

AIR COMMANDO

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

JOURNAL

Vol 10: Issue 3

THAI CAVE RESCUE

Air Commandos Support
International Rescue Effort

2021 Hall of Fame

Adaptive
Precision Strike

Afghanistan:
Just Like Old Times

Interview with
Colonel Larry
Ropka, USAF, Ret

Foreword by CMSgt Cory Olson
AFSOC Command Chief



Air Commando JOURNAL



Air Commando Association

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Airmen from the US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) delivered search and rescue experience and capacity to the tremendous efforts provided by Thai authorities and international search and rescue teams. *US Air Force photo by Capt Jessica Tait*



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FOREWORD

Happy New Year! I wish each of you a happy, healthy, and prosperous 2022! WOW, what a year 2021 turned out be...COVID-19 did not relent, we departed Afghanistan after 20 years, and AFSOC Airmen continued to answer the nation's call across the globe. I couldn't be more proud of their amazing accomplishments and I'm delighted that this edition of the *Air Commando Journal* is filled with the Airmen of AFSOC doing what they do best, excelling!

Let me start by sharing personal thoughts about our 20 years of engagement in Afghanistan. On September 11, 2001, our world changed forever. The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon drew America into conflict with violent extremists in Afghanistan. Over the last 20 years, the blood and treasure sacrificed in Afghanistan rings especially true for me because of multiple deployments and the pain of losing Airmen and sister service members who were personal friends. Not a day goes by where I don't think of them, their families, and their sacrifices. Please take a moment of silence to honor all of those who served so remarkably and dedicated their lives to service...remember.

AFSOC Airmen certainly answered our nation's call in Afghanistan. In this edition some of our greatest Air Force Special Operations Forces legends who also served in Afghanistan are highlighted and are being inducted into the ACA Hall of Fame: Col Timothy Hale, Lt Col Bill Schroeder, Maj Dan Turney, CMSgt William "Cal" Markham, and SMSgt James "JB" Lackey. Each of these Airmen provided countless contributions to AFSOC and their impact and legacy continues on today through the lives and careers of so many.

To continue the theme of greatness, service, and sacrifice we also have the special tribute to the compelling life and career of Lt Col Felix "Sam" Sambogna. Lt Col Sambogna had an illustrious career from flying as an attack pilot with two tours of duty in Southeast Asia. After 29 years of service he served again for another 17 years at the Oklahoma State University Office on Eglin AFB and continued his service as a volunteer for the Guardian ad Litem and as the ACA President from 2004-2008. What an impressive life and story and I think you will enjoy, as I did, learning so much more about this Air Commando. Well done Sir!

I'm so thankful for all of the heroes that came before us and their lineage permeates through the outstanding Air Commandos we have today. As I read through the 2021 AFSOC awards and each individual's accomplishments, I'm extremely proud of each of them and as you will see; they continue on the proud legacy. MSgt Hannah Walters from the 352nd SOW is one of the 12 Outstanding Airmen of the Year for the entire Air Force. I have the privilege of knowing Hannah and she is the epitome of what we want and desire in all of our Air Commandos...she is impressive!

Thank you for the opportunity to be surrounded by selfless All-Stars and as we begin 2022, I wish each of you and your families health and happiness and the profound hope that this year is even better than previous years. I know our Air Commando community will continue to thrive and ascend to even greater heights. I'm forever indebted to so many Air Commandos, and the exceptional joint force we work alongside, and couldn't be more honored to be on this team. Happy New Year!



CORY M. OLSON, CMSgt, USAF
AFSOC Command Chief

A Tribute to Lt Col Felix "Sam" Sambogna

By Air Commando Journal Staff

Lt Col Felix "Sam" Sambogna was born December 8, 1931 in Manchester, CT, and graduated from Trinity College in Hartford, CT. Sam joined the Air Force and became an instructor in the Air Training Command. In 1966, he asked to be assigned to any fighter jet so he could go to Vietnam, but to his surprise and confusion he received orders to report to Hurlburt Field, FL, to begin training in the AT-28D Trojan, a propeller driven aircraft. Sam and several others were the first group of "Zorros," as they became known within the 606th Air Commando Squadron (ACS), and were a part of a program called Project Lucky Tiger. Lucky Tiger supported the Royal Thai Air Force to prevent communist intrusion into the country by providing counter-insurgency advisory support and training.

Sam served 29 years in the Air Force as an officer, pilot, squadron commander, deputy base commander, and as a staff officer. He had the reputation of a skilled attack pilot and combat operator. He completed two tours of duty in Southeast Asia flying the AT-28 and A-37B aircraft, logging 130 sorties at night along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Sam also served as a Special Operations Force Liaison Officer flying as an observer in almost all SOF aircraft. Sam was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, Meritorious Service Medal w/ 1 OLC, the Air Medal w/6 OLC among many others.

After retiring, he worked for Oklahoma State University at the Eglin AFB Field Office, retiring after 17 years. Sam volunteered his time with the First Judicial Circuit Guardian ad Litem program in Florida working as an advocate for abused and neglected children for 16 years.

Sam also volunteered his time to the Air Commando Association and served in all capacities as an officer and was the president from 2004 - 2008. During a time of need he filled the president and treasurer's role simultaneously. After his time as the ACA's president concluded, he continued to provide advice and mentorship to subsequent ACA leaders on developing the association's hallmark as a service organization. Sam was instrumental in assisting the ACA organization transition from a largely fraternal group into what it is today.

There was no task ever too menial or arduous for him to take on and he was an active volunteer in all that the ACA did, right up to his last days. He was the epitome of the quiet professional and was awarded the Air Commando Association's Lifetime Achievement Award in 2019.

Sam also volunteered his time for the charitable McCoskrie Threshold Foundation serving as its treasurer and book-keeper. The MTF was an ACA partner organization known for providing humanitarian supplies to indigenous people in Southeast Asian countries and in South America.

Lt Col (Ret) Felix "Sam" Sambogna was a mainstay of the leadership in the Air Commando Association for nearly three decades. Sam never forgot the past as he embraced the changes needed for the ACA to move into the future. The ACA was extremely lucky to have Sam's guidance and experience as we continued to explore ways in which we can fulfill our mission to support Air Commandos, past, present, and future. Thank you Sam, Rest in Peace.



HOTWASH

Remembering TSgt Pat Rogers and Lt Col Jerry Klingaman

I was fortunate enough to have quite a bit of interaction with both Jerry Klingaman and Tech Sgt Pat Rogers. The stories brought back memories of my good fortune to know and work with them on different occasions. The following details may or may not be useful in continuing to “flesh out” existing histories concerning both of these Quiet Professionals.

Technical Sergeant Pat Rogers: I’d known Pat Rogers for a few years from various activities in the Fort Bragg area. Flying Pope Air Force Base C130s in my initial line tour, a CASA tour, a joint headquarters tour, followed by another two CASA tours (in different positions) there resulted in sharing many planning, flying and operating hours around the Combat Control community. Pat was someone we enjoyed working with. Many times, we’d try scheduling him to control our airland and airdrop training missions. Well respected, exceptionally adaptive (an implicit combat controller trait!), he seemed to enjoy our non-standard procedures as much as the squadron members.



TSgt Pat Rogers appears in the article, *Operation Gothic Serpent, The Critical Role of USAF Combat Controllers in the Air Commando Journal, Vol 10 Issue 2 on page 26.*

Sometime in the 1998 fall to 1999 spring timeframe, the unit was tasked to perform a mission supporting another agency. We were given a very short time window to prepare for the task. Many associated tasks included within the overall mission were challenges without any existing guidance or prescribed performance parameters. Shortly after this tasking appeared, Pat came walking into hangar dragging his equipment asking when we were departing.

A short discussion ensued as we exchanged all the data in our collective intellect. After a very busy and late afternoon/evening session, a training and operational timeline was solidified. As we fleshed out the train-up, we began to understand why Pat was the perfect choice increasing our

mission probability of success.

Your article highlighted why he was the perfect choice, previously executing combat operations in the proposed area of operations for us. A never mentioned point, but one used to prepare us exceedingly well for success. He insisted all were proficient with the weapons being carried, including his long gun. Through his efforts, we were able to attain an isolated training range with enough ammunition for the entire team to fire multiple evolutions with every weapon. As I recall, my arms and hands were so sore the next day I could barely hold a coffee cup or process paperwork.

Pat left us much too early in 2001 while stationed at MacDill AFB, Florida. His actions precipitated by, at least in my mind, earlier combat actions. Numerous questions regarding why we didn’t recognize his need for buddy support at a critical time remain a decade after his last action.

Most hard charging special operators ignore four Mayo Clinic identified symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). They are: intrusive memories and avoidance, negative changes in thinking, changes in physical reactions, and changes in emotional reactions. The Mayo Clinic further identifies indications of: depression and anxiety, issues with drug and alcohol use, eating disorders, and suicidal thoughts or actions.

The Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs have recognized the urgent need for suicide migration actions. While much has been accomplished, much remains to be addressed. The same studies show the veteran, 55-74 age year, subgroup to be experiencing a 38.6 percent suicide rate increase through 2019. This particular age group is of specific concern to many ACJ readers as they are cohort members. A factor making the Journal’s pages and the Air Commando support net even more crucial in the upcoming decade.

Jerry Klingaman, Lt Col, USAF (Retired): I’m not sure when I first crossed paths with Jerry but if we would’ve had cell phones back then, he would have been on speed dial! I think I became aware of his expertise through a AFSOC backed class in the early nineties. In the presentation, Jerry, in his normal humble way, discussed his previous past flying roles. He also discussed building partner air capacity and joint/combined air operations. As an AFSOC newcomer, it seemed as if his presentation was directed solely at me. I quickly button-holed Jerry at every break and after class to glean his thoughts on STOL and dissimilar aircraft operations.

The unit’s charter I joined after DESERT STORM was applicable to what Jerry was teaching, at least in my naivete. After the six-month transition to mission qualified pilot, I was able to start reviewing some of Mr. Klingaman’s documental history on flying various airframes in out-of-the-way places. Jerry was patient in our ensuing discussions over the next two years or so, assisting the unit in building policy/procedures for current and future flight operations.



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At some juncture, Jerry moved into the 6th Special Operations Squadron. The passing years proved just how perfect this job transition matched his academical, teaching and flying skills. As time passed, I was fortunate to become the 16th Special Operations Wing (now 1st SOW) Commander. The CASA 212 was being flown by the 6th SOS. On occasion, I would visit the unit and sometimes even "borrow" some CASA 212 stick time. Jerry and I spent discussion time during my visits.

I scheduled a monthly recurring lunch event in order to continue our conversations. I didn't make all of them, but it was always a learning time for me plus an enjoyable visit with an Air Commando legend. My last meals with Jerry occurred during my Hurlburt assignment as the AFSOC vice. At this point, we were just old friends visiting and talking about our next chapter outside of the military.

Thank you for doing such great job on the article, as always!!

O.G. Mannon
ACA Lifemember #3949



Read our tribute to Jerry Klingaman on page 9 in the *Air Commando Journal*, Vol 10 Issue 2.

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An Interview with *Colonel Larry Ropka* *USAF, Retired*

By Colonel Paul Harmon, USAF (Retired)
Editor, Air Commando Journal

Celebrating our newest members of the Air Commando Hall of Fame, and to honor all past inductees, I thought it would be interesting to speak with Colonel Larry Ropka, USAF (Retired) who, along with 19 other Air Commandos, was inducted into the first Hall of Fame – Class of 1969. Larry enlisted in the USAF in 1952 and over time rose through the ranks, retired as a colonel and served as the former Principal Deputy to Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs. Colonel Ropka participated in a wide range of Air Commando operations and deployments in Southeast Asia and elsewhere, played a significant role in planning Operation Kingpin (Son Tay Raid), as well as having a part in the creation of US Special Operations Command.



Let's start at the beginning, where you are from and what led you to the Air Force?

I grew up near Lancaster, PA, but upfront I have to say that I describe my military career with the words providence and serendipity...either a lot of providence or a truck load of serendipity...I had little to do with it. My father was in the trucking business with two semi-trailers and a dump truck. He assembled these from parts in salvage yards with me at 12-years old cleaning the parts and handing him wrenches. Later when I was 15, dad became ill and I took over all of the maintenance.

I was a terrible student in high school, but went to college and did no better. I grew up during the war and became fascinated with airplanes. I would make models out of wooden cigar boxes using a coping saw. After the war, I hung out at a small airstrip where an instructor pilot with two Piper Cubs was providing free pilot training to veterans. He would take me for short rides if I wiped down windshields and pumped gas all day.

