots and minimize flying time for the seasoned leadership because the young guys had long careers ahead of them and they deserved – needed – combat experience. Jerry told me that I was the only aerial refueling qualified pilot with enough crew rest for the mission, I reluctantly acquiesced.

Christmas Day began with an early crew briefing followed by a flight briefing with Capt Rob Schmaltz from the 20th SOS. Schmaltz was flight lead for our formation of two MH-60 Pave Hawks and an MH-53 Pave Low and our mission was to take a US Army Special Forces colonel to Camp David (Panama, not Maryland), so he could negotiate the surrender of Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF) stationed there. The mission included a time-on-target (TOT) landing near a local school so the colonel could use a pay phone to call the PDF Commander for one last assurance that the surrender would happen without incident. With Schmaltz as flight lead in the larger Pave Low, the colonel was in our aircraft to help find and land in the small area near the school, as well as land in the middle of the Camp David parade ground to drop off our negotiator while the MH-53 provided armed top cover.

Pave Hawk in-flight refueling

We flew north along the Pacific coast air refueling twice along the way with our HC-130. Everything was going well until about 15 minutes out when we turned eastbound from the coast and flight lead told us that "his [navigation] system was down" and could #2 or #3 take over lead? I asked my co-pilot, Lt TJ Porterfield if he had any idea where we were and he showed me his finger tracing our route on the map, I announced, "Three has the lead." and we made our pre-briefed TOT near the school. Our passenger made his telephone call; we were cleared to proceed.

When we arrived at Camp David, we discovered a rather large, very dusty, parade ground with over 200 PDF soldiers either sitting on or hanging on the bordering fence and they were obviously armed. I confirmed, once again, with our SF colonel that all was well and that he wished to be dropped off at the parade ground...he said, "Yes." We landed dead center while the Pave Low flew in an intimidating overhead pattern. We remained on the ground, rotors turning, while the colonel spoke with the camp commander, until he gave us a thumbs-up to depart.

As we departed the Camp David parade ground, the MH-53 crew, with their nav-system working again, resumed flight lead. We comfortably fell back as chalk 3 while the formation flew down the Pacific coast and, thanks to two more inflight refueling events, we landed back at Howard AFB having flown over 9 hours on Christmas day. Beside flight lead's nav-system hiccup, the only other hitch in our mission was me allowing my co-pilot to do one or two of the aerial refuelings. Turns out, TJ was not qualified for air refueling. Although he did a fantastic job, I was severely berated by my operations officer!

About the Authors:

Maj Dan Turney, USAF (Ret.) served 22 years assigned to AFSOC as a pilot, mission planner, and staff officer. He logged more than 4,000 hours in multiple types of helicopters. He served in Operations Just Cause, Desert Storm, Uphold Democracy, and Enduring Freedom. Major Turney was inducted into the Air Commando Hall of Fame, Class of 2021.

Maj Gen Eugene Haase, USAF (Ret.) was a member of the 55th SOS in its formative years from 1987 to 1994 and again from 1998 to 1999. He commanded units at the squadron, group, and wing level and served in multiple staff tours in USSOCOM, Joint Personnel Recovery Agency, and the Pentagon. The general has 2,500 hours in the MH-60G and supported combat operations during Operations Just Cause, Desert Shield, Desert Storm, Provide Comfort, Allied Force, Enduring Freedom, and Iraqi Freedom. General Haase retired in 2017 as the AFSOC Vice Commander.

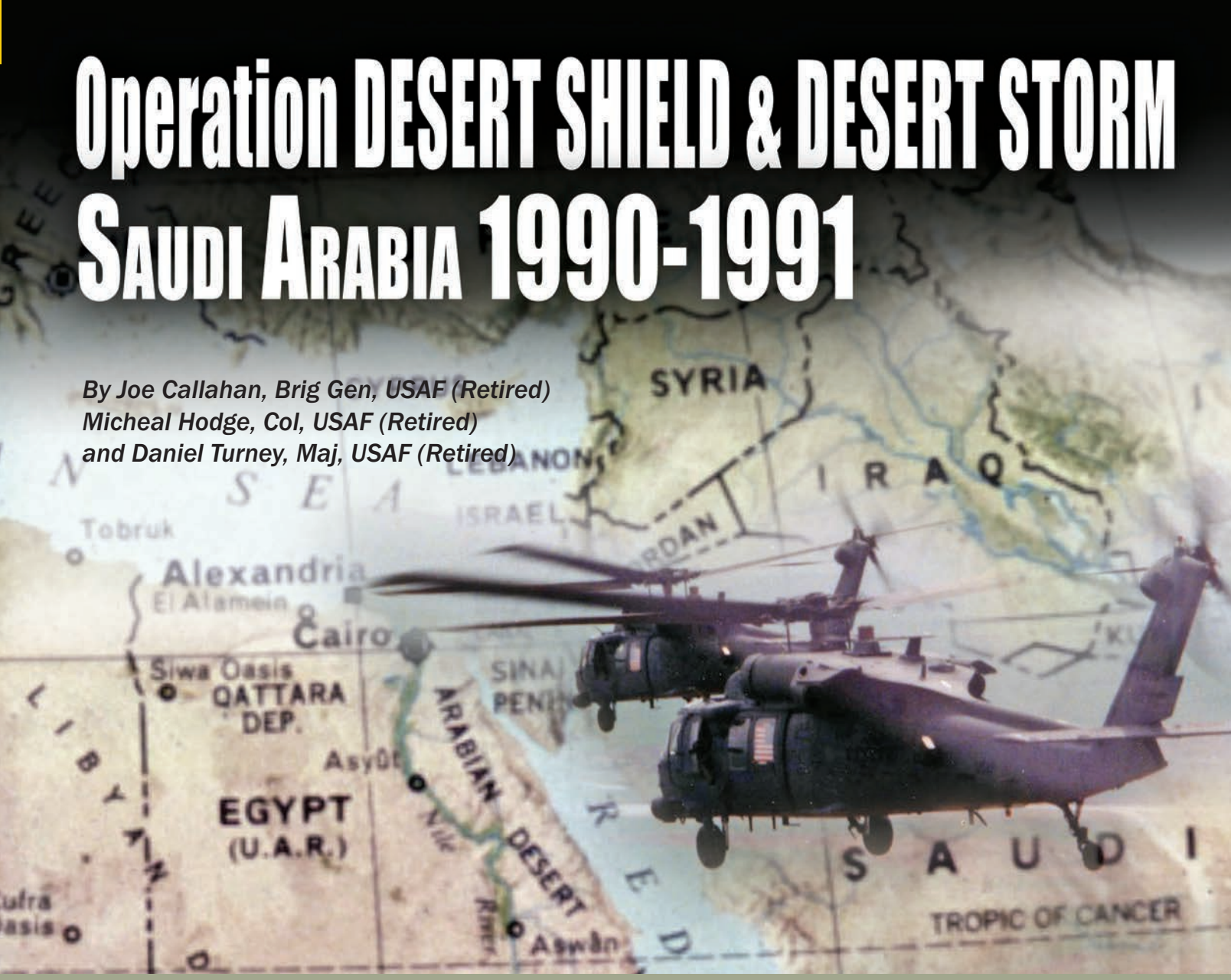
Col Tom Finnegan, USAF (Ret.) served numerous operational and command tours in both USAF combat rescue and special operations, as well as an exchange tour with the Royal Australian Air Force. Colonel Finnegan retired to Australia where he worked an additional 15 years as a defense contractor with Boeing. He lives in Queensland Australia with his wife Prue.

Col Mike Hodge, USAF (Ret.) served numerous operational and command tours in combat rescue, special operations and the intelligence community. Colonel Hodge flew over 100 combat missions during his career and is retired currently living in Virginia with his wife Imyu.

Col Taylor, USAF (Ret.) served over 26 years in the Air Force with 10 years in special operations. He logged more than 3,500 hours with over 1,000 hours in fixed-wing aircraft before upgrading to helicopters. Colonel Taylor was the first commander of the 55th SOS leading the unit during Operation Just Cause. He also served as the 1st SOW/DO for Operation Desert Shield and assistant director of operations during Operation Desert Storm.

Operation DESERT SHIELD & DESERT STORM
Saudi Arabia 1990-1991

By Joe Callahan, Brig Gen, USAF (Retired)
Micheal Hodge, Col, USAF (Retired)
and Daniel Turney, Maj, USAF (Retired)



PROLOGUE

Saddam Hussein's Iraqi Army invaded Kuwait on 2 August 1990. This article is about the 55th Special Operations Squadron's (SOS) participation in Operation Desert Shield and, eventually, Desert Storm. The 55th SOS deployed to Saudi Arabia in September 1990 to support coalition efforts to deter further Iraqi aggression, and later to support operations to liberate Kuwait. I served as the 55th SOS lead planner for the operation.

I was assigned to the 55th SOS in October 1987 as a captain, when the unit was transitioning from the UH-60A to what we referred to as the MH-60A Credible Hawk — a UH-60A modified with an internal fuel tank and in-flight refueling probe. Follow-on versions included additional avionics and defensive weapons, and were designated MH-60G Pave Hawks.

Before Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm the 55th SOS had executed two previous operational missions with the MH-60G. The first occurred in August 1989 to search for an aircraft carrying Congressman Mickey Leland and 15 others who had crashed in Ethiopia. The 55th SOS operations and maintenance personnel, as well as unit helicopters departed Eglin Air Force Base (AFB) on a C-5A within 12 hours of notification. Landing in Ethiopia, the unit searched and found the wreckage, but all 16 on board had perished. The second deployment was to Panama in support of Operations Just Cause and Blue Spoon. Both operations are covered in this issue of the Air Commando Journal.

Iraq invaded Kuwait at 0200 on 2 August 1990 (local time). At that moment, the 55th was participating in a joint readiness training exercise in the Southwest US with the Army's 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR), multiple assets from the 1st Special Operations Wing, elements of the 75th Ranger Regiment, and other special operations units. Word of the invasion reached us in the middle of the exercise, while refueling at the former Walker AFB in New Mexico. We continued with the exercise, as planned, knowing that once we returned to Eglin, preparations would begin for a potential operational deployment.

DEPLOYMENT

When we returned to Eglin, the 655th Consolidated Aircraft Maintenance Squadron's (CAMS) effort to prepare for a full deployment was well underway. The 55th was in a "build" phase with new personnel in various stages of qualification training on the MH-60, so we stepped up the training effort to ensure everyone was current and qualified in their crew positions. We spent much of the month of August trying to gather as much information as we could on the status of Iraqi forces, cultures, environment, etc., while dusting off old operational plans and trying to determine when, or even if, the squadron would deploy. We didn't have long to wait.

We were told that we would deploy on 9 September 1990, which gave us a little more time to ensure the squadron was fully ready to go. The 20th SOS had already departed Hurlburt Field for Saudi Arabia in August. The 55th was tasked with sending eight MH-60s, but we didn't have enough fully qualified crews to operate them. With the extra time, though, we ultimately finished top-off training to deploy eight full crews, plus some extra members to support normal overhead duties like scheduling, plans, maintenance functional check flights, and others.

The actual movement from the US to Saudi Arabia was uneventful, and when we landed at King Fahd International Airport, we joined our brothers from the 20th SOS. King Fahd Airport was still under construction at the time; the runways and taxiways were mostly complete, but the main terminal and other facilities were not yet done.