I mercifully dropped out of college after one year. Dad closed the trucking business, so I applied for a job at nearby Olmstead AFB. I was excited about working on "clean" airplanes rather than filthy, greasy trucks, but I was assigned to the vehicle overhaul depot working on greasy trucks.

Can you tell our readers a little bit about your early military career?

In 1952, the military draft was breathing down my neck. There were road signs promoting "Join the Air Force and See the World," so I enlisted and went to Sampson AFB, NY, for basic training. Just before graduation the cadre asked for volunteers for flying training.



I jumped at it. After a week of testing, I scored high for pilot, and ok for navigator training, but during my flight physical the doctors found a minor astigmatism in one eye and I was sent to the navigator program. I was disappointed, but after graduating basic training I visited an aunt near home whose neighbor was a Military Air Transport Service (MATS, now AMC) navigator. His tales of flying all over the world, eating great food, and seeing the sites warmed my desire for the program.

I waited for navigator training for six months at Ellington AFB near Houston, TX. During that time, I was a mechanic on C-47 aircraft, finally getting what I wanted in the first place. I enjoyed it so much that I threatened to withdraw from the cadet program, but a wise chief mechanic I worked with would not allow me to quit.

I attended the first-ever 12-week preflight training program for navigators at Lackland AFB. It was hell. Our upper class were pilot trainees who were angry at being held over six weeks to train us navigators. Probably the most severe hazing in cadet history.

I finally went to navigator training at Harlingen AFB, TX, in 1953. For the year prior to graduation in 1954, there were no MATS assignments available. I mysteriously graduated first in my class and grabbed one of the two slots offered that year. I was also offered a regular commission, a prize in those days, but stupidly, I turned it down as I would for 18 more years. I was having fun and not thinking about a career.

After graduation I was assigned to a C-54 squadron at Kelly AFB, TX. At that time, MATS was being reorganized from three geographical divisions into a single Military Airlift Command. The European, North African, Pacific, and South American routes were 12 hours long at 185 knots and over the course of 3 years, I flew 3,000 hours moving quickly to instructor and then flight examiner.

In 1957, I was determined to get out again, but my squadron commander convinced me to stay. He told me he had a close friend in Misawa, Japan, who commanded an Air-Sea Rescue squadron flying the SA-16 Albatross amphibians and he needed a chief navigator. He told me I was perfect for the job and would have a lot of fun, so I went.

The week I arrived in Misawa, the Air Force deactivated the squadron. I spent a long summer splashing around the local lakes with the Albatross pilots and performed a real search or two in the Pacific, but the main activity was attending weekly going away parties; almost everyone transferred, except me. In the fall, I received orders to Kadena AB on Okinawa. At the same time, we received orders to transfer an SA-16 to Kadena. We flew it down, arriving on a Friday. I checked in to the personnel office on Monday and handed my file to a sergeant who opened it and murmured to a nearby associate, "Not another d--mn navigator!" He handed me a paper showing units that had navigators and said, "Go find a job."

The pickings were slim, but I was attracted to a weird unit, the 322nd Troop Carrier Squadron (Medium, Special). It was a remnant of the 581st Air Resupply & Communications Wing (ARCW). During the Korean war era, the ARCWs were special operations and PSYOP wings. The squadron had

two C-54s, one C-118, and the just delivered SA-16.

The unit had 10 navigators, mostly older or just out of training. The commander welcomed me and I was quickly asked by two C-118 pilots to plan missions and fly with them. The pace quickly picked up, but there was a shroud of secrecy around the missions we flew. We had controlled estimated times of arrival or ETAs that the pilots insisted be precise. We flew somewhat James Bondish landings at night into unfamiliar airports in the region, picking up or dropping off people. The security was so tight it was almost a year before I caught on we were working for the "Company."

A few months later, an Air Force colonel arrived and flew with us to Clark Field in the Philippines where we began the process of cleaning the markings off our C-118. I was taken to a safe house nearby and given charts from Thailand to central Tibet. The colonel also had weather data from Air Force Weather Center and I was instructed to plan a route from Clark to Takhli, Thailand.

Next a Civil Air Transport (CAT) crew appeared; some pilots had over 35,000 flying hours. The plane was loaded with parachute-rigged pallets of arms, ammunition, and supplies. I prepared the flight plan and briefed the crews to take advantage of the full moon phase because the only means of navigation was visual. They refueled in Thailand and flew hours to a drop zone, deep in Tibet, over 30,000 foot mountains, with the cargo door off so the pallets could be airdropped. The crew would return for refueling and head home. This was the first of a series of missions that quickly expanded, flying several times each moon cycle during the dry season.

In 1958 or 1959, we started using new C-130As on loan from the 21st Tactical Airlift Squadron because they had better lift and range capabilities than the C-118s. I did all the flight planning. They would depart Takhli and head to Dacca, East Pakistan, (now Bangladesh). The CAT crews would then fly over the Himalayas, drop guerrillas or supplies into occupied Tibet, and return to Dacca for fuel and head home. They departed at last light and returned after sun-up the next morning. The missions were very successful.

At what point in your career did you meet Heinie Aderholt?

In 1958, a crew and I flew to Baltimore to pick up a C-118 that had been overhauled. The repair facility messed up the aircraft wiring a few days before we arrived, so we hung out in our Washington, DC, hotel for six weeks until it was fixed. While we were gone Heinie Aderholt assumed command of our unit, which had been renamed the 1045th Operational Evaluation & Training Group. Heinie met us on the ramp when we landed and gave us a week off. A week later I went to the officers club to get a newspaper. Heinie came flying out the door asking, "You work for me, don't you?" I said, "I think so." He said come to my office. There he explained that we were given a mission and he wanted to write an operations plan. He had worked as a plans officer in Europe and knew the format and process well. He dictated from about 2:00 to 8:00PM. I almost filled a yellow tablet. Real fear grew in me that I could ever get such a document printed and I asked him when he needed it. He responded,

“Just put it in the safe.” I asked, “Why did we do it?” He said, “Now there are two SOBs that know what we are going to do.” With that, unwittingly, I became his right-hand man. He tasked me with most of the provisioning for our operations from bare bases as well the mission planning. I never forgot the experience.

We were still flying the Tibet missions two weeks a month and I still didn't know it was a Company operation. One day a guy came up to me and said I needed to go to Tokyo. I asked why and he said I'd find out when I got there. He gave me an address in the fancy part of town and when I arrived I was told I needed a higher security clearance. This was the first time I knew I was working for the Company!

About a month after we got those special missions going, Heinie went to Vientiane, Laos, to meet with Ambassador Bill Sullivan and assess the situation. The war in Southeast Asia was just beginning in Laos and the Company had elements of Air America and other contract airlines flying to support General Vang Pao from Laos.

Heinie captivated Ambassador Sullivan and General Vang Pao and he knew they needed a short takeoff and landing (STOL) airplane to work operations supporting the Hmong in northern Laos. “I wanted a plane that could fly into airfields built by natives ... with shovels,” said Heinie, and in 1962 he got several U-10 Helio Couriers. He flew a demonstration for the Company and then developed leaflets with picture instructions. Whenever Vang Pao wanted to talk with his people, the U-10s would drop the instructions and the Hmong would cut out a flat, 300-foot strip, so the U-10s could land and Vang Pao would give instructions to his people and forces. This is what opened Laos.

I went to Vientiane for a time to help organize the operations and Heinie wasn't there six months when he told the Company headquarters they needed better airlift. So they got rid of the C-46s and brought the C-123s on board. Heinie also convinced them they needed B-26s, so those were brought in as well.

Sometime later, Heine directed Ed Smith and me to go back to Laos to straighten the place out. They really had some issues: no orders, no rescue plans, no safety...nothing. So Ed, a survival expert named, Bob Weaver, and I went to Vientiane to sort things out.

While we were there, Heinie would go out to the airport and see four aircraft taking off with three of them going to the same place...he hated waste. Ed and I spoke to the customers and had a meeting every evening to issue instructions for where each of the aircraft were supposed to go with their loads. We created dispatchers and put safety processes in place. The operation was working well, and at the end of nearly three months Heinie comes in and says he is taking Ed and told me to stay there. I protested because there was so much work to do to maintain the system we'd just established. Heinie said they were going to Saigon because there was a war starting there. Ed went and started the program inserting agents into North Vietnam using the C-47s.

When did you go to Company Headquarters, and what did you do?

I got to Kadena AB in 1957 and Heinie arrived in 1958 and by 1961, Heinie told me I was going to Washington, DC. He never asked me, but he convinced the Company to take me on board. My guess it was to help him implement his vision for special air support.

I was the Company desk officer for all of Southeast Asia, except for CAT and Air America. The head of the office was an Air Force reconnaissance officer. He was focused on larger high-tech projects and didn't care much about my programs in Tibet, North Vietnam, and elsewhere. He gave me free rein including dealing directly with higher ups. My principal was Richard Bissell, Deputy Director of Operations. He took blame for the 1961 Bay of Pigs disaster, though it was not his fault. My job was to select drop zones and approximate safe routes for overflights. Bissell would then get approval from the White House. He reveled in detail and would challenge every change I made each month. My 15-minute briefings often turned into an hour.

Keeping up with Heinie's requests was almost a full-time job. They needed a heavier STOL aircraft, so I initiated the purchase of two Dornier DO-28 twin engine planes for STOL and other potential operations where they needed a mid-sized transport. One fiscal year our branch was offered a sizable sum of money. I had been following the On Mark Corporation's conversion of B-26s to executive transports by installing a ring spar freeing the bomb bay area for either passengers or cargo. I initiated purchase of two aircraft adding terrain following radar, doppler navigation, and a rear ramp. We had them painted similar to other executive aircraft and provided decals consistent with the cover story being used.

I really enjoyed the job. I worked extensively with the ground officers, some from the World War II OSS days, and I learned a lot about cover and deception. My office had no documentation whatsoever about how clandestine or covert air operations should be run. So starting in my second year, from experience and research, I created a 12-chapter document covering most of the important features that might be used.

With all this is going on, Ed continued working the missions with the C-47s and we got word that the North Vietnamese Army was monitoring our operations. When they saw a C-47 land at Da Nang AB, South Vietnam, they knew something was up. I decided that we needed something with longer legs so we didn't have to stop in Da Nang. The company had given the C-54s to Air America and I went to get one back. I had to buy it back for \$300,000 and then I had it modified with a doppler navigation system and a roller map that helped to accurately navigate into North Vietnam. After we got the airplane all fixed and the crews trained, it took off and was never seen again.

The insertions into North Vietnam were going badly. I spent a lot of time doing the route planning for those missions and cleared them with Bissell. Unfortunately, the agents were getting rolled up very quickly after we inserted them and we weren't getting any mileage out of them. We had a meeting at the “Farm,” and concluded we were putting people with the wrong dialects into the wrong places. I

tasked them to find someone from North Vietnam and we inserted him about 20 miles from his home. He hiked to a place where he could observe his village. He saw his mother going to the river, and we cleared him to make contact. She immediately turned him in to authorities. As a result, we scrubbed all future missions.

Working with the company was great fun and I was tempted to stay there, but Heinie was hammering on me to bring the Company's tradecraft to the Air Commandos.

How long were you with the Company in DC?

I left DC in 1964. Heinie brought me to Hurlburt Field and put me in the Special Air Warfare Center's (SAWC) Combat Applications Group (CAG), mainly to teach the Company's tradecraft in accurate aerial delivery using beacons and all sorts of other gear. Heinie put me in with Joe Kittinger and we became a great team. Heinie gave us the job of redoing the capability demonstrations for senior officers and government officials. The demonstrations showed off special air operations: short field landings, aerial delivery, etc. During the day we had the planes flying up to 18 events with exact times on target; we never had a total deviation of more than 120 seconds. At night, we would take the visitors to the Eglin AFB range, land them in the dark with no lights, and then put them in stands and start the firepower demonstration, which was always fantastic.

Heinie moved me into the SAWC headquarters in the plans shop and I got involved in picking people for the military training teams (MTT) going into other countries and worked exercise plans. We had many exercises at Ft Bragg and a monster exercise in Missouri that started with a counterinsurgency and ended with a full-scale invasion, including the first dirt landing of a C-5A.

While I was in plans, General Cardenas took command of SAWC and said we had to codify what special air operations is and does. After a slow start, and struggling for six weeks, we wrote a document that described who we were and what we did, with an outline of a training program, and a personnel selection program...essentially doctrine.

During this time the wing moved to England AFB in Louisiana. The school stayed at Hurlburt, but the operational parts went to Louisiana. I moved, as well, and flew the B-26. I was put in the plans office again and told to put a plan together for taking a unit, to be called the 606th Air Commando Squadron, to Nakhon Phanom (NKP) in Thailand for a counterinsurgency mission. We built the plan and deployed.

When we arrived at NKP in late 1966, we went over to Udorn, Thailand, and spent the day with the 7/13th AF staff. The commander, General Bond, had been in charge of the big exercise we did in Missouri. When we went in to meet the general and let him know we were there, he asked, "What are you going to do?" He said no one told him we were coming or what our mission was. We had put a whole squadron together, trained, deployed, and didn't have a mission.

General Bond told us to go back to NKP and figure out what we were going to do, and come back to tell him. Our unit had U-10s, helicopters, and other fixed-wing aircraft.

So we developed a plan and a briefing and went back to see Bond. After the briefing, the general told my boss he needed to know what we were doing and wanted someone to stay at the 7/13th AF headquarters to keep him informed; that was me. At the time, 7/13th AF had nine CH-3 helicopters to support various missions, so he tasked me to schedule their operations.

You were there six months, where did you go from there?

I went back to Hurlburt, but six months later I got orders to the Pentagon. I was assigned to Special Plans and Policy working for Brig Gen Jim Allen on the Air Staff. The office was responsible for virtually all special operations matters including all support to the Company. There was no coherent special operations documentation in DOD at that time; nothing but fragments from past wars. The vacuum precipitated conflicts between the Services that generated many issues, such as roles and missions that had to be resolved by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Action officers in the Services were given issues to research and to produce a "package" containing everything that could be found on the issue. These were often an inch thick and would be reduced to about 20 pages containing possible and recommended courses of action. These were further reduced to 2-3 page "talking papers." Action officers personally briefed the issues up the chain of command to their Service's Chief of Staff. The process could be slow and arduous. I had been through the process more than a dozen times and I got to see General Allen regularly and then the POW rescue mission came along.

Can you give us some first-hand insight into the initial concept and planning for the Son Tay Raid?

This was early 1970 and there were some high-level discussions about POWs. General Allen told me, a major at the time, to go see General Blackburn and tell him what I thought. Blackburn was the Chairman's Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities (SACSA). I went to see him and he introduced his intelligence people who were tracking the POWs. They gave me and a few others briefings and when it was done General Blackburn said, "Your job is to get some of these POWs out...and I pledge that there is nothing in this building, nothing in this Department of Defense, nothing in this country that I won't get for you and support you to do it." That was Friday and he told us to go and think about it and come back Monday and tell him where to start.

I went back to see General Allen and explained what Blackburn wanted to do. I said, "I'm afraid of it." I knew it had to be helicopters and it was a long way over rugged mountains. General Allen looked at me, gave me a pat on the shoulder, and said, "Larry, go down there and give it a few weeks and if you come back and tell me it is a No-Go, I'll support you."

So I did. I went down to General Blackburn's office and he said, "Okay, what are we going to do?" CRICKETS! Warner Britton, an Air Force helicopter pilot, was there, some intel people, three Army guys, and Ted Grabowsky, a Navy

SEAL. I said the first thing we needed to do was get out of the building because there were always leaks. Blackburn found us space at Ft Myer, near the Pentagon, and the next day we started with only five or six weeks before the first briefing to the JCS to show a proof of concept.

We got to work and within two days we had the general scheme thanks to Britton and Grabowsky. Warner had such gravitas that he would tell you something and you knew he was right. We set a time of 60 seconds to get control of the compound, but after some wargaming we realized we needed a creative, inside-out, solution. Finally, Grabowsky said, "Just land in the f-ing compound." I wanted to use the fast rope system that had recently been developed. Grabowsky had had two helicopters shot down on top of him, so he said absolutely not and that opened the door to other planning.

I didn't think there was enough room to land a helicopter in the compound because we had pictures and it looked small. We asked the intel guys to figure out the actual size of the compound and discovered landing would work. This was really making me anxious and I asked Warner if the helicopter could fly that far and land in the compound? He said, "Yes."

One last point about General Blackburn. After we got to Ft Myer, he never checked in on us. The day of the first briefing to the Chairman and the Chiefs of Staff, Blackburn shows up about 20 minutes before we were supposed to start. All we had was a pile of yellow tablet pages and a couple of hand-drawn transparencies for an overhead projector. Blackburn comes in and says, "Are we ready to go?" We gave him a very quick update and then we went to the Chairman's briefing room. He trusted us completely and I never forgot that.

What did you do after the fanfare of the Raid died down?

Around 1973, I was still on the Air Staff and Dick Secord was on the Company's Southeast Asia desk. Dick was working with a guy named Erich Von Marbod, a civilian and a comptroller in the Defense Security Assistance Agency. Von Marbod asked Secord for help in getting an Air Commando assigned as his special assistant. Col Johnny Johnson, an AC-47 guy, was selected.

The Southeast Asia team was watching messages go back and forth and saw that nothing was being done to help the Cambodians. Dick said we can help them and he mentioned it to Von Marbod. Dick nominated me to go to Cambodia to see if and how the US could help. As a result, Jerry Klingaman, Johnny Johnson, and I went to Phnom Penh, Cambodia, to make an assessment. Our report went to Von Marbod, who gave it to Secretary of Defense (SECDEF) James Schlesinger. He took it to the Chairman and one day, SECDEF tells Von Marbod to execute the recommendations in our report. They pulled me out of my Air Staff job and I was on my way back to Cambodia.

Five months go by and I got a call from Von Marbod to come home. Schlesinger had picked Von Marbod to be his Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary. Senator John Stennis told Schlesinger he was tired of yahoos from DOD

giving him disconnected stories about where we were in Vietnam. He demanded that one person tell the story or he wouldn't support further funding. Schlesinger selected Von Marbod and Erich chose me to be his deputy. Von Marbod established a small office of four, led by me, to research and prepare all of his testimony on the Hill. Von Marbod would go visit the field units to gather information, but he couldn't get anything out of the Navy. So he told me to go out there and don't come home until I had information. I demanded we get access to the Navy bases in Saigon and elsewhere in Vietnam.

When we got over there the Navy gave us a car and driver. The escort told me everything I wanted to know about the Navy. That guy was Richard Armitage. He was a Naval Academy graduate with three tours in Vietnam as a riverine advisor. He wanted to extend, but the Navy wouldn't let him, and so he resigned from the Navy, went ashore, and worked on the Phoenix program as a civilian. Rich spoke flawless Vietnamese and was greatly respected by his Vietnamese Navy counterparts. I went home singing his praises and the next time Von Marbod traveled to Vietnam he hired Armitage on the spot.

At the same time, Dick Secord was telling Erich stories about Heine, who was now retired, so Erich wanted to meet him. Erich went to Florida and met Heinie, and it was a love affair. Erich was one of the most powerful bureaucrats in Washington and his weapon was people. I spent a lot of time finding people to come work for Von Marbod. Sure enough, Erich pulled some strings and got Heinie recalled back to active duty as a colonel and sent him to Thailand as the Deputy Chief of the Military Advisory & Assistance Group (MAAG). We were all there, in Thailand or offshore South Vietnam in April 1975 when Saigon fell and the war ended.

Okay, now the war is over and you've been involved with it from the beginning. What was your next job?

After we did all that and returned home, Erich decided that he was tired of the Pentagon and found a position in Iran. He said I was going with him. I worked with the State Department to get him an office and household, and I joined him in Iran.

Erich spent a year in Iran and was ready to come home. The Shah had a very secret signals intelligence program for C-130s and he wanted two or three Boeing 707s with similar capabilities. It was a multi-billion-dollar program. The Company's technical support division only had engineers, unfamiliar with operational work, so Erich asked me to go there and be the deputy. The job was at the Company headquarters. I helped negotiate hundred-million-dollar contracts for air integration of the system with air and ground capabilities, but as the Shah's troubles mounted, the Company shut down its support.

On 1 January 1979, President Carter officially recognized Communist China in Beijing and severed official diplomatic ties with the Republic of China in Taipei. The US created the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) to replace the US MAAG in Taipei. Dick Secord told me an individual

had already turned the new job down and asked me to find someone with east Asian experience willing to go. I went home and told my wife to pack our bags. I retired from the Air Force in 1979 and went to Taiwan as a civilian. I worked all the issues of a traditional MAAG. The MAAG had had nearly 1,000 people who all went away overnight. So we worked all the Taiwanese equipment, airplanes, and associated defense requirements under the auspices of the AIT.

When we came back from Taiwan in 1983, we bought a boat and went cruising. We sailed the west coast of Florida and the Bahamas for a while and things were going along pretty well for three years. We were six weeks from finishing building our home in Florida when Rich Armitage, now an Assistant Secretary of Defense-International Security Affairs (ISA), calls me and asks me to come back and work for him. I said no.

Rich was persistent and he called me three times asking to please talk with him. I finally said okay and went up to DC. I got a call at the hotel saying that he couldn't make our 0800 meeting and that I should go have breakfast with Jim Kelly, who had worked with us years before. Jim was now in the White House on the National Security Council. Rich said to meet with him for breakfast in the White House. When I got to the gate they said, "Welcome Mr. Ropka," and took me in. That was an excellent psychological operation.

After breakfast I went to Rich's office where he made his pitch. The "SOF Mafia," a group of respected generals and civilians, was very upset about Desert One, Grenada, and other screw ups and had formed a group to fix US special operations. Rich wanted me to be his new Deputy Secretary for Special Operations. I agreed and six weeks later I was back.

When I arrived, he told me he failed to get the new position, but his Principal Deputy had just left and told me I would fill that position in the plush office across the hall. I was stunned. The other deputies had degrees from Yale and all the big schools and I barely had a high school diploma. He said the SOF Mafia wanted to take special operations out of the Services and create a national special operations agency.

What did you do?

I went over to Capitol Hill and met Senators Sam Nunn and Bill Cohen, but I worked mainly with their assistants. Jim Locher was Nunn's special assistant and Lynn Rylander was my deputy and leader for the Air Force part.

The SOF Mafia was a determine bunch; about a dozen generals. One day I got a call and was asked to attend a meeting in Rosslyn VA. I went and there were four generals, a four-star, two three-stars, and a two-star, the conversation was ugly and they made strong threats, in various forms, on my life. My work with Senators Cohen and Nunn was getting in the way of their grand scheme to take special operations out of the Services and create its own agency, similar to the CIA. My assessment was that it was an unworkable solution. Considering just the support infrastructure needed for a new, independent agency was an exorbitant cost and the Services were already providing it.

When the Nunn-Cohen legislation was passed in

1986, Armitage was tasked with the implementation. He immediately assigned the responsibility to me and my eight-person staff. I hired an additional eight well-experienced special operators, and we began the process of translating the spirit and intent of Nunn-Cohen into the organization and structure of USSOCOM and the supporting elements. We did this in brainstorming sessions with everyone contributing ideas and we adopted the best.

In special operations we say it's all about the people. You need a large pyramid of good special operators, not unlike the super case officers, the Heinie Aderholts, and the others who I worked with over the years. These individuals make up about three percent of the people in the five Services. You need to create that pyramid of top people to sift through and find the others to fill in the ranks. I saw all sorts of problems with the SOF Mafia's approach and in the end, the SECDEF agreed to the Nunn-Cohen Amendment that gave us USSOCOM, AFSOC, and all the rest of what we now know today as US SOF.

One last point, additional to working the legislation, I kept up with the ISA staff activities and covered for Rich in his absences. He also made me the DOD representative on the Interagency Counterterrorism Task Force. This was a very active period with scheduled, weekly meetings and full-time attendance during multiple incidents around the world where special operations played a roll. I felt my experience came in handy during many of these crises. I worked it all and was Armitage's deputy in every sense of the word.

When did you finally retire?

I retired in 1989 and my wife and I came back to Florida to live in the house we built. We took an old 42-foot lobster boat, just the hull, and spent six years outfitting it making real nice and comfortable. We spent five summers cruising from here up to the Chesapeake and up near Canada. It was wonderful.

Listening to you talk about your career was fascinating. If you wrote a book about your career, what would the title be?