King Fahd Int'l Airport (Photo courtesy of author)

On the flight to Saudi Arabia we had expected combat operations to begin at any moment, so everyone was a little nervous. Given this, one would expect that our first briefing upon landing from the commander of the 101st Airborne Division would concern the threat and situation on the ground. Instead, our initial briefing stands out because it seemed to focus heavily on warning us Air Force types to not fraternize with 101st female members who were billeted in a parking garage at the airport. Seemed kind of silly at the time.

Following that highly informative briefing, and although somewhat sapped after our long flight from Florida, we quickly engaged in unloading, unfolding, and conducting initial flight checks of our eight MH-60G Pave Hawks. Within an hour after landing the 55th SOS was operational.

Squadron mates who were not involved in configuring and checking the aircraft headed to the trailers where we would live for the next eight to nine months. These trailers were, in a word, filthy. Before the invasion of Kuwait, the trailers were used by third country nationals who were building the new airport. Our western sanitization standards were clearly not the same as the previous inhabitants'. Deep cleaning was one of the first orders of business. Captain Mike Hodge took on the task of cleaning the bathroom and it was readily apparent that hot water alone was not going to get the job done. He found a few bottles of Clorox and proceeded to douse every square inch of the bathroom in it. Needless to say, in the closed quarters of a trailer, Mike was not popular when the overwhelming and eye-watering stench of bleach began to waft through the air. I think a few guys went for gas masks as others quickly evacuated the building. Regardless, all of this drama did not distract from the fact that the bathroom was now sanitized and usable!

Facilities for the squadron developed fairly quickly and it is always amazing at how imaginative our flight engineers could be in creating a nice livable Hooch. They scavenged leftover lumber, wooden pallets, and excess parachutes to build a nice covered lanai and Flintstone furniture. Several PJs even built a swimming pool! All the other AFSOC squadrons, with the exception of the 20th SOS, were billeted in the trailers and each unit made them very homey. All in all, it actually made for some relatively comfortable living.

The first crews that deployed into country lived on MREs (meals-ready-to-eat) for several days, but as things began to settle down, the 1st SOW contracted for a dining facility where the food was pretty good; but got boring after several months. Over time, breakfast, lunch, and dinner time became the highlights of the day for most folks… and we had ice cream… after all, we were still in the Air Force.

For entertainment and fitness, some of the guys built a volleyball court and, when not training, volleyball seemed to occupy a great deal of our time. It seems we played until all hours of the night; it was not unusual to return from a night training sortie at 1 or 2 am to find an intense volleyball game underway.

As we began to fly training sorties, getting around to the flight line and other places was difficult. The squadron badly needed vehicles for local transportation. Some of our more mechanically inclined members found a junkyard, where every vehicle seemed to be a used Chevrolet of some kind. These inventive gents cannibalized working parts from some vehicles to build others, and soon we had an entire fleet of working pickup trucks and Blazers; the creativity of our operations and maintenance members was without limits.

We were living in an uncertain environment, so we became adept at filling sand bags, which we used to further protect the trailer. At some point over the months we were there, Air Force RED HORSE civil engineers brought in a

backhoe, and dug a big hole behind the trailer. We had no idea what it was for until they brought in a cargo container and buried it in the hole. This became our bomb shelter, which also required more sandbags.

With our bomb shelter in place, our high praise and many kudos went to RED HORSE. They created a huge sand wall around our living compound, installed lights, paved roads within the compound, and built a couple of other buildings, including a chapel for all assigned.

TRAINING FOR THE MISSION

It didn't take long for the squadron to work into a solid routine of training sorties and maintenance flights, as required, but more importantly we had to get the aircrews familiar with the challenges of flying over the flat sands of Saudi Arabia, which was completely different than the Panhandle of NW Florida. Desert flying was a challenge because the MH-60 did not have a FLIR (forward looking infrared) system, like the MH-53s, and our crews were still using older model night vision goggles (NVG). While the Pave Hawk had several improvements over the UH-60A, the navigation system was the original UH-60 doppler system, and our inertial navigation system (INS) was designed for the C-141 airlifter. So in a land not known for significant landmarks, navigation was a challenge.

Again, training was our focus, and we needed to develop new procedures for landing in the fine sand, which usually turned into a dust out or brown out where it became difficult, if not impossible, for the pilots to see the ground on short final approach for a landing. The big MH-53s had the same issue, as you can imagine, but they had a tricycle landing gear (nose wheel and two main landing gear) and the crews would keep some forward airspeed and touchdown with the main gear slowly lowering the nose as they came to a stop. The MH-60 on the other hand has two main gear and a tailwheel, which was pretty sturdy, but still had its limits. Some guys in the unit had previous experience with dust outs from an exercise in Jordan in 1988, but most of the new pilots did not. We started using a semi roll-on landing to stay a little ahead of the dust, but it was not without risks. We learned in Jordan that the tail gear was susceptible to damage if we ran over an unseen rock or bush as we rolled to a stop, but we eventually figured it out.

At the time, the MH-60s were continually undergoing modifications and improvements, even though we were on our second potential combat deployment. A major improvement was the BULLDOG self-defense flare system, which was designed to counter man-portable shoulder launched surface to air missiles, like the SA-7. The BULLDOG allowed the left and right scanners to launch flares if they saw an incoming threat. It was a considerable improvement over the older flare gun concept and it augmented our AN/ALQ-144 IRCM (infrared counter measures) system. BULLDOG wasn't perfect, but it made us feel better…going up against the fourth largest military in the world.

Another major improvement was the addition of the GAU-2, 7.62 caliber minigun that replaced the old M-60. The problem was no one in the unit was trained on the system. The good news was two PJs who deployed with us were fully qualified on the system, and they trained all our flight engineers; we didn't have aerial gunners back in those days. We flew a good number of gunnery training sorties in the months leading up to Desert Storm, and the PJs did a tremendous job in getting the entire unit qualified on the miniguns.

Another mission we flew quite often was day and night

Pave Hawk during a brownout landing. (USAF photo)

overwater hoist recovery training. We trained quite a bit over the water and some of the crews were concerned about the egress options for the pilots in the front seats in the event of a water landing. The MH-60, at the time, had the original system where the pilot could pull a lever and then kick the door out. Simple enough, but some pilots were concerned about the reliability of the lever raising the door hinge pins to allow it to be kicked out. The easier solution was to remove the doors completely when we flew over water missions. This technique increased the pilots' visibility, but was problematic during brownout landings; also, invariably, items inadvertently departed the aircraft through the open door.

Finally, flying and landing in the desert and operating over salt water environments was a major challenge for our maintainers to keep the aircraft flyable. The sand was so fine it clogged our engine intakes and foreign object mechanisms, and the salt water spray adversely affected the engines' performance. The sand also eroded the leading edges of the rotor blades much quicker than expected. Some of our windshields cracked due to heat, routinely near 125 degrees Fahrenheit, and debris in the desert. Despite these challenges, our 655th CAMS teammates managed to keep our eight aircraft at a high state of readiness for the entirety of our deployment.

Training continued over the months and selected officers from the squadrons began working a number of plans for possible combat operations. As mentioned, I was the Pave

Hawk mission planner and worked alongside planners from the 20th SOS, 8th SOS, 9th SOS, and others. The 1st SOW was under the operational control of Special Operations Command-Central or SOCCENT. SOCCENT was tasked with traditional special operations missions and it was also charged to perform combat search and rescue for the larger air component. The Saudi/Iraq/Kuwait border was quite expansive, so we divided it into three zones to provide a full range of coverage. Out in the Western Sector, the 55th (with four aircraft) and 20th operated out of Al Jouf Airport and also forward-based at Ar'Ar. The 160th SOAR covered the Central Sector from King Khalid Military City, and finally, the 55th and the 71st SOS (Air Force Reserve), with HH-3Es from Davis Monthan AFB, covered the Eastern Sector and North Arabian Gulf from a pier at Ras al Mishab up near the Kuwait border. The 20th SOS backed up the Eastern Sector from King Fahd.

Finnegan and Mike Brooker during shipboard operations, Fall 1990.
(Photo courtesy of author)

OPERATION DESERT STORM

Western Sector — Brig Gen Joe Callahan reports

On 15 January 1991, President George H.W Bush's deadline to Saddam Hussein expired, and it was time for action; Operation Desert Shield thus became Operation Desert Storm. On the morning of 16 January four 55th SOS Pave Hawks departed King Fahd and headed for Al Jouf airport. I was one of the aircraft commanders flying in the Western Sector, and when we landed the advance party marshaled us into flightline parking. The MH-53s, along with a group of AH-64 Apache gunships and a few Army UH-60s from the 1/101st Airborne Division were already there on the ramp. We were all billeted in a rather nice community a few miles from the airfield. The 1st SOW deputy commander for operations, Col Ben Orrell, was the forward operating base (FOB) senior officer in charge.

Al Jouf was an FOB, and not an operating location setup that the conventional Air Force flying units were normally accustomed to, so there wasn't a security perimeter around the billeting area. Again, we were in an uncertain environment and about to start a war, so each unit provided manpower to take up security duties and patrols around the lodging area. Our meals were MREs, but the facilities were nice, and more than comfortable enough for us to execute our mission.

One powerful memory I have of Al Jouf occurred while I was patrolling one in the early morning, around 0200, on 17 January 1991, when I looked up to the sky and saw fighters and fighter bombers overhead, and I saw them extinguish their navigation lights, going dark as they prepared to fly over Iraq to strike defense facilities. It was a meaningful sight.

The 55th SOS had only a few missions out in the Western Sector. However, the most notable event was when Captain Tom Trask taxied his Pave Low into parking after a long, daytime combat search and rescue (CSAR) mission into Iraq, and Navy F-14 pilot LT Devon Jones climbed out of the back, escorted by Colonel Orrell…it was a tremendous event to see.

EASTERN SECTOR — Colonel Mike Hodge reports

During Desert Shield, the 55th SOS was assigned to the Eastern Sector for CSAR and other on call missions. We spent a lot of training time working with Navy SEALs on ship take-downs and insertion/extraction operations. On 16 January 1991, we were briefed on our missions for Night One. US Central Command tasked SOCCENT to perform the CSAR mission to support the theater Air Component, because the larger Air Force rescue community was in disarray at the time and were not available to support Desert Storm. SOCCENT's assets in theater were the 55th SOS, 20th SOS, US Army 160th SOAR helicopters, and 9th SOS MC-130s --all made available for CSAR missions. I was an aircraft commander, assigned to the Eastern Sector for missions into eastern Kuwait and the North Arabian Gulf.

On Night One, I was flight lead for two MH-60s and two HH-3Es, and we departed King Fahd for a pier at Ras-al-Mishab. No one from the 55th had been to there prior to 17 January, but we were told there was a US Marine Corps Aircraft Group (MAG) operating there, and that a command-and-control tent had been set up on the pier. Lt Col Jerry Cruit was the senior officer at the forward operating location (FOL). My co-pilot was Capt Eugene Haase. Capt Dave Harden commanded the second Pave Hawk and Capt 'Max' Maxwell was the HH-3E element lead. Max was previously assigned to the 55th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron, flying H-60s, before moving to AFRES, and I had flown the HH-3 in earlier assignments, so we each had solid understanding of each other's capabilities and performance characteristics.