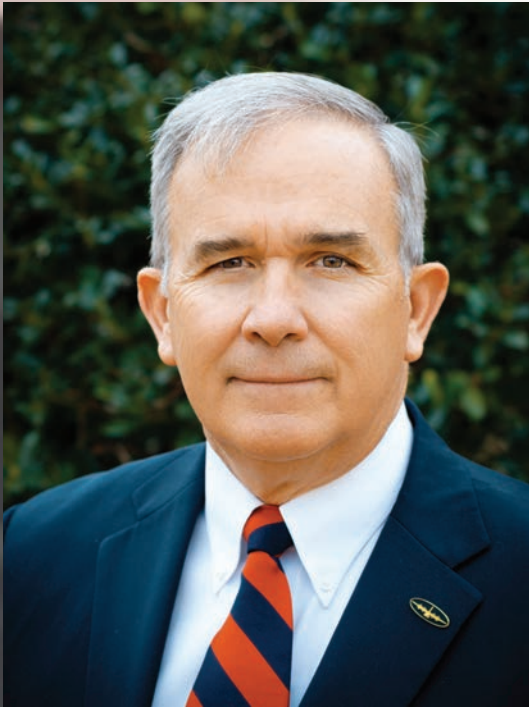
My Thirty-Year Journey in the Shadow of Special Operations Giants. Heinie Aderholt, Richard Bissell, Richard Armitage, Jim Allen, and Don Blackburn were just a few of those giants.

Finally, do you have any thoughts that you'd like to pass on to the next generation of Air Commandos?

I firmly believe that the best, if not only hope, we have of thwarting China and Russia's obvious intentions to split off friendly weak states around the world is to give those states a reason to stick with us. And I believe that can be done affordably, but only with an imaginative, flexible, and responsive blend of innovative people who use the aircraft they have in ways unexpected by the adversaries, and lead by courageous leaders who trust their people and manage the risk inherent in special operations. That spells SOF.

Thank you, Larry, for sharing your story with our Air Commando Journal readers. 

2021 Hall of Fame



Colonel Timothy L. Hale

Colonel Timothy L. Hale distinguished himself as an Air Commando, a veteran's advocate, civilian instructor, and minister over four decades of service to God, his nation, and his fellow Americans. Colonel Hale excelled as an MC-130E/H crew commander and instructor/evaluator and an AC/MC-130J instructor. From his first combat mission as an MC-130E pilot in the lead aircraft over Point Salinas, Grenada, Colonel Hale led from the front with professionalism, courage, a keen sense of humor, and respect. He excelled as a staff officer enhancing SOF capabilities at HQs Military Airlift Command and supported the Commander's strategic engagement at US Special Operations Command. The onset of the global war on terrorism resulted in multiple deployments to the US Central Command's area of responsibility, where he served on a Joint Special Operations Task Force destroying Al Qaeda safe havens. He commanded an Expeditionary Group and Wing, flying missions and riding resupply convoys during Operation IRAQ FREEDOM. As 16th SOW Vice Commander he forged unity between Hurlburt Field and local communities while executing multi-million-dollar recovery operations following Hurricane Ivan. Upon retirement, he continued to serve Air Commandos as an aircrew accession instructor with the 58th Special Operations Wing. Handpicked by New Mexico's Governor, he served 4 years as the state's Department of Veteran's Services Secretary then returned to instructing SOF aircrews. He was ordained as a minister and dedicated his service to America's veterans. Following 40-years of direct service to SOF airmen, he continues ministering to military personnel, veterans, and those recovering from natural disasters. The singularly distinctive accomplishments of Colonel Hale reflect great credit upon himself, Air Force Special Operations Command, and Air Commandos of every generation.

Home Inductees



Senior Master Sergeant James B. “JB” Lackey

Senior Master Sergeant James Bertrand “JB” Lackey distinguished himself through selfless service and sustained superior performance during a career that culminated as the 8th Special Operations Squadron Superintendent. His outstanding professionalism and personal leadership were vital to building the readiness of the 8th SOS, Air Force Special Operations Command’s first operational CV-22B squadron, and prosecuting the squadron’s mission during the global war on terrorism. From 1992-2006, SMSgt Lackey served with distinction as an instructor and flight examiner for the MH-53 Pave Low Models J/M. JB’s focused leadership, courage, and superior airmanship were evident during Operations PROVIDE PROMISE, UPHOLD DEMOCRACY, BEVEL EDGE, ALLIED FORCE, ENDURING FREEDOM, and IRAQI FREEDOM. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for heroism as well as the Meritorious Service Medal (1 Oak Leaf Cluster) and Air Medal (4 Oak Leaf Clusters). With the MH-53 Pave Low drawdown apparent, in 2007 he was selected as one of five enlisted airmen to become CV-22 Initial Operational Cadre team members. He excelled as a CV-22 flight engineer during combat deployments supporting Operations IRAQI FREEDOM and ENDURING FREEDOM. JB gave his last full measure on 9 April 2010 during a combat mission in Afghanistan. His selfless service, heroism, and sacrifice are revered to this day. The singularly distinctive accomplishments of SMSgt Lackey reflect great credit upon himself, Air Force Special Operations Command, and Air Commandos of every generation.

2021 Hall of Fame



Chief Master Sergeant William C. "Charlie Mike" Markham

For his legacy of selfless service and absolute commitment to mission accomplishment, Chief Master Sergeant William C. "Charlie Mike" Markham is hereby inducted into the Air Commando Hall of Fame. During his storied 30-year career, he directly impacted multiple national security taskings and served as the senior enlisted leader at the squadron, group, wing and center levels within Air Force Special Operations Command. He served as the senior enlisted leader of a Joint Special Operations Air Detachment and Combined Joint Special Operations Air Component in combat. As a young NCO and combat controller, he was the first US Airman on the ground in Afghanistan a mere five weeks after 11 September 2001. Then Sergeant Markham controlled close air support that decimated the ranks of the Taliban, ultimately liberated Bagram Air Base and Kabul International Airport, and returned the US Embassy to American control. For gallantry in action he received the Silver Star. As an AFSOC Command Chief, he led the growth and re-missioning of the 352nd Special Operations Group integrating the MC-130J and CV-22B weapon systems. Chief Markham's resolute commitment to the well-being of veterans and families of the fallen and wounded continues to be the standard that others emulate. From fund-raising events to executive leadership of established and start-up charities, Chief Markham personally enabled hundreds of thousands of dollars in scholarship funding and pro-bono legal support to America's warriors and families. With charismatic leadership and passion for continuous improvement, Chief Markham has prepared generations of Air Commandos for the challenges that lie ahead. The singularly distinctive accomplishments of Chief Markham reflect great credit upon himself, Air Force Special Operations Command, and Air Commandos of every generation.

Hall of Fame Inductees



Lieutenant Colonel William "Bill" A. Schroeder

Lieutenant Colonel William "Bill" A. Schroeder distinguished himself as an Air Commando through selfless leadership and superior performance throughout his special operations career. As an officer-in-charge and then commander of the special operations weather detachment at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, his steadfast leadership of low-density, high-demand Special Operations Weather Team (SOWT) operators was critical in ensuring premier weather support to the 3rd and 7th Special Forces Groups as they deployed during Operations ENDURING and IRAQI FREEDOM. At Special Operations Command – Europe, Colonel Schroeder was responsible for standing-up specialized weather support across Africa, uniquely enabling the stand-up of Special Operations Command – Africa. As commander of the 10th Combat Weather Squadron, Colonel Schroeder oversaw the continuous deployment of SOWT operators across the globe. Bill also managed the integration of SOWT forces and equipment into the Special Tactics Squadrons. He later led the herculean effort to modernize the Battlefield Airman training program and played a pivotal role in establishing the Special Warfare Training Wing, paving the way for a new era in the selection and training of Air Force special operations ground combat forces. In a final act of devotion and bravery, Colonel Schroeder laid down his life after confronting an armed assailant determined to inflict harm to the men and women under his charge. He was posthumously awarded the Airman's Medal and honored by the Air Force Portraits in Courage for his valor and selfless sacrifice. Lieutenant Colonel Schroeder's extraordinary dedication and commitment to the special operations mission and bravery in the face of certain peril reflect great credit upon himself, Air Force Special Operations Command, and Air Commandos of every generation.

2021 Hall of Fame Inductees



Major Daniel E. “Dan” Turney

Major Daniel E. “Dan” Turney, USAF, Retired, has served our nation with honor for over 34 years, as an enlisted and commissioned airmen and civil servant. He distinguished himself during 22 years with the Air Force Special Operations Command in squadron, wing, and headquarters positions. He epitomizes the definition of the ‘Send Me’ Air Commando. Major Turney was an MH-60 initial cadre pilot in the 55th SOS, the first H-60 unit in the USAF. He played a critical role for the squadron by developing aircrew qualification courseware and tactics, techniques, and procedures. He was the first MH-60G special mission planner for the 1st Special Operations Wing and Joint Special Operations Command. He deployed as an MH-60G combat search and rescue mission manager during Operations JUST CAUSE and DESERT STORM, coordinating over 40 combat missions. Dan was selected as AFSOC’s Rotary Wing Test Manager for the Operational Test and Evaluation of the CV-22, MH-53, and MH-60. As a mission manager during Operation UPHOLD DEMOCRACY, he coordinated logistics and air refueling for MH-60s deployed on a ship. As a 6th SOS combat aviation advisor he maintained instructor status in four different helicopters. During Operation ENDURING FREEDOM he flew the first coalition support missions in the Jordanian Super Pumas, Uzbek Mi-17s, and Pakistani Pumas. After retirement, Dan served as an AFSOC operations analyst and developed the first formal Aviation Foreign Internal Defense Concept of Operations and Roadmap for the 2006 and 2009 Quadrennial Defense Reviews. His efforts resulted in growth of the 6th SOS and the unit becoming an integral part of the 492nd Special Operations Wing. The singularly distinctive accomplishments of Major Turney reflect great credit upon himself, Air Force Special Operations Command, and Air Commandos of every generation.

SOWF

SPECIAL OPERATIONS WARRIOR FOUNDATION

Educating Children of Fallen Special Operations Forces



- Ensuring full funding for a college education for surviving children of Special Operations Personnel lost in the line of duty as well as children of all Medal of Honor Recipients;
- Funding educational programs specifically designed for children with special needs;
- Funding for preschool programs for children ages 2-5;
- Unlimited private tutoring for students of all ages;
- Access to online college planning tools;
- Exclusive college planning conference; and
- College-to-Career transition programs.



SpecialOps.org



2021 Commander's



Brittany K. Brown

First Lieutenant Brittany K. Brown distinguished herself as Officer in Charge, Fitness and Sports, 1st Special Operations Force Support Squadron, Hurlburt Field, Florida, from 1 June 2020 to 31 May 2021. During this period, Lieutenant Brown led 135 Airman and a 27-million-dollar sustainment operation during the Coronavirus pandemic, providing critical sustenance to mission essential Airman across four wings and 40 tenant units. Additionally, she was the lead for Air Combat Command and Hurlburt Field's first ever Agile Flag experiments, where she provided agile combat support through sustainment and beddown for 376 deployers, enabling testing for bare base rapid deployment capabilities of three multi-capable Airman teams and four aircraft weapons systems validations, reducing the overall acclimation time for deploying members. Furthermore, Lieutenant Brown was critical to organizing Hurlburt Field's first pre-deployment quarantine operation, where she directed restriction of movement lodging and fitness support for 331 combat-ready deployers, enabling the continuation of four special operations missions across three combatant commands. Finally, she collaborated with the Human Performance Lab in a body mass index analysis for Air Force Special Operations Command. The results were presented to Headquarters Air Force Manpower, Personnel and Services, contributing to removal of the waist measurement requirement across the Air Force. Her leadership directly contributed to Air Force Special Operations Command's recognition as the Air Force Sustainment Flight of the Year award win in 2020. The distinctive accomplishments of Lieutenant Brown reflect credit upon herself and the United States Air Force.

Jonathan C. Edwards

Captain Jonathan C. Edwards distinguished himself as Aircraft Maintenance Unit Officer In-Charge, 20th Aircraft Maintenance Unit, Cannon Air Force Base, New Mexico, from 1 June 2020 to 31 May 2021. Captain Edwards expertly led 197 talented CV-22 Osprey maintainers conducting field-level maintenance, sortie generation, and sustainment

for a fleet of 13 special operations tiltrotor aircraft valued at 1.4 billion dollars. He validated the CV-22's agile combat employment capability through an operational readiness evaluation where he sustained three aircraft in an austere location with a 75 percent reduction in the logistics footprint demonstrating his team's ability to operate in a contested environment. His efforts showcased the relevance of CV-22 operations in support of the United States Special Operations Command's pivot to accelerate change in addressing great power competition between near-peer competitors. Additionally, Captain Edwards deployed to Afghanistan as the 20th Expeditionary Special Operations Squadron's maintenance officer-in-charge where he generated 178 sorties and produced 161 combat hours utilizing four CV-22s to transport 227 passengers, 100 special operations forces, and 37,000 pounds of cargo while overseeing 38 airlift missions supporting the Presidential directed retrograde in Afghanistan. For his actions, Captain Edwards was recognized as the 27th Special Operations Maintenance Group's 2020 Maintenance Professional of the Year and was the 2020 Leo Marquez recipient for excellence in leadership. The distinctive accomplishments of Captain Edwards reflect credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

James R. Evans

Staff Sergeant James R. Evans distinguished himself as Electrical and Environmental Craftsman, 58th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron, Kirtland Air Force Base, New Mexico, from 1 June 2020 to 31 May 2021. During this period, Sergeant Evans was hand-selected to fill the role of Flightline Expediter during a critical manning shortfall. In his capacity as a Flightline Expediter, he used his expertise to manage maintenance actions across six Air Force Specialty Codes, which enabled the generation of 141 sorties, 2,700 flight hours, and led to 293 special operations aircrew graduates. Additionally, Sergeant Evans took decisive action as the subject matter expert to diagnose and repair a malfunctioning bleed air valve and preserve a critical timeline for an isochronal inspection, which resulted in an

Leadership Awards



aircraft's timely return to the flying schedule. While repairing the valve, he trained and certified four members from the squadron to alleviate an experience shortfall. Finally, Sergeant Evans was selected as the lead technician for a five-member emergency maintenance response team tasked with repairing a severely damaged aerial refueling pod on an MC-130J. His incisive troubleshooting and leadership enabled him to quickly identify the faulty mounting hardware, determine the cause of the failure, and develop an executable plan to return the aircraft to a flyable condition. His actions, during a crucial repair, prompted an Air Force-wide C-130J one time inspection and safety time compliance technical order leading to the resolution of the mounting hardware deficiency across the C-130J fleet. The distinctive accomplishments of Sergeant Evans reflect credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

Riley A. Feeney

Captain Riley A. Feeney distinguished himself as the AC-130J Program Manager and an AC-130J Instructor Pilot, 492d Special Operations Training Support Squadron, Hurlburt Field, Florida, from 1 June 2020 to 31 May 2021. During this period, Captain Feeney led an AC-130J crew to aid in the rescue of an American citizen by providing on-call close air support for a Secretary of Defense directed alert mission. Additionally, as a Flight Commander, he expertly managed all readiness and training requirements for 53 combat aircrew members ensuring his unit was postured to meet 100 percent of its worldwide deployment commitments. Furthermore, Captain Feeney established and implemented a "Feed the Flights" initiative resulting in the delivery of 65 meals to isolated personnel during the Coronavirus pandemic. For his efforts, Captain Feeney was recognized as the 1st Special Operations Group Flight Commander of the Year. As the AC-130J Program Manager, he updated and revamped 11 syllabi of instruction, over 1,700 training tasks and 37 training events in order to streamline initial qualification training which led to an immediate two-week reduction in training timelines. Finally, Captain Feeney's talents were critical in executing the first-ever AC-130J formal course review and the subsequent efforts to reengineer

the AC-130J formal training program and rewrite all of its 18 syllabi of instruction in order to align with Air Force Special Operations Command strategic guidance. The distinctive accomplishments of Captain Feeney reflect credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

Andrew T. Flynn

Technical Sergeant Andrew T. Flynn distinguished himself as a Special Operations Weather Forecaster at Operating Location Alpha, Detachment 1, 23d Special Operations Weather Squadron, Hunter Army Airfield, Georgia, from 1 June 2020 to 31 May 2021. During this period, Sergeant Flynn deployed in support of Operation FREEDOM SENTINEL with a joint task force for two-months as the sole weather forecaster, where he produced 854 mission weather products for 1,400 flight hours, ensuring the safety of nine Army Special Operations Aviation Command helicopters and 201 personnel. While deployed, Sergeant Flynn simultaneously filled two, three-man unit type codes, effectively performing the duties of six personnel during the final phase of the Afghanistan retrograde. Once all other weather personnel and equipment redeployed from the deployed location, Sergeant Flynn assumed airfield weather support responsibility, installed a tactical advanced micro weather sensor, and began transmitting hourly meteorological observations to Air Mobility Command and United States Special Operations Command assets. Additionally, Sergeant Flynn provided critical environmental intelligence, which enabled commanders to synchronize the base defense plan for President-directed retrograde operations. Furthermore, as his unit's lead trainer, Sergeant Flynn was selected by the 1st Special Operations Wing to attend the Joint Fundamentals Course where he earned Honor Graduate recognition. He used this baseline of joint knowledge to lead four Air National Guard and Active Duty personnel through an intensive two-week combat mission training event covering 84 Army special operations support requirements, which resulted in fully qualified personnel capable of deploying four weeks faster than standard. The distinctive accomplishments of Sergeant Flynn reflect credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

Ryan M. Laube

First Lieutenant Ryan M. Laube distinguished himself as Deputy Commander, Communications Flight, 352d Special Operations Support Squadron, Royal Air Force Mildenhall, United Kingdom, from 1 June 2020 to 31 May 2021. During this period, Lieutenant Laube led 19 Special Operations Command - Africa personnel during a 52-day Presidential-directed theater force relocation. As the deployment's senior communicator, he fused command, control, communication, and computer capabilities with the joint task force, resulting in the execution of 141 sorties, the offload of 110,000 pounds of fuel, 31-days of alert, and the firing of 1,000 rounds of ammunition from AC-130 aircraft. Additionally, Lieutenant Laube steered electrical services and facilitated the stand-up of an alternate support site for the President of the United States' first-ever overseas visit and worldwide-televized speech. He also led the wing's participation in a bilateral communications exercise, teaming with the Special Operations Command Europe and British Armed Forces in their first contested cyber event in more than two years. Moreover, Lieutenant Laube led the preparation for a rapid contingency deployment, delivering command and control capabilities and 4,200 pounds of cargo, where he ensured the successful execution of a Presidential-ordered mission that resulted in saving the life of an American citizen. Finally, Lieutenant Laube's efforts were validated by his selection as the wing's 2020 Network Operations Officer of the Year and his team's selection as the Wing's Team of the First Quarter

of 2021. The distinctive accomplishment of Lieutenant Laube reflect credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

Robert T. Lemay

Technical Sergeant Robert T. LeMay distinguished himself as the MC-130J Wing Planner, 352d Special Operations Wing, Royal Air Force Mildenhall, United Kingdom, from 1 June 2020 to 31 May 2021. During this period, Sergeant LeMay exhibited exceptional leadership while serving as the senior enlisted leader for two large force exercises, overseeing 58 deployed personnel and executing 68 sorties across six countries. Sergeant LeMay's efforts enabled strategic theater messaging to North American Trade Organization allies in the European Theater while simultaneously meeting the top priorities of the combatant commander by countering malign activity. Furthermore, Sergeant LeMay led a site survey team to the Balkan region, certifying multiple drop zones and ensuring the availability of a critical staging area for future operations. Additionally, Sergeant LeMay led a 10-month, partner nation forward area refueling point training program, establishing an austere refueling capability and critical access to the strategically important high north Arctic Region. Moreover, while serving as an Operations Flight Chief, Sergeant Lemay executed a squadron reorganization initiative, enabling predictable deployment windows aligning with Headquarters, Air Force Special Operation Command's guidance. Finally, while under presidential direction, Sergeant LeMay served as the lead loadmaster on the longest-range hostage rescue in United States history, flying 2,100 miles while offloading 59,000 pounds of fuel, ultimately resulting in the successful recovery of an American citizen. The distinctive accomplishments of Sergeant LeMay reflect credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

Michael J. Lintz

Major Michael J. Lintz distinguished himself as the Senior Intelligence Officer, at his unit from 1 June 2020 to 31 May 2021. During this period, Major Lintz's unparalleled leadership and knowledge were vital to the successful command and control of over 2,000 sorties supporting Secretary of Defense directed missions, combat operations, and joint exercises. He filled a two-month leadership gap as the acting Director of Operations for his unit leading 112 personnel operating onboard a 755-million-dollar Special Operations Command Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance aircraft fleet. Furthermore, under his leadership, special operations forces conducted missions across five geographic combatant commands. His dedicated efforts directly aligned his unit with National Defense Strategy objectives sustaining joint force military advantages, both globally and in key regions. Additionally, Major Lintz authored a liaison officer roadmap fostering interoperability with Army, Navy, and Intelligence Community partners paving the way for the creation of three new liaison positions. He pioneered three new developmental



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opportunities gaining access to over 80-hours of instruction focused on strategic communication. Finally, Major Lintz led a 10-member team in the creation of a unique intelligence product fusing 35 reports from across the intelligence community informing a sub-unified command's global response plan and garnering interest from the United States Special Operations Command and Joint Chiefs of Staff level. The distinctive accomplishments of Major Lintz reflect credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

Erik A. Lolland

First Lieutenant Erik A. Lolland distinguished himself as Chief of Intelligence Training, 720th Operations Support Squadron, Hurlburt Field, Florida, from 1 June 2020 to 31 May 2021. During this period, Lieutenant Lolland expertly managed a 12-person flight during three mission qualification training courses totaling 630 instruction hours which increased the group's combat readiness by 16 percent. Under his leadership, the training course generated a 40 percent increase in attendance from units external to the special tactics community. Additionally, Lieutenant Lolland led the group's Defense Strategic Debriefing program by guiding five geographically separated units and becoming the driving factor for a 20 percent growth of Air Force Special Operations Command's reporting to the intelligence community. Furthermore, Lieutenant Lolland deployed as Officer in Charge of Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance to Joint Special Operations Air Component Africa where he controlled a 353-million-dollar air intelligence package responsible for 13,000 collection hours which facilitated more than 2,000 counter-violent extremist organization missions. Finally, he spearheaded the air intelligence coordination responsible for the search and discovery of a downed remotely piloted aircraft, as well as the successful targeting of over 400 kidnap-for-ransom objectives, and the recovery of an American citizen. Due to his skillful management of air assets and cooperation with multiple agencies, the American citizen was located and recovered within 72 hours of capture. The distinctive accomplishments of Lieutenant Lolland reflect credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

Adam C. Long

Technical Sergeant Adam C. Long distinguished himself as Tactical Air Control Party Craftsman, 720th Operations Support Squadron, Hurlburt Field, Florida, from 1 June 2020 to 31 May 2021. During this period, Sergeant Long served as Noncommissioned Officer in Charge of Joint Terminal Attack Controller operations and training for the 720th Special Tactics Group. Sergeant Long oversaw training and upgrades for a 450-day Air Force Special Operations Force Generation cycle and enabled resourcing decisions for a two-million-dollar training budget. Additionally, he drove 304 ground and close air support events, 1,389 close air support controls, 316 ground and aircrew readied for a 180-day deployment cycle and managed the group's Joint Terminal Attack Controller program for six squadrons in support of

five geographic combatant commands and Theater special operations commands. Furthermore, Sergeant Long was the lead inspector on four group-level functional visits where he scrutinized 240 records to validate the Joint Terminal Attack Controller training program for five deployable squadrons. Sergeant Long debriefed 148 personnel from three theaters to refine the 24th Special Operations Wing's 75-million-dollar actual expense authorization for 160 wartime solutions. Finally, Sergeant Long stood out among his peers during professional military education where he oversaw seven weeks of squadron drills, inspections, and over 100 hours of community service, earning Distinguished Graduate honors at the Noncommissioned Officer Academy. The distinctive accomplishments of Sergeant Long reflect credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

Zachary R. Maginnis

Captain Zachary R. Maginnis distinguished himself as Pilot Resource Manager, 1st Special Operations Squadron, Kadena Air Base, Japan, from 1 June 2020 to 31 May 2021. During this period, Captain Maginnis' outstanding leadership was pivotal in the synchronization of national level assets and a theater directed operation to counter a near peer threat and ensure freedom of navigation throughout the Indo-Pacific Area of Responsibility. Additionally, he was selected to lead the air campaign at an Indo-Pacific Command large Joint Chiefs of Staff directed exercise, meeting National Defense Strategy objectives, and strengthening ties with partner