The flight up to Ras al Mishob was supposed to be routine. We had no idea what we might face in terms of Iraqi resistance or the Iraqi Air Force (IAF), but we pressed

on. The distance from King Fahd to Ras Al Mishob was approximately 150 miles. The HH-3E was limited to about 120 knots so it took just over an hour to make the journey.

As it turns out, the biggest threat on Night One was not from the IAF, but from the RAF (Royal Air Force). While enroute, my flight engineer, MSgt Barry Jewett, called out, "Bogies 3 O'clock, closing fast, level." I first thought, "what fighters at our altitude of 100 feet?" The tone of Barry's call reiterated his concern as it increased a few octaves to let me know the bogies were headed right at us and closing fast. Just about that time, the RAF Tornados must have either seen our formation visually or on radar, because they abruptly altered their course to pass just in front of my aircraft. The entire event probably only took 30 seconds, but provided insight into just how congested airspace was on Night One. So much for a routine first night.

When we got to the Ras al Mishob pier, an abandoned Saudi naval facility with docking for small warships, it was pitch black. The air strikes had not started and the horizon was featureless looking north to Kuwait. As promised, there was a tent at the end of the pier with tables, chairs, MREs, water, and a communications suite. We all shut down our engines and cocked the aircraft, but we left the auxiliary power units (APU) running, in case we needed to depart quickly.

I was standing on the pier with some of my crew and looking south at 2 a.m., and all I could see for miles were red blinking lights in the sky as the coalition air armada made its way north for first night strikes. I had never seen so much airpower amassed at one time, and it literally sent shivers down my back. I hoped we would not see much CSAR action, but with that many aircraft in the air and the intelligence received on Iraqi air defenses, it seemed we could be very busy.

Working on the dark pier, we quickly discovered that it was impossible to see anything in the blackness of the Persian Gulf in the background and it led to a problem of people running into the MH-60s refueling probes. Someone suggested taping a small 1-inch chem light to the tip of the probes to illuminate their locations. This worked well, but led to an interesting and somewhat comical moment a few evenings later.

Later on the first night, Colonel Cruit told us we were tasked with conducting surveillance of an oil transfer platform called Dorra, located approximately 25 miles off the Kuwait coast. With CSAR as the primary mission, Colonel Cruit decided to send the two MH-60s on the reconnaissance mission while the HH-3s remained on CSAR alert. The exact nature of the mission was not particularly clear, and the threat intelligence brief was shaky at best. We were told the oil platforms were lightly defended, probably with small arms, perhaps SA-7 heat-seeking missiles. There was the added concern that the Iraqis would open the valves to let the oil flow into the sea, creating an environmental disaster.

In what would become a pattern during Desert Storm, we felt we were not provided the full intelligence picture prior to launching on this mission. We learned later that numerous US Navy sorties from aircraft carriers in the Gulf reported taking surface-to-air missile fire (SAM) from the Dorra area. Intel suspected there was a large garrison of Iraqi troops located at Dorra, being used as an outpost for reporting coalition aircraft movements back to Iraq.

Regardless of the shaky intelligence, we departed the pier and headed toward the Dorra platform with an enroute inflight refueling from an orbiting HC-130. We were instructed not to engage the Iraqis, but to simply reconnoiter the platforms and report back what we saw. As we got closer to Dorra, it did not appear to be a small lightly armed force, as we were briefed, but actually a fairly substantial force of 50 to 100 people. We were cautious and did not get close enough, due to the potential SA-7 threat, to clearly decipher what the Iraqis were actually doing on the platforms. Our Pave Hawks did not have the ability to record what we saw, so we headed back to the pier and provided a verbal report. After the mission, I went over everything in my mind and in reality, at the low altitude we were flying, and with our active IRCM defensive system, I probably overstated the SAM threat.

On 18 January a Navy surface force comprised of the USS *Nicholas* (FFG 47) and the Kuwaiti fast attack craft *Istiqlal* (P 5702) conducted the first surface engagement of the war, tasked tasked to destroy the Iraqi force occupying the Dorra oil platforms. The attack included US Navy and Army attack helicopters, SEALs, and surface fire from both *Nicholas* and *Istiqlal*.

The next few nights were rather routine, with very little happening in terms of CSAR or special operations missions. However, one night provided our alert force with both a better understanding of the threat to the FOL, and another story that will go down in the annals of military humor.

The Kuwaiti border and nearest Iraqi forces were approximately 35 miles north of Ras al Mishob. As the attacks on Kuwait City intensified after 17 January, we could clearly see impacts and flashes from our position on the pier. One evening Dave Harden and I were standing near the four helicopters on the pier. The APUs were running so we had our helmets on and we were watching the flashes of light up in Kuwait. The good news was nobody was tripping over the air refueling probes because of those little chem lights taped to them. All was quiet on the pier (except for the running APUs) and we had not been alerted to prepare for any missions.

Looking north, I noticed several "waterspouts" erupting from the sea about a quarter mile north of the pier. With all the noise from the four running APUs and with my helmet on I could not hear anything, but I kept asking myself, are there whales or dolphins in the Persian Gulf…is the water deep enough for them to swim and blow water out of their blowholes? Soon the spouts started getting closer, I looked over to Dave and asked him if he thought the water was deep enough for whales and dolphins to express waterspouts like that. Harden looked at me like I had three eyes and lost my mind and yelled, "Those are not waterspouts, you idiot, that is incoming!"

The alert force had standing orders to flush the aircraft in the event we came under attack if we had the minimum crew of two pilots to "Go." Fortunately, the crews rallied quickly and within just a few minutes all four aircraft departed the pier. Once we got airborne we radioed for the orbiting HC-130s to refuel us, and assumed an airborne alert status until the "All clear" was given for the pier. The only problem with this plan was that little chem light on the air refueling probe. It was clearly attached with Gorilla glue because there was no way it was going to come off in flight. So, I decided to return to the pier to remove the chem light.

In the rush to flush out of FOL we left our mission commander, Jerry Cruit, behind…we were, after all, under orders to preserve the aircraft as a first priority. As we came back to land, I could see Colonel Cruit sprinting as fast as his legs would take him, in his best OJ Simpson impersonation, towards the helicopter. The cabin doors were open so he lunged head first into the cabin as the left gunner/PJ calmly stepped out to remove the chem light. As soon as the chem light was removed, with splashes of water from artillery fire getting ever closer to the pier, we lifted off and rejoined the formation. Cruit came up on intercom and made a comment to the effect of "that was the bravest thing I have seen since Vietnam; I can't believe you guys came back for me." I did not see the look on his face when I replied, "Come back for you…we had to get the chem light off of the probe."

Khafji was 30 miles north of Ras al Mishob, and on 29 January Iraqi forces attacked and occupied this lightly-defended Saudi city with tanks and infantry. The Battle of Khafji ended two days later, when the Iraqis were driven out by the Saudi Arabian National Guard, supported by Qatari forces, US Marines, and our AC-130 gunships.

Both sides suffered casualties, although Iraqi forces sustained substantially more dead and captured than the coalition forces. Eleven Americans were killed in 2 separate friendly fire incidents, and an additional 14 Airmen were lost when their AC-130H gunship, callsign Spirit 03, was shot down by an Iraqi surface-to-air missile.

On 5 February, LT Bob Dwyer, flying an F/A-18 from the USS *Roosevelt,* failed to return from a mission, for unknown reasons. On 6 February, the Eastern Sector team was given an intelligence briefing that radio communications had been detected on Bubiyan Island, northeast of Kuwait City. The rescue team was tasked with evaluating the possibility of conducting a CSAR mission based on those transmissions.

There were numerous tactical problems with this mission. First, no one had confirmed the transmissions were real; second, no one had authenticated the transmissions; third, Bubiyan is a large island and we did not have Dwyer's exact location; and finally, contrary to wishful thinking, Bubiyan was not lightly defended.

Despite these challenges, our team put together a plan to attempt a rescue. When we asked for more detailed threat information, were told we were not cleared to get the rest of the threat laydown because none of the aircrew had a Top Secret clearance! As you can imagine, this did not go over well and a heated discussion ensued. We were told Bubiyan had been heavily attacked in the past few days and battle damage reports indicated its defenses were "substantially reduced." Of course, substantially reduced to an F-16 is very different from substantially reduced to a helicopter.

With nothing resembling firm intelligence, we nonetheless decided on a plan to approach Bubiyan and to try to make radio contact with the survivor, and from there we would make a determination on if we could make the recovery. So two MH-60s and two HH-3Es staged out of King Fahd for the mission. The HH-3Es landed at the FOL on the pier and assumed alert for other missions, as well as for us, and we headed on to Bubiyan.

As we approached Bubiyan it was dark and quiet. Very little of the normal good-natured back-and-forth was going on in the cockpit. The crews were all intensely focused on the task at hand. At a position east of Failaka Island and south of Bubiyan Island we reported "at the IP" and entered a holding pattern. From that position, we could see, using our NVGs, the outline of the coast of Bubiyan. It appeared quiet and there was a glow on the horizon to the west from the ongoing attacks on Kuwait City; otherwise it was pitch black. Maybe intel was correct after all. Perhaps Bubiyan had been quieted by the previous attacks. Before getting closer to Bubiyan, though, we planned to make a SATCOM call for a last-minute update before committing to fly inside the Iraqi weapons engagement zone and attempting radio contact with Lieutenant Dwyer. The SATCOM radio preamble squelched on time, indicating an incoming call but instead of an intel update we were told the mission was scrubbed and were ordered to return to the FOL.

Some time later, we learned Lieutenant Dwyer was considered MIA and was definitively last seen by his wingman approximately 40 miles east of Kuwait City. There was no way he was on Bubiyan Island. This is part of another pattern that would repeat itself over the course of Desert Storm--sketchy and unreliable reporting regarding aircraft and Airmen shot down over Iraq and Kuwait. After the fact, we also found out that Bubiyan island was still heavily defended, despite two days of naval bombardment prior to our mission.

The air war was winding down, so our commander, Lt Col Jerry Garlington, began to send some crews home in order to set up a rotation schedule for what would eventually become the two-decade-long Operation Southern Watch (OSW). OSW was a US and Coalition partner effort to keep Saddam Hussein and what was left of his army contained within their own border.

The 55th SOS and 655th CAMS team would continue on for another ten years, doing remarkable things in Bosnia, Kosovo, and other areas around the world. I tip my cap to them for leaving a legacy of 'We Come in the Night'.

EASTERN SECTOR — Major Dan Turney Reports

Attempted Search & Rescue of Spirit 03, Kuwait 1991

My purpose for this writing this essay is to tell of the little-known efforts of 55th SOS aircrews to search for

and possibly rescue the 14 crewmembers of Spirit 03, an AC-130H gunship lost on the morning of 31 January 1991, while supporting the Battle of Khafji. This story is based on my personal recollections as the aircraft commander in Chalk 2 of the MH-60 formation sent to search for Spirit 03.

When Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990, most of the 55th SOS deployed to support Desert Storm. The 1st SOW special plans office or DOS planners, myself included, were directed to stand by to support counterterrorist and/or hostage contingencies, as required. Of course, all the DOS planners wanted to deploy with their squadrons, and I finally got my break after Christmas 1990. I deployed to King Fahd airport to support the 55th as a mission manager, planner, and aircrew augmenter, as required.

As previously mentioned, the 55th deployed eight helicopters to King Fahd, but before they left Eglin AFB, they were repainted with a brown desert camouflage paint scheme. The final touch was white invasion stripes painted on the tail boom. The stripes were reminiscent of the WWII D-Day stripes painted on the aircraft supporting the Normandy invasion. The MH-60s looked awesome, but more on this later. The 20th SOS MH-53s arrived in their standard European green camouflage, and were repainted with similar desert camouflage in-theater. The 1st SOW helicopters made quite the impression on the flight line at King Fahd.

On January 17, coalition forces launched offensive strikes in Iraq and Kuwait to begin the 38-day air campaign. To counter the air offensive, Saddam Hussein directed a ground attack into Saudi Arabia to destroy coalition forces and capture Saudi oil fields. Hundreds of Iraqi tanks and armored vehicles were observed moving south along the coastal highway towards the border town of Khafji. On January 29, Iraqi forces attacked and coalition forces, including 16th SOS AC-130H Spectre gunships, responded in kind, inflicting heavy damage and casualties on the Iraqis--ultimately stopping them at the border. The battle raged for several days with our Spectre gunships decimating the Iraqi armor and ground forces.

In the early morning darkness of 31 January, Spirit 03 was attacking armored vehicles and enemy positions at Khafji when radio contact was lost. A Marine OV-10 forward air controller (FAC) working with Spirit 03 reported the gunship had departed the area to the east, just after sunrise. The FAC reported hearing a faint Mayday call and a flash in the eastern sky, but couldn't confirm who or what it was. No further radio or electronic signals were heard from Spirit 03. It was feared the aircraft was down, but without confirmation, its status remained unknown.

The two alert MH-60Gs were cocked and ready to launch, but were directed to stand by because without a crash location or survivor contact, plus a battle still raging at Khafji, it was determined too risky to launch a CSAR effort. Wing leadership directed the 55th to keep the two MH-60s on standby alert and also to generate two additional MH-60s to handle other taskings. In order to maintain a 24/7 alert posture, the schedulers developed a plan to use all qualified staff, like myself; I was added to the schedule for any possible Spirit 03 CSAR on 2 February.

The battle over Khafji continued on February 1 and neither the day or night CSAR alert birds were able to launch to search for Spirit 03. However, it was looking good for a go on the 2nd. While the delay on the 1st was frustrating for everybody, it gave us the benefit of an extra 24 hours of mission planning that alert crews seldom get. We reviewed all the intelligence available and updated our paper charts with known hazards, like power lines and oil field fires. We even marked known minefields along the border to avoid, in case of a precautionary landing. We used a Marine forward arming and refueling point (FARP) as a Bulls Eye--a known reference point and safe rally point. As Chalk 2, we decided to mount an M2 .50 caliber machine gun in addition to the standard two miniguns on my aircraft. Our job was to be a high gun bird to provide cover for lead when we discovered the crash site or survivors. Knowing that Spirit 03 had 14 crewmembers, the plan was when the crash site and/or survivors were found, the Tactical Operations Center would launch the second CSAR alert package, task additional MH-53 support, and request A-10 Sandy rescue escort to augment us. We knew when we found survivors the war would stop and all available aircraft would respond to support the rescue effort. I hope the reader notices that I keep saying when, not if. We all were dialed in that this was a search and rescue mission until proven otherwise.

Photo of 69-6567 during a training mission before Operation Desert Storm. (Photo courtesy of Bill Walter)

During this planning stage, I admit we were concerned about the lack of any radio or electronic contact. Virtually all SOF air crewmembers had survival radios that could transmit beeper or voice and most US military aircraft were able to track the signals. The AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control System) aircraft did report a possible weak signal to the west of Khafji and we plotted that location as our first search area. Our other concern was the lack of a discovered crash site. With all the aircraft in this area, it would seem

somebody would have seen something, especially a large aircraft like a C-130. We decided that the water east of Khafji would be our second search area. As it turned out, both areas were problematic.

"Special operations are missions that nobody is trained to do. Certainly, there were tasks and specific skills that we honed and did repetitively, but that was for training. It was like having a plan that is simply the point from which to deviate. The hard missions always had something we hadn't planned for or trained for."

-- LT GEN TOM TRASK,
AIR COMMANDO JOURNAL
VOLUME 11, ISSUE 1

Over 30 years ago we witnessed the truth of General Trask's assessment.

We launched mid-morning on 2 February, after hours of weather, intel, and mission briefs. People may say there is no search in CSAR, but I disagree. Not only were we going to do a combat search, we were doing it in the day time without air cover. What could possibly go wrong?

The weather was overcast with light drizzle on departure, but it cleared up as we crossed the border into Kuwait. We stayed low-level, 50 feet and below, until we reached the coordinates for the first search area where the AWACS reported a weak signal. We popped up to 300 feet, assumed about a half-mile separation, and began a sector search with 10 mile legs, using the provided coordinates as the center. We didn't get any voice or signal contacts. On the search legs to the west we ran into issues with the smoke from the oil fires. The further west we went, the darker it got, and the visibility was so bad we became concerned about power lines in the area. We closed up the formation, dropped back down to low-level, and reduced airspeed. Climbing any higher put us at risk of inadvertently getting into the weather. I put on my NVGs to see if it would help, but I only got the green sparkle you get on a zero-moon night over the water or desert. No way we could do any search in this soup, so we returned to the east. We broke out in the clear and finished the search in the eastern half of the sector. One thing that sticks with me after all these years is how clearly fresh man-made tracks and objects stand out in the desert sand. We saw all kinds of vehicle/tank tracks, as well as multiple destroyed machines. We checked them all out. Anything moving put up dust clouds and we stayed clear of those.

With no success at the first location, we proceeded at 300 ft on a creeping line search pattern toward Khafji. If this was Spirit 03's flight path, perhaps the crew bailed out on this route. As we flew further north, we began to see more and more coalition ground forces moving in the same direction. It was easy to identify the friendly vehicles, because most were flying their national colors. I must admit, I felt like we had a target painted on our aircraft, but we were only getting lots of waves from the soldiers. Maybe those invasion stripes were working. Again, we saw no sign of wreckage or parachutes.

The closer we got to the coast, we began to run into the overcast and light rain again. We could also see the signs of the battle the closer we got to the coastal highway. The road had been cleared, but it was quite a sight to see all the destroyed tanks and armored vehicles everywhere. The bad news was as we approached the coast it was completely socked in with sea fog--a wall of fog almost right up to the

beach. We went into a loose trail formation to see if we could spot anything on the beach or shallow water. As feared, our radar altimeters became erratic over the shallow, calm waters, and would ping off the seabed instead of the surface. We were just trolling low and slow searching for debris, but it would get interesting if we got too far from sight of the beach. Visibility would go to zero and the radar altimeter would go intermittent from 10 to 30 feet, so we headed back to the highway area and searched around Khafji until we were bingo fuel and then headed for the Marine FARP to refuel and regroup.

We topped off with engines running in the refueling pits, then repositioned to the marshaling area to shut down. What I found interesting was the Marines' interest in our desert painted MH-60s. The young "Devil Dogs" told us they had never seen a Blackhawk like ours and didn't even recognize it at first. They said the refueling probe looked like a cannon and the brown camouflage paint job was really unique. Hold that thought for a minute. Meanwhile, we debriefed with lead and compared notes. Both of us agreed that if Spirit 03 had gone down in any of the areas we had searched we would have seen it. It was now appearing likely that no one had bailed out in our search areas. The unknown was the water area, but nothing we could do about that now since it was socked in with sea fog. Since the Iraqi threats in our area seemed low to zero, we decided to split up the formation to maximize the area we could search before having to return to King Fahd. At best, we might double our chances of finding Spirit 03. At worst we could at least mark off the areas we searched, so that future missions wouldn't duplicate our efforts. We agreed on our respective search areas, and to return to the FARP in two hours to refuel as required, then return to King Fahd to turn over the mission to the night shift.

I briefed my crew on the new plan and off we went to begin searching east toward the coastal highway and westward toward the oil fires moving north, careful not to pass ahead of the coalition forces also moving north. The search continued to be much the same as earlier in the day, but with more coalition forces in the area. I tried to concentrate on the more remote areas and stay out of their way. We were all feeling some frustration on not finding any sign of our downed Airmen, and I felt the clock running out on the chances of finding any survivors.

Not too long into our new search pattern, we observed two Marine AH-1 Cobras working over a tree line near a small village that did not appear on our maps. I also noticed several of the unique Marine tracked amphibious assault vehicles (AAV) in the village supporting dismounted infantry. I briefed the crew that we weren't having much success in the search; maybe these Marines had been near Khafji a couple of nights ago and saw something that might help us. "Let's land in the village," I said, "and ask them." The consensus was, "Why not? Nothing else is working." As I'm circling over the village looking for a landing spot, my flight engineer (FE) suddenly comes over the intercom, "Holy S---, those Cobras are rolling in on us!" Like a "momma bear", they had come to protect troops from this strange looking helicopter. I guess they didn't get the word about the invasion stripes. I rolled out level, slowed down, turned on my red anti-collision lights, and directed the crew to lower their weapons. I was preparing to hail them over the emergency guard frequency when my quick thinking FE pulled an American flag from his survival kit and waved it from the cabin window. That did the trick, and the lead Cobra pulled abeam of us, while his #2 stayed at our high 6 o'clock, gave a salute, and peeled off back to the tree line. Okay crew, I said, that was fun. Now let's land down there and see if those guys have seen anything.

We landed on a dirt road near the AAVs and I asked the FE to go over and see if the Marines had seen anything. "What?" Yes, they aren't going to come over to us. So he runs over, confers with them, and runs backs quickly. What did they say? "They haven't seen anything and they said we are under fire!" Well, I guess we better go then. Looking back, I'd have to file this in the "seemed like a good idea at the time" category.

We searched for another hour or so, while staying away from any other coalition forces, but still had no luck on finding any sign of Spirit 03 or the crew. We joined up with lead back at the FARP and then returned uneventfully to King Fahd. We debriefed with the night shift, but they didn't launch. This was my only sortie related to Spirit 03. Sadly, the crash site was eventually found off the coast of Khafji several weeks after the loss. Spirit 03 had been hit by a surface to air missile and there were no survivors. A sad ending that none of us who were there will ever forget.

In closing, for the families and friends of the 14 courageous Air Commandos on Spirit 03 that were lost that day: this may be the first article you have read about the initial CSAR for your loved ones. I wanted you to know that I think of that day all the time, and that we gave our best effort to try and find them and bring your men home.

About the authors:

Brig Gen Joe Callahan retired after serving over 28 years in the Air Force. He had various assignments in Military Airlift Command, Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC), Air Combat Command (ACC), and Pacific Air Forces. He commanded units at the detachment, squadron, and wing level, served as Deputy Director of Air and Space Operations at ACC, and was the Deputy Director of J5 (Plans) Politico-Military Affairs Asia on the Joint Staff and the Military Deputy Director of Requirements (A9) on the Air Staff.

Colonel Hodge retired after serving numerous operational and command tours in Air Force combat rescue, special operations, and the intelligence community. He flew over 100 combat missions during his career, and currently resides in Virginia with his wife Imyu.