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forces. Furthermore, Captain Maginnis led a squadron training program, authoring an examination, and managing 61 flight upgrade folders, ensuring the squadron's aircrew are combat mission ready. His attention to detail led to the discovery of an MC-130J system deficiency. Captain Maginnis then liaised with other units across the globe to identify and implement an operations security resolution across Air Force Special Operations Command. Captain Maginnis showed adept leadership by sponsoring new squadron members and their families acting as their sole link to the outside world to ensure they had housing, food, and essentials while conducting two weeks of isolation during a global pandemic. Finally, he was selected as the Pilot Resource Manager for the squadron where he scheduled 375 sorties, guaranteeing continued integrated combat mission training despite the Coronavirus pandemic. The distinctive accomplishments of Captain Maginnis reflect credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

Arthur W. Mapp

Technical Sergeant Arthur W. Mapp distinguished himself as an Enlisted Executive Officer, 27th Special Operations Group, Cannon Air Force Base, New Mexico, from 1 June 2020 to 31 May 2021. During mission qualification training, Sergeant Mapp was selected as the class leader, mentoring eight officers and six airmen, ensuring a 100 percent graduation rate. During his deployment, Sergeant Mapp was the Flight Chief of 54 personnel where his team flew over 1,500 combat hours, striking 16 high-value enemy targets. For their outstanding contribution during deployment for the development of aerospace power and for the betterment of mankind, Sergeant Mapp and the members of the 3rd Special Operations Squadron received the Citation of Honor award. After returning from deployment, Sergeant Mapp was hand-selected for the group Enlisted Executive Officer position, where he led a nine-member executive team. He led the personnel actions for 13 squadrons, 38 Air Force specialty codes, and 1,400 personnel. His dedication to excellence culminated in his recognition as the 3rd Special Operations Squadron Non-Commission Officer of the Year and the group's Tuskegee's Airmen and Senior Master Sergeant Barbour Award winner. The distinctive accomplishments of Sergeant Mapp reflect credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

Jeremy D. Morlock

Technical Sergeant Jeremy D. Morlock distinguished himself as Squadron Intelligence Department Noncommissioned Officer in Charge, 353d Special Operations Support Squadron, Kadena Air Base, Japan, from 1 June 2020 to 31 May 2021. During this period, Sergeant Morlock identified 12 erroneous threat assessments from a national level intelligence agency. The rectification of this data altered the personnel recovery alert posture criteria for Indo-Pacific Command, decreasing the number of alert periods by 80 percent, and reducing strain on the force by saving 2,000 man hours annually. Additionally, Sergeant Morlock sifted

through two decades of data from six intelligence agencies. Aligning it with current trends, he identified a critical area of interest of a top National Defense Strategy adversary. After up channeling his findings, the Secretary of Defense and Commander, Indo-Pacific Command, created three new missions based on his discovery. Furthermore, Sergeant Morlock led the 353d Special Operations Group's Joint Intelligence Support Team through six Secretary of Defense directed missions. During which, Sergeant Morlock provided live threat recognition and awareness to ten aircrews and revealed 45 new adversary tactics. Finally, Sergeant Morlock masterfully led his section during a four-month absence of the officer in-charge. He displayed phenomenal leadership skills mentoring 43 airmen, resulting in the section garnering one annual award, five quarterly awards, and four promotion stratifications. The distinctive accomplishments of Sergeant Morlock reflect credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

Jason M. Morris

Captain Jason M. Morris distinguished himself as a C-146A Instructor Pilot, 859th Special Operations Squadron, Duke Field, Florida, from 1 June 2020 to 31 May 2021. Captain Morris deployed as Director of Operations, 524th Expeditionary Special Operations Squadron in support of Special Operations Command Central. Captain Morris supported 29 Special Operations Forces units by supervising 429 air mobility combat missions, delivering 511 joint special operations personnel and 112,000 pounds of cargo across the Department of Defense's most active area of responsibility. While serving at Headquarters, Air Force Special Operations Command, Captain Morris authored the command's newest "Reset the Force" deployment model, changing the way Airmen and assets are employed to counter future threats. He also saved 2.4 million dollars by identifying an error in the command's flying hour program. This correction created a six percent increase in flight hours across all the command's squadrons. Captain Morris also deployed in support of Special Operations Command South, and spearheaded 7th Special Forces Group's new theater evacuation plan, ensuring theater-wide access and freedom of movement while reducing risk to force. The distinctive accomplishments of Captain Morris reflect credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

Keith A. Proze Jr.

Technical Sergeant Keith A. Proze, Jr., distinguished himself as an MQ-9 Sensor Operator Scheduler, 2d Special Operations Squadron, Hurlburt Field, Florida, from 1 June 2020 through 31 May 2021. During this time, Sergeant Proze scheduled six aircraft ground control stations in Air Force Reserve Command's only special operations Reaper Operations Center, in support of special operations task forces in four areas of responsibility and directly enabled the continuous battlefield presence of more than seventy percent of special operations Reaper combat air patrols, which produced 1,760 combat sorties, totaling more than

14,000 hours for 169 personnel. Furthermore, Sergeant Proze flew 134 combat sorties totaling 510 combat hours, during which he located more than 100 enemy combatants and personally laser-guided three Hellfire missiles and two guided bombs, which resulted in six enemy eradicated and the destruction of two enemy vehicles armed with improvised explosives. Finally, he served on the first-ever special operations aircrew to participate in Emerald Flag Exercise. As a result, the unit was hand-picked to plan and execute the first-ever live fire training during the exercise series, which enabled development of new tactics and techniques to enable Joint All-Domain Command and Control. The distinguished accomplishments of Sergeant Proze reflect credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

Trevor L. Rohrer

Staff Sergeant Trevor L. Rohrer distinguished himself as C-146A Loadmaster and Supply Non-Commissioned Officer, 524th Special Operations Squadron, Duke Field, Florida, from 1 June 2020 to 31 May 2021. During this period, Sergeant Rohrer assisted in managing the squadron's 1.5-million-dollar budget for 130 service members enabling operations in more than 105 countries in support of four theater special operations commands. Furthermore, he oversaw the implementation of a two-factor authentication system allowing the squadron to securely communicate with embassies worldwide while hedging against emerging cyber security threats. Additionally, Sergeant Rohrer led a 60,000 dollar renovation of the squadron mission planning area, modernizing the mission planning suites while also doubling the available space. The updates allowed squadron aviators to have a dedicated location to thoroughly plan flights together as a crew using the most up to date hardware and software applications. Finally, he took charge of the 105,000 dollar squadron technology refurbishment initiative. He served as the single point of contact with the communication squadron and managed the purchase of 92 new computers, their reimaging, installment, and the disposal of old hardware. This refurbishment was key to the squadron's Coronavirus pandemic mitigation efforts by supplying squadron members with the ability to telework during the peak of the pandemic. The distinctive accomplishments of Sergeant Rohrer reflect credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

Brett E. Rush

Technical Sergeant Brett E. Rush distinguished himself as Non-Commissioned Officer-in-Charge, Religious Affairs, at his unit from 1 June 2020 to 31 May 2021. During this period, Sergeant Rush deployed as the Air Operations Non-Commissioned Officer-in-Charge, assigned to a joint task force in support of Operation INHERENT RESOLVE. His superior display of leadership, dedication, and professionalism empowered the coordination and execution of 115 sorties, 52,000 pounds of cargo, 53 mobility movements, and 389 combat flight hours. He expertly oversaw and protected sensitive property accounts worth more than 10 million dollars and increased flight crew

berthing capacity by 15 percent, preserving vital mission capability during the Coronavirus pandemic. Concurrently, while dual-hatted in his primary duty as the unit's senior enlisted member of the Religious Support Team, he advised seven commanders in the areas of spirituality, ethics, and morale. His tireless advocacy propelled 987 hours of squadron visitation from the unit's chapel team, leading to 109 critical crisis interventions. As the budget manager for the unit's resiliency funding, he executed 295 thousand dollars, bringing 27 events to fruition and engaging 998 attendees. These actions directly ensured the wellbeing and readiness of the unit's Air Commandos and their families. Additionally, Sergeant Rush was crucial in developing a Moral Injury awareness curriculum which trained 11 joint Chaplains and 63 operators. Furthermore, his excellence was continuously recognized, as he led his team to their third-consecutive command Small Chapel of the Year Award. The distinctive accomplishments of Sergeant Rush reflect credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

Jacob L. Wiseman

Captain Jacob L. Wiseman distinguished himself as Assistant Director of Operations, 353d Special Operations Support Squadron, Kadena Airbase, Japan, and 415th Special Operations Squadron, Kirtland Air Force Base, New Mexico from 1 June 2020 to 31 May 2021. During this time, Captain Wiseman served as the mission commander for a joint, short-notice typhoon evacuation, leading six MC-130J aircraft with 96 personnel to safety. His efforts preserved 570 million dollars in Air Force assets and helped bolster United States Indo-Pacific Command's crisis response force capabilities. He also operationalized intelligence support for two squadrons, resulting in increased near-peer combat readiness of 200 special operations aircrew and operators. Moreover, Captain Wiseman identified training policy shortfalls for the MC-130J aircraft commander upgrade. He liaised with six MC-130J squadrons across three major commands and authored policy changes to improve MC-130J aircraft commander upgrades while reducing operational risk. Separately, he led the mission planning environment transition for the 415th Special Operations Squadron during major system upgrades. These upgrades resulted in the installation of 24 new systems totaling 81,000 dollars and ultimately led the 415th Special Operations Squadron to meet Air Force Special Operations Command's original transition timeline. Finally, Captain Wiseman served at multiple volunteer events for food distribution to at-risk families and removed over 1,000 pounds of rock and cement paving the way for the renovation of a religious site. The distinctive accomplishments of Captain Wiseman reflect credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.



This award recognizes AFSOC's outstanding performers from any AFSC/career field who have made the most significant contributions to mission accomplishment as determined by their respective commanders. Their outstanding accomplishments make them truly deserving of this prestigious recognition.



14th Weapons AIR COMMANDOS IN

By Maj Randy S. Buckley, USAF

Lieutenant General James Slife stated, “AFSOC’s human capital is our competitive advantage.” This is the guiding principle of Air Force Special Operations Command’s Strategic Guidance. The men and women of the 14th Weapons Squadron are an example of these competitive advantages. Special Operations Forces Weapons Officers pass down the history and traditions of the unit from class to class in many forms, song, poem, and, yes, PowerPoint presentations. The purpose of this article is to capture some of that history and provide readers with a sense of who the 14th Weapons Squadron Air Commandos are and what they do. Additionally, this article will reveal first-hand accounts from weapons officers who spent five and a half months pushing themselves to their limits in the small building hidden behind the Hurlburt Field commissary. Although part of the Air Force’s Air Combat Command, the 14th Weapons Squadron transforms select special operators into the leaders AFSOC will need.

The 14th Weapons Squadron shares a strong bloodline

with the 14th Air Commando Squadron. Although the unit’s true origins began with the 14th Observation Squadron in 1942, the 14th Air Commando Squadron (ACS) is the forefather most invoked. On 25 October 1967, the 14th Air Commando Squadron was assigned to the 14th Air Commando Wing at Nha Trang AB, Vietnam. While stationed there, the 14th ACS flew the AC-47 aircraft, a modified C-47 “Gooney Bird” with three 7.62 miniguns to support US and allied bases. The plane was officially renamed “Spooky,” but for those who experienced the AC-47 in action, it would be called “Puff the Magic Dragon.” Until the last AC-47 flight on 1 December 1969, the 14th ACS provided fire support to troops in contact so effectively that they could claim, “no outpost under the protection of Spooky was ever overrun.” By 1969 the 14th Air Commando Squadron was redesignated the 3rd ACS, and the “Air Commando” title changed to Special Operations. This was the second deactivation for the unit, but it would emerge again and become an essential part of AFSOC.

An Airman assigned to the 14th Weapons Squadron at Hurlburt Field, FL., stands outside a CV-22 Osprey before a night mission. (Photo by SrA Kevin Tanenbaum)

Weapons Squadron

AIR COMBAT COMMAND

Why Create a SOF Weapons School?