Major Dan Turney retired after serving 22 years in various assignments including HQ AFSOC. He flew over 4,000 hours in multiple types of helicopters during his career while serving in Operations Just Cause, Desert Storm, Uphold Democracy, and Enduring Freedom. Major Turney was inducted into the Air Commando Hall of Fame, Class of 2021.

Operation PROVIDE COMFORT II

Turkish Pilot Down

1 - 3 July 1992

By Steve Laushine, Col, USAF (Retired) and Brian McNabb, Col, USAF (Retired)

In late 1991, the 55th Special Operations Squadron (SOS) was tasked to relieve the 21st SOS in support of the PROVIDE COMFORT mission. Staging out of Incirlik AB, Turkey, they provided combat search and rescue (CSAR) support to coalition aircraft and any other combined task force (CTF) missions as directed.

Over the course of 3 days in July 1992, the CTF directed the 55th SOS to conduct a CSAR mission for a downed Turkish F-104 pilot who had gone missing over the rugged mountains of northern Iraq. There is no lack of irony in this mission as the squadron was in Turkey supporting Operation Provide Comfort II, a multi-national operation to protect the Kurds from Iraqi aggression. Unbeknownst to the 55th SOS, the Turks had been conducting air attacks with fighter-bombers against separatist Kurdish elements in eastern Turkey and northern Iraq and using their own H-60 helicopters for both targeting and battle damage assessment. The 55th SOS was not informed of these aspects of the situation, only that a Turkish pilot had gone down in northern Iraq as reported by his wingman. You could say this was a complicated political situation given that the US was providing protection to the Kurds while the Turks were trying to eradicate the Kurds who were fighting for an independent Kurdistan.

On 1 July 1992, the 55th SOS dispatched two MH-60G aircraft (call signs: Black 11 and 12) to search for and recover the Turkish F-104 pilot in northern Iraq. Unfortunately, neither the Turks nor coalition forces were helpful in determining an accurate last known position or search location. The search area centered on a very rugged and high-altitude generalized area in the far northeast region of Iraq, along the Turkish, Iranian, and Iraqi border. The crews requested a nighttime mission from the CTF but were denied permission to conduct the search during hours of darkness. As was tactical protocol, the 55th SOS planned a two-ship MH-60G formation with air refueling support from the 67th SOS MC-130P Combat Shadows. Completing initial mission planning in less than 15 minutes, the crews launched from Incirlik AB. The flight flew three hours enroute to the Iraqi border, test firing aircraft weapons systems and refueling from an MC-130P at low altitudes to avoid detection from hostile Iraqi radars/aircraft and hostile factions in the area. The summer's deep heat coupled with rough terrain produced significant convective turbulence throughout the mission. Secure radio problems on both MH-60Gs and MC-130Ps hampered communications, leaving a garbled HF radio as the only secure communications link between helicopters and the command-and-control element back at Incirlik Air Base. Navigation problems on Black 11 pushed Black 12 to take over flight lead responsibilities to navigate through the extremely rugged

mountain terrain. After aerial refueling first, Black 12 was unable to maintain altitude and airspeed with the refueling formation. Thinking this a product of high temperatures and altitudes, the flight continued to the objective.

Entering Iraq, the helicopters were diverted to Zakhu to pick up a Turkish pilot familiar with the area of the downed aircraft. Extremely high temperature, high density altitude, and ground obstacles posed difficult challenges for their takeoff from Zakhu. Black 12 again displayed marginal power and barely cleared the eight-foot wall surrounding the compound. Thanks to their great skills and tenacity, they executed a superb marginal power takeoff, barely cleared the wall, and proceeded to bounce through a wheat field until enough speed was reached to attain translational lift and start flying again. This was yet another clue that something was not right with the Black 12 aircraft. Additionally, some poor farmer could not have been happy about his wheat blowing all over creation by military aircraft.

The flight flew East through a large valley past one of Saddam Hussein's palaces high atop the mountain range. They topped off with fuel from the MC-130P before beginning search efforts. Eleven miles from the objective they received intelligence indicating the intended route would take them through an area of reported hostile fire. Black 12 immediately diverted the flight, successfully circumnavigating the "hot" area, and arriving undetected in the search area. To expedite the search, the flight split the formation to cover different sectors of the valley flowing northeast to southwest. Black 12 took the northern sector of the valley and Black 11 covered the southern sector. Since intelligence had indicated the threat to be minimal in the area, the aircraft maintained 200-300 feet AGL to optimize the search visuals.

Operating in the 10,000-foot-high mountain area, the crews conducted an extensive daylight visual search, taking their aircraft to their performance limits in the hot mountain air. Multiple burned areas on the ground hampered the search effort as each area required screening for signs of aircraft wreckage. At the time, it was thought, the fields were being burned by farmers in preparation for planting. Searching progressed uneventfully for 40 minutes when Black 11's flight engineer identified small arms fire directed at the aircraft. Black 11 executed an immediate break away from the ground fire, relayed the threat to Black 12, and recommended egressing the area. Meanwhile, Black 12 completed searching the northern sector and relayed to Black 11 that they were expanding their search to the southwest. They received a garbled reply that was assumed an acknowledgement. Bad assumption. While searching in the new sector, Black 12 experienced a loud explosion and the tail swung violently to the right. They thought one of their engines had exploded but an immediate check of the gauges appeared normal. One of Black 12's USAF pararescuemen (PJ) witnessed a large black cloud just feet behind the tail rotor. The aircraft was targeted with an RPG that barely missed. Its crew regaining composure, Black 12 immediately departed the area and informed Black 11 and mission commander what had occurred. Black 11's response was, "We told you there was hostile activity in the area." Apparently, that was the garbled radio call received earlier. Having covered the search areas, the flight decided to depart the area and return to Incirlik Air Base. There was no evidence of the downed Turkish pilot or his aircraft.

On egress, both aircraft again came under fire, this time receiving antiaircraft artillery fire from a ridge line, and began evasive maneuvers to save both aircraft from damage. Clearing the danger area, the aircraft rejoined into a loose tactical formation and began a rapid, low-level egress of area. With limited fuel, the flight conducted another low altitude refueling to avoid the potential of Iraqi aircraft while watching for additional ground fire. Both crews conducted inflight battle damage assessments, but none was obvious to either aircraft. The flight proceeded to Zakhu to drop off the Turkish pilot who had aided in the search. During the return trip, the CTF directed the flight to land at Diyarbakir Air Stations (AS), remain overnight, and prepare for follow-on taskings. At Diyarbakir AS, the crews debriefed the CTF commander on the 7.9-hour mission. During post-flight inspection, maintenance crews discovered a broken engine throttle bracket on Black 12, evidently the source of the low power issue. The deployed mission commander at Incirlik AB, Lt Col Randy Peixotto, sent a spare MH-60G along with maintenance personnel and parts to fix the problem and replacement aircrew members since it was unknown if, and how long, the CSAR mission would continue.

Pave Hawks returning to Incirlik

Major Miller and Captain McNabb (Photo courtesy of authors)

Diyarbakir AS was austere which led to a dilemma of housing all these unexpected guests. The crews ended up sleeping above the base gym on fold-out cots. The relief MH-60 would not depart Incirlik AB until the following morning which meant any follow-on mission would have to wait.

On 2 July 1992, both crews remained on alert at Diyarbakir AS with a 15-minute response time while crews gathered additional information on the potential location of the missing pilot and aircraft. Crews spent the day updating location and intelligence information while maintenance crews worked the aircraft. The CTF commander rejected another request to allow a night mission to minimize the obvious hostile threat. The CTF stated that coalition supporting fighters and their tankers did not fly at night. Crews turned to planning for a predawn departure the following day, reducing the threat of small arms fire and increasing aircraft performance in the cool morning air.

So, with task in hand to return to the search the next morning, 3 July 1992, crews finished planning and settled in for the night. The crews decided the attic of the base gymnasium would not cut it for a second night so the helicopter crews would reposition to stay in the MC-130P "Hercules Hotel." Just prior to lights out, a car approached the aircraft. It turned out to be the Turkish Air Force general who commanded the base. He heard through the grapevine that the USAF crews, who were about to go out again to search for his missing pilot, were planning to sleep in a C-130, and he was having none of that. So, the crews headed to the Turkish barracks. Not sure which was worse, the gym, the C-130, or the barracks, but the general was well-intended.

Arising before dawn on 3 July 1992, the flight prepped for departure. Air refueling support was again required both into and out of the search area. The planned search area was concentrated around the same area as day one but with satellite photos indicating a more specific possible crash site. Flight tactics were adjusted knowing there were hostiles in the area who by all accounts were, ironically, Kurds. The flight planned to maintain a close, tactical formation for mutual support and the aircraft would fly lower and faster to minimize threat vulnerability.

The flight launched at daybreak on 3 July 1992, flying to Batman AB, Turkey to pick up the downed pilot's wingman with a reconnaissance photo of a possible crash site. From Batman AB, the crews conducted another turbulent air refueling crossing into Iraq. Five miles from the objective area, they received ground fire. Black 11 directed the flight through evasive maneuvers to clear the "hot" area, and returned suppressive fire, successfully eliminating the threat. Crews elected to continue the mission, courageously reporting to controlling agencies at Incirlik AB, "We are not receiving ground fire AT THIS TIME and will continue this mission."

Approaching the search area, the flight was almost immediately engaged by small arms and heavy machine gun fire from several locations and directions. As Black 12 navigated around the high-altitude mountainous terrain, it became more a mission of survival than a search. At one point, at extremely low altitude, the flight flew directly over a hostile with an AK-47 pointed up and firing wildly. Black 11 returned fire with aircraft

Back up crew for the rescue mission. (Courtesy of the authors.)

defensive systems and silenced the threat, for at least a few minutes. The flight navigated to and confirmed the intelligence-designated crash site was merely a burned-out wooden shack. To evade active threats, the flight navigated around a large mountain and into Iran for a brief time. It seemed like the lessor of two evils at the time.

Re-entering Iraqi airspace, the flight followed the mountain ridge line to the southwest using the military crest. Black 12's flight engineer came on intercom and said there was something on fire at 3 o'clock on top of the ridge. Black 12's pilot saw a heavy machine gun pointed directly at, and engaging, his aircraft with huge flames spewing from the muzzle. As Black 12 called a left break, Black 11 called "Break left, AAA, 3 o'clock." Black 11's flight engineer engaged the target with his minigun, but was thrown off solution when his aircraft broke hard left, just as he was about to obliterate the threat. Black 12's copilot was at the controls and broke hard left and almost went inverted as they descended the steep valley.

After escaping that threat, the flight continued southwest at high speed. Black 12 noticed a vibration in the helicopter but initially thought it was retreating blade stall as they were at high speed and a very high-density altitude.

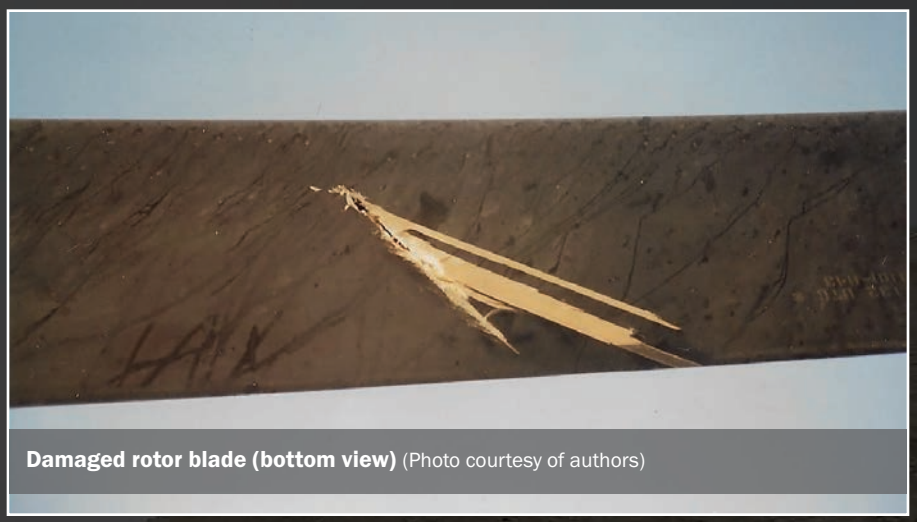
Determining the search over with negative results, the flight departed the valley, climbed to a safer altitude, and looked over Black 12 for signs of battle damage. Black 11 reported negative visible damage. Proceeding westbound, the MC-130P conducted another aerial refueling then flew on to Batman AB to drop off the Turkish wingman. Black 12's crew heard a whistling sound upon landing at Batman AB but, with no other indications, decided to continue the flight to Diyarbakir. The flight touched down safely at Diyarbakir AS, taxied to parking, and shut the aircraft down after a 7.2-hour mission. As the rotors coasted to a stop, Black 12 noticed a distinct strip of sunlight interrupting a rotor blade shadow about 8-10 feet out from the rotor hub. Upon further inspection, maintenance found a large hole in one of the rotor blades which had penetrated the rotor blade spar and blew out the aft third of the blade. A two-inch wide by 12-inch-long gash in the main rotor blade aft of the titanium spar caught everyone's attention. Black 12 had flown over 4 hours with severe damage to a rotor blade, whose failure would have obviously been catastrophic. Everyone involved became immediate believers in the capability and durability of the MH-60G. Maintenance personnel replaced the rotor blade and the aircraft and crews returned to Incirlik AB.

Unfortunately, the 55th SOS did not find the downed pilot or his aircraft but were glad they had survived a harrowing mission with no injuries. Again, the irony is worth mentioning. The 55th SOS deployed to Turkey, on a mission to protect the Kurds, who were bombed by the Turks, and who were subsequently trying to kill us while trying to find one of the pilots trying to kill them. Instead of receiving credit for making it back safely, Black 11 and 12 crews got our butts chewed by the CTF commander for trying to start a war. The words used were something to the effect of "you bunch of @#$% snake eaters."

Sadly, the Turkish pilot was found about six weeks after the unsuccessful search mission. Ground personnel found his body several miles from our search area in Iran.

Due to extraordinary flying skills of the crews, Black 11 and 12 successfully completed the mission with zero injuries to the crews despite significant battle damage to Black 12. The battle damage substantiated the air and combat worthiness of the MH-60G Pave Hawk.

The 55th SOS commander submitted the crews for Air Medals for this mission and both the mission commander and flight lead received the 1992 USAF Cheney Award. The Cheney Award, honoring 1st Lt William H. Cheney, was established in 1927 to award airmen for acts of valor, extreme fortitude or self-sacrifice in a humanitarian interest.



Damaged rotor blade (bottom view) (Photo courtesy of authors)

About the Authors:

Col Steve Laushine served 27 years on active duty and logged more than 3,400 hours in the UH-1N/H, UH-60A/L, and MH-60G aircraft. He currently supports NATO special operations education and training.

Col Brian McNabb served 30 years in the Air Force logging 7,000 hours in the UH-1H/N/ST, HH/CH-3E, MH-60G, MI -17, and S-61. After retirement, he continued to serve training Air Force helicopter pilots in aviation foreign internal defense, supported the State Department in Baghdad, Iraq and fought fires in the Western U.S. He is now fully retired.

SPECIAL OPERATIONS WARRIOR FOUNDATION

In 1980, during Operation Eagle Claw, a courageous, but failed, attempt was made to rescue 52 Americans held hostage in Iran. On that tragic day, eight Special Operations Forces lost their lives, leaving behind 17 children.

In memory, an immediate enduring battlefield promise was made by their teammates to take care of those and subsequent surviving children by providing full educations, and additional educational opportunities, "cradle to career" (preschool – college), to the surviving children of Special Operations Forces lost in the line of duty. The feeling then was, and will continue to be, it is the least we can do to honor those who made, and unfortunately will make, the ultimate sacrifice.

In 2020, Special Operations Warrior Foundation enhanced eligibility to include children of all Medal of Honor Recipients. SOWF continues to provide financial assistance to severely wounded, ill, and injured Special Operations Personnel.

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Friendly Fire in Northern Iraq

Recovery of Eagle Flight

14 April 1994

Flying through the rugged mountains of eastern Turkey. (Photo couresty of USAF)

By Todd Bolger, Lt Col, USAF (Retired)

Sitting combat alert day after day for weeks and months on end can be summed up simply, 90 percent of the time is sheer boredom, but the other 10 percent can be over-the-top hectic. So it often was in Incirlik, Turkey, where the 55th Special Operations Squadron (SOS) provided an organic combat rescue alert posture as part of both Operation Provide Comfort II (OPC) and its multi-national combined task force (CTF) enforcing the United Nations (UN) no-fly zone in northern Iraq in the mid-1990s. By 13 April 1994, most of the 55th SOS crews had deployed to Incirlik multiple times to support this mission. It was just another typical alert day for the two MH-60G combat crews and support personnel until the alert radios sounded and the 55th, along with assigned special tactics (STS) forces, jumped into action. Two Iraqi helicopters were spotted in the no-fly zone, and both were shot down by two US F-15 Eagles. The 55th had to be ready for whatever came next and the events that followed put into motion what would be one of the longest helicopter recovery missions on record.

Again, that day began normally with the CTF conducting no-fly zone operations within the northern Iraq area of operations. The 55th SOS's deployed mission commander, also serving as the OPC commander and commander of Air Force Special Operations Forces (COMAFSOF), received an urgent call from the CTF search and rescue liaison officer (SARLO). A flight of CTF F-15s had just shot down two Hind helicopters in northern Iraq. This was alarming! Not only was it unlikely that Hind helicopters were suddenly operating in northern Iraq for the first time in two years, but, more importantly, two US Army UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters from the 6th Battalion, 159th Aviation Regiment--call sign, "Eagle Flight"--were conducting an important CTF mission in the same area that day. COMAFSOF had just spent a few days in Zakho, Iraq, flying on Eagle Flight helicopters with the OPC Military Coordination Center (MCC) commander on daily missions visiting the various Kurdish villages. He knew that on this particular day the outgoing MCC commander was taking the incoming MCC commander to meet the local Kurdish leaders throughout northern Iraq.

Earlier that morning with a crew of 10, Eagle Flight departed their base in Diyarbakir, Turkey and made their first stop at the MCC in Zakho, where they picked up 16 members of the UN Provide Comfort coalition leadership team. This included four Kurdish civilians; one Chaldean-Catholic civilian; three Turkish, two British, and one French military officer; plus five US civilian and military officials, leaving one major behind to man the MCC. This day-long mission was meant to be an auspicious occasion for the entire MCC senior staff to meet and greet local Kurdish leaders at several locations, to include Irbil, Iraq, which is located approximately 120 miles inside Iraq. Knowing this, the COMAFSOF asked the SARLO to quickly check with the CTF operations section on the location and time of the reported shoot-down, against the flight plan and schedule for Eagle

OPC Military Coordination Center (MCC) located at Zakho, Iraq (Photo by Scott Swanson)

Flight. The SARLO quickly called back, stating that it appeared the Eagle Flight helicopters were supposed to be flying in the area near Irbil at about the same time the shoot-down was reported. Further, CTF Ops had not received any position updates from Eagle Flight since before the reported Hind shoot-down. The COMAFSOF grimly commented to the SARLO that, "Those were not Hinds…"

COMAFSOF immediately notified both 55th operations duty officer and the Commander, Joint Special Operations Task Force (COMJSOTF) of the potential friendly-fire shoot-down, while attempting to nail down CTF's actual awareness of the situation. Immediate concern was that IF it was a friendly shoot-down, time was of the essence to rescue survivors, especially given the two-hour minimum preparation and launch time, and four additional hours transit time to the recovery location. It soon was apparent the CTF staff was not yet aware or engaged, a factor which cost the recovery effort a few extra hours of precious time. Fortunately, the 55th SOS, with JSOTF in tow, wasted no time "leaning forward in the saddle" to prepare for the mission, should it come to pass, well in advance of direction from CTF HQ.

Over the next hour and a half, as Eagle Flight failed to check in, and no further radar contact was made, the realization that the two downed helicopters were most likely the US Army helicopters of Eagle Flight began to sink in. The alert team readied the added gear for a potential recovery mission, to include additional personnel and communications equipment. Simultaneously, the 55th SOS generated its third and last helicopter, which required a maintenance check flight, providing what proved to be a mission critical asset. It was evident the CTF was not positioned to deal with a mass casualty event that would depend heavily on 100 percent of JSOTF's air assets. If any one of the helicopters had been non-mission capable, the rescue/recovery operation would have been extended into a two-day operation. The ability to generate all necessary assets that day speaks highly of the squadron's deployed maintenance readiness and personnel.

Apart from CTF delays, other challenges included very heavy-weight helicopter mission loads with STS and Army Special Forces (SF) personnel on board to provide crash site security and manpower for whatever the mission would encounter on the ground. Taking off at maximum gross weight and flying such a long distance would require inflight refueling enroute to the crash site(s). Yet the host nation imposed two other mission-impacting restrictions. First, a Turkish military officer was required to be on each helicopter simply to observe, which scratched a troop actually needed for the mission and second, Turkey prohibited the helicopters from air refueling within Turkish airspace. This forced the very heavy, fully loaded MH-60Gs, flying in hot conditions, to be critically low on fuel when crossing the border into Iraq. Then, when CTF finally gave the launch order, the Turkish base initially denied take off clearance, further delaying the mission.

By 1500, a full four hours after initial alert call, three combat loaded MH-60Gs finally departed Incirlik for the four-hour flight to the shoot-down site. The COMJSOTF and COMAFSOF were also aboard the MH-60Gs, serving as the joint rescue/recovery mission commander (RMC) and his air mission commander (AMC), respectively. When the crash sites were found, they and the special tactics teams off-loaded to provide on-site command and control (C2) for the operation. Along with the helicopter team, two MC-130P Combat Shadows launched to provide communications links and continuous on-call helicopter aerial refueling. Once the MH-60 formation was airborne, the long flight to the border proved to be uneventful. However, the AMC thought it was odd that the flight received virtually no radio (SATCOM) communications enroute and no situation or threat updates. Nothing!