From 24 March to 10 June 1999, the United States conducted a combined air campaign against Serbia as part of Operation ALLIED FORCE. This operation was significant for many reasons. It was the first extensive use of force by NATO, it was the first time air forces had successfully coerced an enemy leader, and it is where Captain Gregg Vander Ley learned the lessons that would inspire the creation of Special Operations Forces Weapons Officers. The integration of aircraft and capabilities for maximum effect was always the goal, but it became clear there was room for improvement. With simultaneous air interdiction, combat search and rescue, and special operations missions, the Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) was critical. The CAOC tasked the Special Operations Liaison Element (SOLE) with the heavy burden of integrating special operations with the rest of the coalition's Air Forces. While working as a member of the SOLE, Captain Vander Ley gained first-hand knowledge of what was needed to improve

integration. Thankfully, two senior leaders took notice of these lessons. First, General John P. Jumper, Commander, US Air Forces Europe and Allied Air Forces Central Europe, and then Lieutenant General Charles Holland, Commander, AFSOC, could see the potential benefit of improving integration between SOF and Combat Air Forces (CAF). Commanders identified the problem, but how would it be solved? To answer that question, Vander Ley made a dinner reservation.

In the summer of 1999, a chain of events was set in motion to solidify the bond between SOF and the Air Force. As Vander Ley describes it, "I was working for the AFSOC/DO, Colonel Steve Connelly, when I returned to Hurlburt Field from my SOLE deployment. We began discussing what it is that SOF does and how we do it." A short time later, while TDY to Albuquerque with fellow MC-130H Talon Electronic Warfare Officer (EWO), Major Chris "Hoser" Connelly, inspiration struck. It actually struck at the Macaroni Grill! Knowing that great ideas are fleeting,



they began writing on the tablecloth, which assuredly confused restaurant staff and fellow diners. What they were writing was to become the SOF Weapons School structure and its syllabus. They wrote out a course that included academics, flights, and mission-oriented integration exercises involving all the assets that SOF could

assemble. As Vander Ley and Connelly describe it today, "It should be a SOF weapons school, not an aircraft-specific school. We need experts of SOF in all its forms." The school would bring together the conventional Combat Air Force and AFSOC, 160th SOAR, Army Special Forces, and Navy SEAL Teams making it inherently joint. Vander Ley described SOF to the CAF by saying, "our [AFSOC] weapons have feet," which emphasized SOF prioritization of people over hardware. Armed with a solution and a plan, the two men returned to Hurlburt Field...with the tablecloth.

The Early Days of the 14th Weapons Squadron

The difficult task of creating a Weapons School fell to the unit's first commander, now Lieutenant Colonel Chris "Hoser" Connelly, who reported directly to Colonel Steve Connelly (no relation) the AFSOC/DO. As with all fledgling units, the founders met adversity and fought battles. There were debates over resources such as personnel, aircraft, and money, not to mention significant doubt from some in the community. Ultimately, the Weapons School Special Operations Forces Division was activated on 15 March 2000, at Hurlburt Field, FL. The location was based on proximity to support aircraft and personnel, but the unit was to be placed in the care of Air Combat Command (ACC). It was imperative to the AFSOC commander, then Lieutenant General Holland, that the SOF Weapons School be a part of ACC. It sent the message that this is indeed the organization of integration. With endorsements from senior leaders, the mission and the school were now in Colonel Connelly's hands to execute.

In December 1999, Connelly assembled an initial cadre of instructors and told them, "There's nothing to expect except that you are writing it." The mammoth task of building a five and half month advanced training syllabus for three very different airframes was a challenge. Nevertheless, the instructors rose to the occasion and put together a rigorous and comprehensive plan to train students to become experts in the craft of Air Force Special Operations. This training included things that no one in AFSOC had experienced before. For example, the AC-130 instructors required students to perform thorough target and weapon analysis. The school purchased targets for their exclusive use, and the students would examine them meticulously

in the days leading up to a training sortie. Students were then required to engage the targets precisely as rehearsed. The following day the students traveled to the range and examined their effectiveness with "truth data" rather than speculations made from 10,000 feet above. This method of analysis proved valuable for the community at large.

Another cherished part of the SOF weapons school syllabus was Opposition Forces (OPFOR). These volunteers and instructors were responsible for being a genuine and formidable enemy on every training mission and exercise that the students flew. Aside from actual bullets, there was very little pretending. One particularly effective night of training made a strong impression on the MH-53 community and its weapons school syllabus. As with all SOF weapons school missions, there is an extensive amount of briefing before and after. During the pre-mission briefing, the battle-hardened crew members supporting the mission did not give the students and instructors of the weapons school their full attention. During the mission, the pilots remained focused on the search and rescue of a single survivor. When they approached the rendezvous location, the isolated person was spotted, and the pilots maneuvered to land. At this critical phase of the pickup, OPFOR let loose a barrage of simulated munitions and explosions. The previously mentioned battle-hardened crew was stunned, which caused the crew to "go around." OPFOR also began to chase down the isolated person with a dog and armed soldiers. The weapons school crew, having witnessed the enemy's actions, went to a laager point where the student pilot calmly and confidently turned to the rest of the crew and said, "Now that I have your attention, here is what we are going to do." Many lessons were learned in that debrief. Thanks to OPFOR, realistic and relevant training became a trademark of the weapons school and continues to draw eager participants today.

The Weapons School Special Operations Forces

The SOF Division graduated its initial cadre in December 2001, class 01B, and began screening and teaching students from special operations squadrons. In June 2002 class 02A, consisting of eleven Air Force Special Operations Weapons Officers, graduated. On 1 August 2002, the squadron was transferred from AFSOC command to the US Air Force Weapons School under ACC. Early the following year, the squadron was officially redesignated as the 14th Weapons Squadron. With





Capt Matthew Prochazka, a MC-130H instructor navigator of 14th Weapons Squadron, instructs Airmen on techniques for integrating flight platforms at Hurlburt Field, FL.



Capt Matthew Prochazka wears a USAF Weapons School patch while sitting at a mission brief for a training flight at Hurlburt Field. (Photos by Airman 1st Class Michelle Vickers)

a clear identity and mission, the 14th Weapons Squadron focused all its efforts on building, teaching, and leading the next SOF Weapons Officers.

Six Words

Six words guide SOF Weapons Officers and their instructors during and after the demanding weapons school training. A previous 14th Weapons Squadron commander stated, “Build, teach, and lead is what we do. Humble, approachable, and credible is who we are.” The school only accepts highly recommended instructors from the AFSOC community. These students are willing participants in a school designed to push their skills in and out of the aircraft under the most challenging circumstances. Upon graduation, they have planned, flown, and led warfighters from the Army, Navy, Air Force, conventional and SOF, aircrew, and otherwise to accomplish special operations missions. This often involves dozens of aircraft occupying the same piece of sky, but performing very different missions at the same time. Building, teaching, and leading an operation is essential to each student’s progress, and the stress from doing it can be overpowering. Therefore, a SOF Weapons Officer must be humble, approachable, and credible. These three traits are the blueprint for successful integration that the 14th Weapons Squadron forms as its foundation.

Students who graduate from the 14th Weapons Squadron return to AFSOC with a heavy burden. Commanders rely on them as the tactical expert and lead instructor of the unit. They frequently hold a rank far beneath the men and women they are briefing. One graduate described a short-notice tasking to plan a combat mission integrating special operations forces and the Navy’s 5th Fleet. This mission required intense planning and was unlike any problem being worked on at the time. Four days after receiving the task,

this SOF Weapons Officer found himself in theater, briefing the commander of the 5th Fleet directly. The Admiral knew he was a weapons officer, knew what it meant, and wanted the briefing from him instead of any others from the AFSOC contingent that traveled. Another graduate found himself deploying as a Task Force Liaison Officer to Balad, Iraq, in the winter of 2006. Upon arrival, he was introduced to the commander and his staff. Then Lieutenant General Stanley McCrystal eyed his new captain from head to toe and tapped him on his Weapons Officer patch. He then said, “You have your Ranger tab on. Let’s get to work.” In both instances, commanders gave them credibility based on the hard work of weapons officers before them. Now, they were responsible for integrating SOF with the rest of the fighting force through humility, approachability, and credibility.

Integration and the AFSOC We Will Need

“There are too many airplanes and RPAs in the airspace. We are going to bend metal.” In late 2018, the Combined Forces Air Component Commander (CFACC) said this to his CAOC staff after personally flying in Syrian airspace. Integration was the only way to ensure the simultaneous and safe execution of missions, and in 2018 there were gaps. So the SOF weapons officer working in the SOLE and the conventional coalition Air Force Weapons Officers constructed a plan. The solution did not require the invention of some new technology or tactic. It only required advanced knowledge of current airpower capabilities and a humble, approachable, and credible demeanor. Commanders tasked these problem-solvers to integrate approximately 30 different aircraft types from seven different countries inside a ten nautical mile airspace. Armed with lessons learned from previous operations such as ALLIED FORCE, the SOF weapons officer in the SOLE, in conjunction with

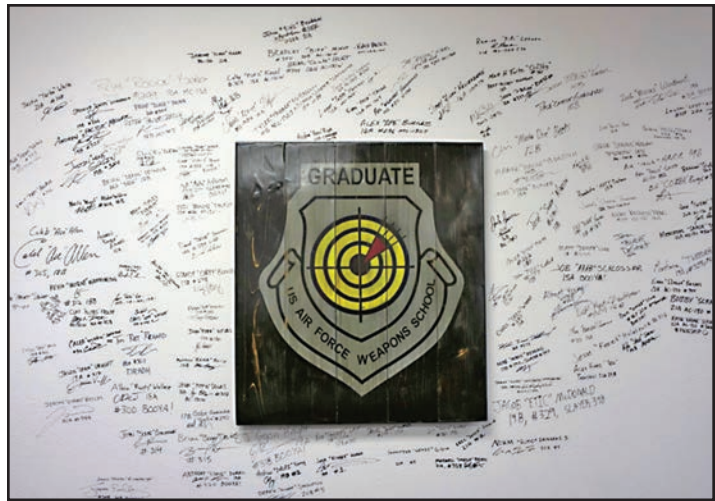
the conventional planners, rejuvenated the Restricted Operating Zone (ROZ). The ROZ is a standard method for airspace control, but without clearly defined rules and experts to teach them, it is a potential catastrophe. The experts in the CAOC successfully implemented the new spin on an old procedure. Evidence of their success is the tattered remnants of the caliphate constructed by ISIS. This could not have happened without the continuous intelligence gathering, fire support, and search and rescue provided by all the air forces.

The 14th Weapons Squadron and SOF weapons officers exist because of who AFSOC was in 1999. Commanders forecasted that the Air Force would need integrators and the AFSOC of today validates this prediction in two ways. First, AFSOC leads or participates in joint, partner, and conventional exercises such as Emerald Warrior and Red Flag. Second, AFSOC enables global special operations missions with its parent organization, the Air Force. Good relationships between organizations are essential for mission success, and the cooperation between and with weapons officers over the past two decades on missions and exercises is valuable. Just as no single airplane wins the war, no single Service, component, or capability does either. Collectively, the relationships between AFSOC and non-AFSOC organizations are a network, and that network is a dynamic capability that is crucial to the AFSOC we will need. The 14th Weapons Squadron is a conduit for this network and innately nurtures it by teaching advanced tactical capabilities with a humble, approachable, and credible ethos.

The 14th Weapons Squadron will officially be 20 years old soon, and a lot has changed. New aircraft and missions have emerged and taken their place in the 14th Weapons Squadron. Combat operations have expanded and shrunk with each new and old adversary. The leadership of AFSOC and ACC has also changed many times. However, the 14th Weapons Squadron's identity and mission remain steady. Demand to integrate airpower to maximize effectiveness has not changed. Nor has the belief that the SOF weapons officer is the joint tactical expert who will lead the difficult mission, integrate the ever-changing network of capabilities, or give their time to instruct the newest member of the unit. The AFSOC Deputy Commander, Major General Eric Hill, stated, "From a senior leader perspective, the fact that we have weapons officers, and a weapons school has provided the continuity that AFSOC needs. When we combine them with the hard problems we face, we see success for the future."



About the Author: Major Buckley is a Defense Analysis student at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey California. Prior to that, he taught at the 14th Weapons Squadron as an AC-130 Weapons Instructor Course Instructor.



Nellis AFB Building 250 Wall: Above and below is the one wall at the 14th Weapons Squadron's home at Nellis AFB. Immediately following Patch Night, graduates are asked to sign the wall with Name, Callsign, and Class Number.