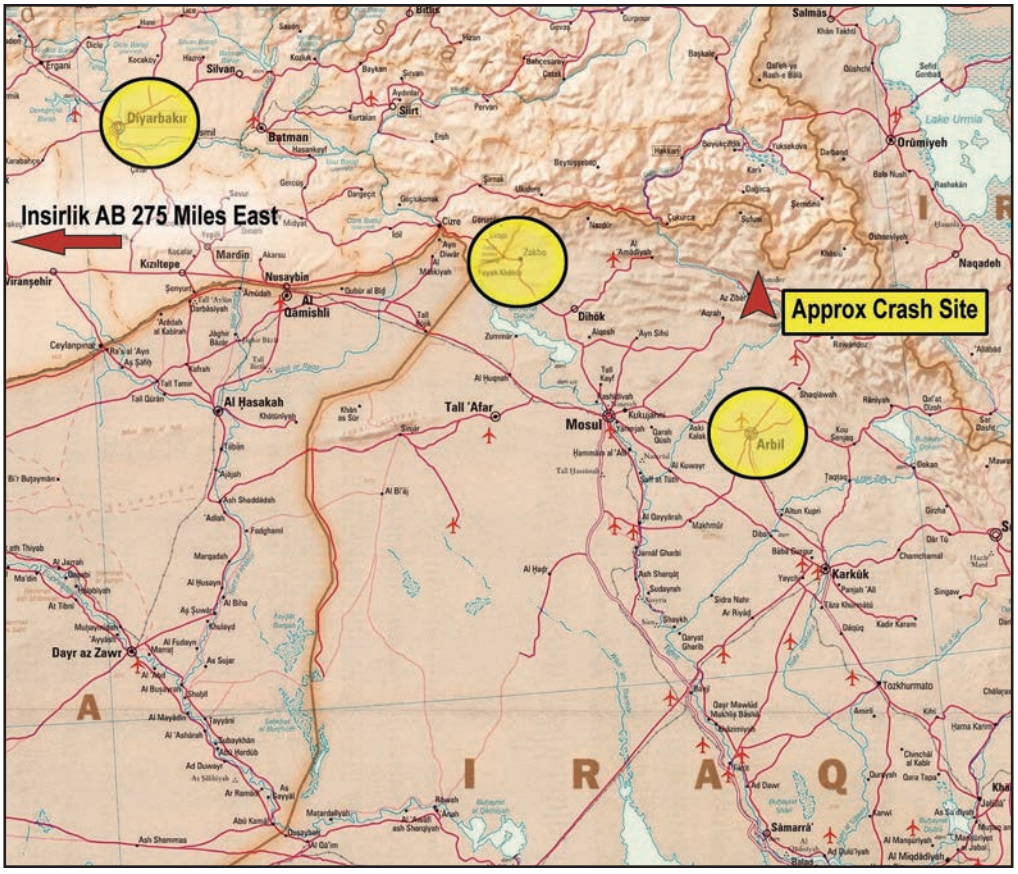
The mission crews did not even

know for certain if it was a shoot-down, and if so, if there were any survivors; but they still pressed on with the urgency of a rescue mission. Further, while the aircrews were aware of an Iraqi artillery and infantry garrison within 20 miles of the objective area, they had no information regarding enemy activity or what threats the recovery forces should expect upon arrival. Crossing the border into Iraq with bare minimum fuel onboard, all aircraft successfully inflight refueled, which required delicate flight maneuvers because the MH-60s were still very heavy.

The Pave Hawks arrived at the first shoot-down site just after sunset. But it wasn't until actually flying over the first site that the aircrews saw the American flag in the cabin door window of the wreckage, confirming the downed aircraft were not Hinds, confirming their fear of fratricide. Flight lead provided airborne security while chalks two and three began recovery team insertion. The first site located was designated Site One. It was fairly level and accessible for a landing to insert their STS team. The RMC and AMC offloaded at Site One and spent the rest of the mission on the ground, providing both C2 of the recovery forces and the critical radio link with CTF. The second crash site was designated Site Two and it provided the biggest challenge to the task force, given the very rough terrain and limited number of body bags they had with them. The crash site was on a steep hill, not suitable for a helicopter landing, forcing the STS team to insert 500 meters down-slope. During the insertion the aerial gunner, while assisting the special tactics team offloading equipment, jumped out of the aircraft and broke his foot on the uneven terrain. The PJ immediately taped up the gunner's foot with duct tape and proceeded to climb the steep terrain to the site while the gunner jumped back on the aircraft and continued his aircrew duties for the next 10-plus hours.

A few Special Forces soldiers from the Zakho MCC, who were already in the vicinity of Site One, met the arriving helicopters and escorted the RMC and AMC on a quick reconnaissance of the crash site. They reported a total of 12 dead at Site One and 14 dead at Site Two and no survivors. The SF team had collected all the dog tags and some personal effects from the deceased and gave them to the RMC. When the details were provided to the CTF, the CTF directed the RMC to recover the remains and sensitive equipment back to Diyarbakir, Turkey, under the cover of darkness. This was to prevent daylight site exploitation by Iraqi forces. It was now clearly a recovery, and not a rescue mission, but still an urgent one because it was located in hostile and uncertain territory. Thus began a very long, difficult, and dark night in many ways.

There were also about 200 armed Kurdish Peshmerga operating in the area, but not associated with the crash recovery. While there was no indication of any Iraqi military response to the recovery operation, the Iraqi threat was still a concern. Another concern was that the only communications between the AMC and the helicopters were VHF survivor radios transmitting in the clear, and it was very likely Iraqi forces were aware of the recovery force activity.



Two of three 55th SOS MH-60G Pave Hawks at the Eagle Flight shootdown site, taken the day the accident investigation team was brought to the site. Vicinity of Site One
(Photo taken by Scott Swanson)

(see diagram to the right). The two other MH-60s then began transferring the collected remains from Site One to the security of the MCC at Zakho for temporary holding, prior to the final flight to Diyarbakir, Turkey.

As mentioned previously, Site Two proved to be the greater challenge for the recovery effort. The ground team found an area that permitted stokes litter hoisting near the wreckage which was along a steep cliff and surrounded by several 10-15 foot tall trees. This required the Pave Hawk to hover out of ground effect which called for very high-power settings. The stamina, skill, and determination of the Pave Hawk and special tactics team at Site Two allowed the recovery of all 14 sets of remains, using 8 separate stokes litter hoist events in the process. The whole process took a long time because of the challenges presented by steep and wooded terrain. To expedite the loading process at Site One, several aircrew members left the aircraft to help load remains. While preparing for the mission and prior to leaving Turkey, the CTF could locate only 16 body bags at Incirlik Airbase (AB), so the team had to use many of the body bags to transport more than one set of remains. This, of course was not ideal, but the aircrews and ground team, did what was necessary to get the job done, quickly, respectfully, and safely, despite all the clear and present dangers.

While the shootdown recovery was a somber and serious event, those of us who have served know that sometimes humor in the darkest of situations can be an incredible medicine. During one of the 40-minute shuttle runs from the crash site to the MCC at Zakho, a call came across the intra-flight radio:

Chalk one, "Did you see that?"

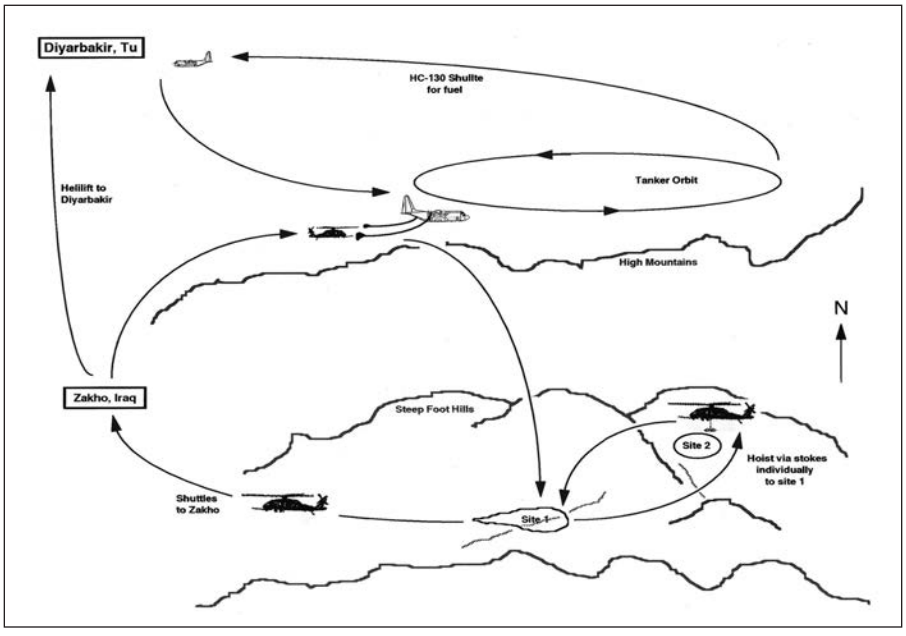
A pensive response came from chalk two, "Maybe."

Chalk one replied, "I didn't know if I was going a bit loopy and seeing things."

Chalk two replied, "You probably are, but we saw it too!"

The exchange was prompted by the sight of huge 50-70 foot shadows projected on a cliff from a group of Peshmerga fighters sitting around a fire. One fighter stood up and shouldered a weapon and walked off, out of the firelight. This scene played out as huge shadows easily visible under NVGs, and provided a surreal sight that brought some much-needed levity to the crews that night.

The Pave Hawks conducted multiple inflight refuelings in northern Iraq throughout the night as they balanced aircraft weight and fuel endurance requirements, all the while avoiding sporadic ground fire. The MC-130s established an air-refueling orbit all night, north of the objective area, to stay clear of any possible Iraqi threats and making it easier for the Pave Hawks to pop up from low-level flight for fuel as needed. During the refuelings, one crew experienced a refueling probe partial extension malfunction. Normally the refueling probe extends a total of eight feet putting the probe tip four feet beyond



the rotor disk when refueling. For this crew, the probe would only extend approximately three to four feet, leaving the probe tip under the rotor disk and making it highly possible for a blade strike on the refueling hose or basket; a very hazardous situation. The crew evaluated the risk and discussed the situation with the MC-130 aircraft commander before conducting a partially extended refueling. Over the night, the crew completed four successful aerial refuelings with the partially extended probe. This allowed them to stay on scene and enabled the recovery of all remains prior to daylight. The MH-60 crew demonstrated incredible skill because even one blade strike on the hose or basket would not just have damaged the helicopter, but could also have prevented the tanker from providing fuel to the other two helicopters that were feverishly working the crash sites and who were dependent on multiple refuelings. By the end of the night, after 13-14 hours of strenuous flying, another crew was critically low on fuel and repeatedly failed to make contact with the MC-130's refueling hose. Despite the fatigue and the stress culminating in that moment, the crew stepped back, and with the encouragement and direction from the flight engineer came together as a team to finally make contact and receive the fuel necessary to reach Diyarbakir. The alternative was making a precautionary landing with its precious cargo in hostile territory and necessitating assistance from the other helicopters.

Once all 26 sets of remains were successfully recovered and shuttled to Zakho, the MH-60s returned to Site One to recover all JSOTF ground forces for final transport back to Zakho. After all forces were safely back in friendly territory, the three Pave Hawks loaded all 26 sets of remains waiting at Zakho, and then flew the final shuttle of the night to Diyarbakir, arriving after sunrise.

When the three helicopters landed at Diyarbakir and taxied to the airport parking ramp, they were met by the Eagle Flight command team. The aircrews kept the cargo doors closed

Crewmembers from the 55th SOS at Site One of the Eagle Flight shootdown, the day the accident investigation team was brought to the site. Back to camera is unidentified Turkish military. Left to right is Aerial Gunner Robert Keiper, Copilot Mike Geragosian, and Aerial Gunner Rodney Quinn. Person in far background is unidentified (Photo taken by Scott Swanson)

to lessen the visible blow of the stack of body bags inside the cabin. One of the aerial gunners jumped off the aircraft to meet the command team. As he walked toward the group, meeting them a few feet outside of the rotor disk, he could see a lieutenant colonel leading the group, obviously crying, but doing his best to remain stoic. The gunner, still covered in blood and charred flesh from lifting the remains, could read the commander's body language as he desperately looked for confirmation. No words were needed. The gunner just slowly shook his head "No" and the officer fell into the gunner, sobbing. They both dropped to the ramp as the others surrounded them. The moment lasted a few minutes, but it seemed like a lifetime. The moment has stayed with the gunner and the onlooking crewmembers to this day.

Finally at Diyarbakir, the three crews entered crew rest, sleeping on cots hastily assembled on a gymnasium basketball court floor. In the end, 55th SOS MH-60 alert crews logged 15+ hours of flight time and over 19 hours of on-duty time after initial alert notification. The crew flying the third aircraft logged over 22 hours of duty time, including their maintenance test flights earlier in the day, all of which exceeded the Air Force's crew duty day limits because the mission required it.

The 55th SOS crews flew two additional missions to the crash site over the following days. After proper crew rest, they flew the 3rd Air Force commander and incident investigation team back to the crash sites. The next day, they transported the CTF commander and various distinguished visitors from Diyarbakir to Zakho for a memorial service and return. The Pave Hawks then flew the ground recovery team (STS, C2, and SF) from Zakho to Diyarbakir, where they boarded an MC-130 for flight back to Incirlik AB. The third day, the 55th crews resumed SAR alert for CTF air activities from Diyarbakir, finally returning to Incirlik that evening.

Despite the tragic loss of two US helicopters with 26 lives, the actions of the 55th SOS and the entire JSOTF team were remarkable. The team was able to recover all remains under cover of darkness, denying Iraq the ability to exploit the shootdown, and

Crewmembers from the 55th SOS at Site One of the Eagle Flight shootdown, on the day the accident investigation team was brought to the site. Left is aircraft commander John Stein and right is flight engineer Kurt Gustafson (Photo taken by Scott Swanson)

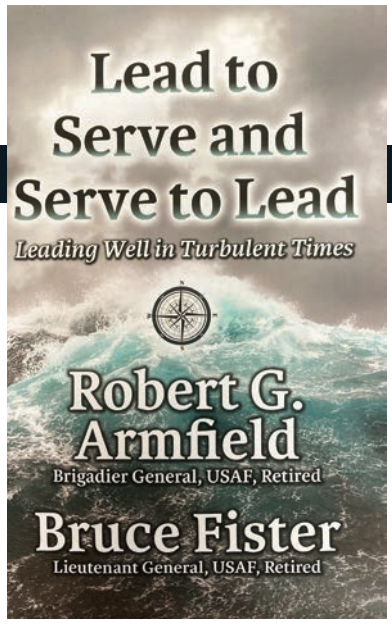
ultimately moving all forces back into either the UN Security Zone or Turkey, all with no loss of life or injury to recovery personnel. Most importantly, the team's actions provided families of the deceased the ability to bury their loved ones. The selfless, forward-leaning, mission-focused, agile, and tenacious character of each member of the 55th SOS team is truly what made this arduous recovery mission under such tragic and potentially hostile conditions so successful. The efforts of all involved contributed immeasurably to the 55th SOS being selected as the AFSOC Squadron of the Year for 1994.

About the Author: Lt Col Todd Bolger retired after serving 21 years in the Air Force. His assignments included 8 years in AFSOC, While assigned to the 55th SOS, Colonel Bolger deployed in support of Operations Provide Comfort, Northern Watch, and Uphold Democracy (Haiti). Later, as the 66th Rescue Squadron Commander, he led the initial US combat rescue deployments for Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. UponAfter his retirement, he joined SAIC and later, Leidos, as a Joint Special Operations University instructor and program manager, followed by multiple international business development and management programs in Europe and the Mideast.

Contributors to this article: Col (Ret) John Zahrt, Maj (Ret) Scott Swanson, SSGT William Rodney Quinn Jr, MSgt (Ret) Kurt Gustafson

Book Review

Reviewed by Joel E. Higley, PhD, Lt Col, USAF (Retired)



Lead to Serve and Serve to Lead: Leading Well in Turbulent Times

By Robert G. Armfield and Bruce Fister

(Branding Habitat, 2022, 243pp.)

Few subjects are more extensively written about than leadership; bookstores are awash with diverse authors' takes on the subject. Nonetheless, some authors find ways to address leadership in new or different ways and manage to add to our understanding of the field. In *Lead to Serve and Serve to Lead*, two retired Air Force special operations senior leaders—Brig Gen Robert 'Gwyn' Armfield and Lt Gen Bruce Fister—seek to provide a practical leadership guide, with a focus on leading well in the midst of chaos. Given the subject, the authors' respective backgrounds, the current world environment, and the nature of special operations; this book is not only a valuable addition to the field, but it speaks directly to the *Air Commando Journal's* readers' interests.

Generals Armfield and Fister are highly qualified to write on leadership in chaos. While some authors build credibility through extensive research and others lean on charisma and salesmanship, Armfield and Fister rely primarily on their extensive experience. Armfield rose through the ranks as a special tactics officer, with service in Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), command at the group and wing levels, and serving as a deputy commanding general for a joint special operations task force in Afghanistan. Fister is a SOF aviator who was an Air Commando in Vietnam, also served in JSOC, and whose last two assignments were as commander of Air Force Special Operations Command, then 15th Air Force. Both saw extensive combat during their careers and led at very high levels. Academically, both attended all the professional schools associated with their ranks, to include fellowships at Harvard. Both continued on to active and successful post-Air Force civilian roles. These men know wherof they speak.

Armfield and Fister organize their book topically, in 11 short chapters which clearly identify their key points. Unsurprisingly, there is a strong emphasis on a leader's character in the opening and closing chapters, with further exhortations toward leading with character throughout the narrative. They start each chapter with "Bottom Line Up Front"-style Leadership Summaries, and conclude each chapter section with boxed Leadership Lessons. Throughout the work, they make generous use of the phrase "YOU THE LEADER" to further punctuate the reader's responsibility and privilege to exercise servant leadership. While the authors' precepts might be difficult to practice, they make them clear and easy to understand.

Lt Gen Bruce Fister

Lead to Serve and Serve to Lead has notable strengths and weaknesses, but whether a particular aspect is strong or weak will be based largely on the reader's perspective. It is not a deeply-researched academic tome; rather, it is a book borne primarily of hard-won experience. Academically-oriented readers will be disappointed by the relative lack of footnotes and limited references to the latest academic leadership research to support their assertions. Leadership practitioners, however, will appreciate that this book's clear examples and counsel comes from extensive practice, rather than ivory

Brig Gen Robert Armfield

tower theory. *Lead to Serve and Serve to Lead* is designed for people who are already committed to leading well. Those wanting to be inspired by cheerleading and inspirational quotes—a hallmark of mass-market leadership books—will find the book lacking. Those already committed to leading well, who are seeking greater insight and better tools with which to lead will appreciate how the authors cut to the chase. A final note is that the authors discuss their Christian faith, but not extensively. Their intent is clearly to put their backgrounds in context rather than push their faith on others. Those who are easily triggered by the mention of faith might want to look elsewhere, but they will miss out on excellent insights in the process. Most readers will find mentions of their faith as a net positive; it should be a good thing for authors to expose their experiences and biases. Those who are familiar with the founder of the authors' faith—and even more so those who share the same faith—will find that the brief references to faith further enriches their understanding of the book and its precepts.

Lead to Serve and Serve to Lead is an outstanding book on servant leadership. The authors' real-world credentials are unassailable. The advice and insights they give are clear, concise, and practical. The chapters are well-organized, and readers looking for advice on a particular topic will find it easy to locate a section and chapter that addresses their particular leadership challenge. *Lead to Serve and Serve to Lead* belongs on the shelves of those who are committed to leading well and learning from successful leadership practitioners. Air Commandos will further appreciate that this book is written by two of their own, who faced the same challenges of leading in the midst of chaos as SOF air operators.

About the Reviewer: Lt Col Joel Higley, PhD, USAF (Retired) served for 26 years as KC-135 pilot and weapons officer, staff officer at Special Operations Command Europe, and faculty member at the USAF Academy. He is currently a pilot for a major US airline and volunteers as a contributing editor for the Air Commando Journal.

Our goal at the *ACJ* is to tell the Air Commando and USAF Special Operations story, from our beginning to today. 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.

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Submit your files electronically to: info@ aircommando.org. We use MS-Word, and 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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Your kind and generous donations directly impact Air Commandos and their families. Air Commando Foundation will continue to fill the gap between what the government can support and the true needs of our warriors and their families.

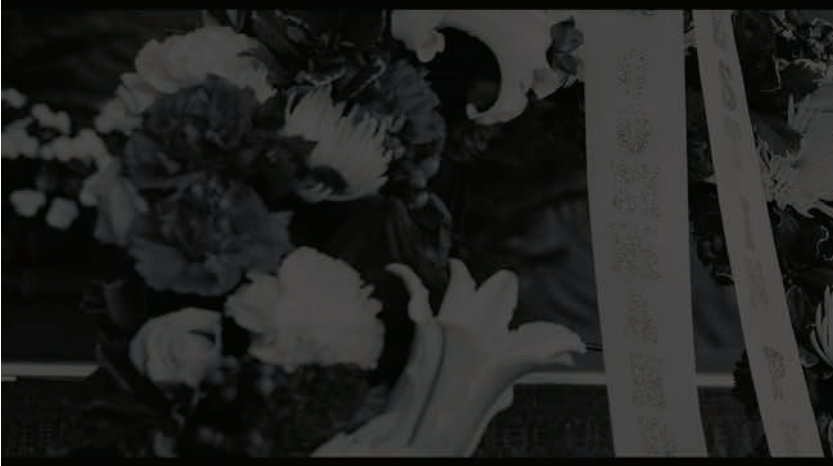
Dear Air Commando Foundation,

In October of 2021 we were notified that our sister-in-law tragically passed away and our nieces and nephew were put into foster care. Immediately upon hearing the news my wife Jessica left on a Red Cross flight from the United Kingdom to Florida to help get the children out of foster care. While Jessica was working to get us established in Florida, I was in England with our three children attempting to get humanitarian orders processed. Thanks to the amazing support of the 352 Special Operations Support Squadron our package submitted and approved within a few days. We were set to move the rest of the family to Hurlburt Field and establish a home in hopes of getting custody the children.

Moving for military families is nothing out of the ordinary but we found ourselves in financial difficulties. The expedited move and extra expenses associated with taking in three additional children took its toll. Our First Sergeant from the 352 SOSS reached out on our behalf to the ACA and explained the difficult situation we were in. The financial support ACF provided enabled us to settle into a home with all of the necessities needed to support three additional children.

We have now been a family of eight for 8 months and all of the children are slowly settling in. We cannot express enough gratitude to the Air Commando Foundation and the amazing family community of the Air Force Special Operations Command.

Sincerely, Cody & Jessica Furnish & family



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Part 2 of the 55th SOS and the Pave Hawk history in AFSOC in the next issue of the Air Commando Journal.

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