Graduate Counter Plaque: Above and below, this plaque donated by previous Commander, Lt Col Patrick "P-Diddy" Dierig, displays the current count of SOF Weapons Officers that have graduated from the 14th Weapons Squadron.



14th Weapons Squadron Auditorium: Above and below is the presentation stage where everyone is reminded of the Build, Teach, and Lead ethos of the SOF Weapons Officer.



SrA Julian Scholten Award

Technical Sergeant Nicholas A. Lord distinguished himself in outstanding leadership and performance as the Non Commissioned Officer in Charge for Aircrew Training in Detachment 2, 25th Intelligence Squadron. Sergeant Lord served as the team chief for a 5-member deployed surge package where he led Direct Threat Warning (DTW) operations for 45 days and effectively safeguarded SOF operations for two areas of responsibility. He flew 16 airborne Combat Search and Rescue alert missions where he ensured the safe repositioning of 854 personnel and \$27M in equipment and was airborne within 14 hours to support a trans-continent SOF insertion that secured the lives of American Citizens within 48 hours. Sergeant Lord also provided DTW support on the longest CV-22 mission to date where he monitored threat activity during 11 continuous flight hours over five different countries.

A4 DAGRE of the Year Award

Staff Sergeant Ethan C. Pierce, 352nd Special Operations Support Squadron, distinguished himself as a superior performer while serving as a Deployed Aircraft Ground Response Element (DAGRE) team leader by temporarily filling in as the noncommissioned officer in charge – a position normally filled by a technical sergeant. While leading the section, he directed 14 members to meet 23 objectives while preparing three teams for the wing’s force generation initiative. Sergeant Pierce expertly secured training requirements to ensure his peers were trained and equipped to meet Special Operations Command Europe’s strategic priorities. In addition, he went above and beyond by constructing seven tactical medical scenarios for 43 personnel that boosted crisis response capability for three separate bases. He also created eight joint lesson plans and led 80 members through four exercises that enhanced AFSOC’s combat employment capabilities.

Heart of the Team Award

Master Sergeant James A. Olk, 720th Operations Support Squadron, suffered the incredibly tragic and unexpected loss of his wife of 9 years. In an instant, his life was shattered and changed forever. Without warning, he found himself a widower and single father to his two young sons. After his wife’s funeral, Sergeant Olk immediately sent out a message of gratitude and inspiration to his teammates. His message was a beacon of hope and a resounding reminder that we must always hold true to our enduring Air Commando principles and service to our fellow teammates. As Sergeant Olks, endured and learned a new way of life, he remained a steadfast leader and inspiration to all. His ability to rally and motivate those around him, is further evident with is laser focused work accomplishments. MSgt Olk led his team towards the completion of almost \$4K in information technology communications support issues and service requests. He also spearheaded a \$100K SIPR VTC

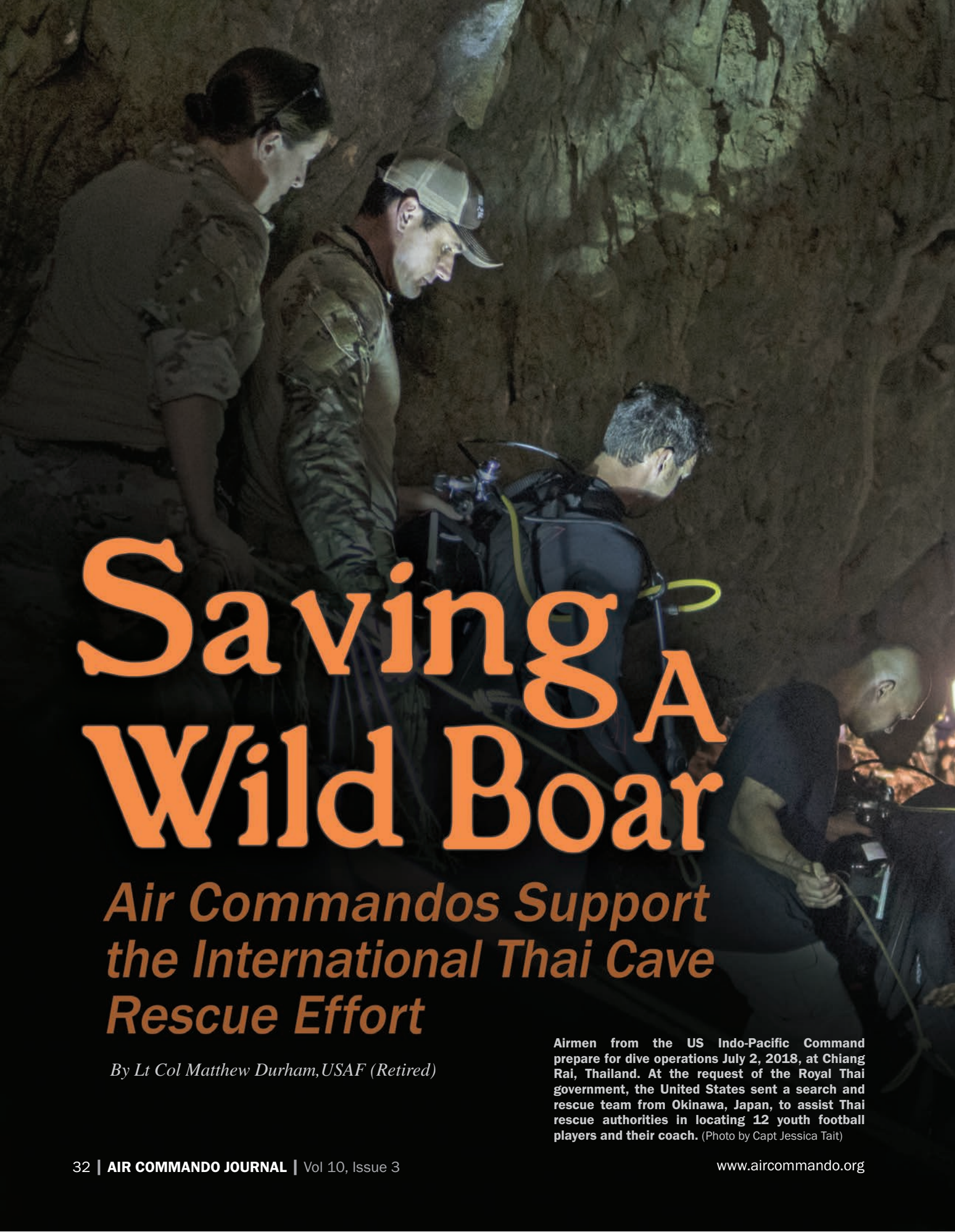
installation doubling the squadron and group’s capabilities and enhancing intelligence mission qualification training for personnel throughout the enterprise. Sergeant Olk also continued to pursue his Masters Degree in Organizational Leadership and used those skill sets towards the betterment of his teammates and Airmen. He has leaned upon his spiritual understanding and holds a bible study group for military members at his home each week. Sergeant Olk’s resiliency and determination in his personal and professional life speaks volumes to his dedication and love for those around him. His ability to overcome great adversity breathes life and inspiration into the heart of his team. Despite overwhelming adversity, Sergeant Olk performed his duties to the highest standards typical of Air Force Special Operations Airmen and did so with extraordinary, exemplary, and unwavering dedication to his family and his teammates.

2020 ST Operator OTY Enlisted:

TSgt Adam Anderson, 17 STS (24 SOW) is a Tactical Air Control Party (TAC-P) Craftsman assigned to the 17th Special Tactics Squadron (STS), Det 2, Joint Base Lewis McChord WA. Sergeant Anderson led Detachment Stan Eval team and Identified and fixed 48 training and met AFSOC commander’s #1 priority and qualified 15 Airmen for global response. He was also responsible for detachment weapons section and organized quarterly inventories with 100 percent accountability of 168 weapons and accessories valued at \$185K. Sergeant Anderson was the strike team NCOIC supervising three Special tactics operators and two US Army Rangers during high risk JTAC training for operational readiness for joint task force tasking. He was also requested for elite strike force leading 400 Afghan partner forces with /22 US military and other government agency personnel a key linchpin for JTF Commander.

2020 ST Operator OTY Officer:

Capt Brandon Farrell, 320 STS (353 SOW) is a Flight Commander and Combat Rescue Officer assigned to the 320th Special Tactics Squadron, Kadena AB, Japan. He served as interim assistant operations officer filling a key role in squadron risk management processes post-safety stand down restoring unit readiness. He was appointed mission commander during Exercise Teak Nail leading 60 combined SOF personnel on high angle, confine space rescue exercise strengthening Special Operations Command-Pacific interoperability across the command. Facing typhoon season, Capt Farrell led 10 teammates through the safety plan securing \$500 K critical mission equipment and resources. Finally, he led a maritime search and rescue training, organizing 30 dives which permitted eight upgrade and seven evaluations utilizing a joint full mission profile with four aircraft enhancing the wing’s open rescue capability. Leading a 2 week cold weather training evolution Capt Farrell’s team completed 200 training items along with three FARP surveys fusing the wings capabilities with SOCPAC objectives.



Saving A Wild Boar

Air Commandos Support the International Thai Cave Rescue Effort

By Lt Col Matthew Durham, USAF (Retired)

Airmen from the US Indo-Pacific Command prepare for dive operations July 2, 2018, at Chiang Rai, Thailand. At the request of the Royal Thai government, the United States sent a search and rescue team from Okinawa, Japan, to assist Thai rescue authorities in locating 12 youth football players and their coach. (Photo by Capt Jessica Tait)



On Saturday, July 23rd, the Moo Pa, roughly translated to Wild Boars, a junior association football team (“soccer” to Americans--“football” to the rest of the world) from Chiang Rai province, on the northern border of Thailand, had just finished practice and planned a quick trip. It was later reported they traveled to the Tham Luang Nang Non cave system to celebrate a birthday, with lots of food. This turned out to be incorrect. They rode their bikes up to the nearby cave entrance simply to explore the cave a little. They were led by the Boars’ 25 year-old assistant coach, Ekkaphon Chantawong, a trained Buddhist monk. After parking their bikes 12 boys, ages 11-16 and Coach Ek entered the cave. Almost as soon as they went into the darkness it began raining. Hard.

Point in fact, in 2018 the monsoon season had arrived two to three weeks early in northern Thailand. There were signs posted advising not to get beyond the entrance of the 6.2 mile-long cave from July-November, the rainy season, but it was not supposed to be the rainy season quite yet. The cave system is in the Doi Nang Non mountain range and is called “the Mountain of the Sleeping Lady,” which it vaguely resembles, a woman laying on her back. As the rain continued, the porous limestone ground on top of the cave leaked water into the cave system itself, creating flooded chambers. As the chambers flooded, the Wild Boars were forced back deeper into the dark cave. After Coach Ek unsuccessfully tried to swim out, they eventually found themselves on a rock ledge, almost two and one half miles from the cave entrance, and no one knew they were there.

One man was looking for them, though. Wild Boars head coach Nopprat Kanthawong had checked his phone about 7 p.m. and found 20 missed calls, all from parents wondering where their kids were. He started calling every team number he had listed, until he reached a 13-year old Boar who got picked up after practice. He told the coach the rest of the team and Coach Ek were planning on biking to the cave and doing a little exploring. Nopprat sped up to the cave entrance and easily found their bikes and packs, but no Wild Boars. He did find lots of water in the cave and it was rising. Fearing the worst he immediately notified authorities.

Thus began an underground rescue operation that would eventually involve approximately 10,000 volunteers, including Thai Army and Special Forces, divers from around the globe, doctors, mining specialists, military and civilian rescue specialists from 38 different countries, from Ireland to India and just about everywhere in-between, with over 100 government agencies represented. Hundreds of media descended upon the rapidly growing base camp. Helicopters flew, ambulances hurried, and food trucks began to arrive. The Wild Boar families had been sent for and were being bedded down. The camp had everything but the kids. Nobody had found the Wild Boars yet. As each hour passed it was becoming harder to be overly optimistic about “the boys in the cave.”

The United States government, in all its power and might, is good at many things. Unfortunately, the government is also known for its levels of bureaucracy. As the requests for help went out, the US Embassy in Bangkok contacted their desk at the State Department in Washington DC, who then contacted the Department of Defense, also in Washington, who contacted Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), who notified Special Operations Command Pacific (SOCPAC), who immediately contacted an organization known to be quite good, and practiced, in moving quickly. Air Force Special Operations Command’s 353rd Special Operations Group, headquartered at Kadena AB, Okinawa, was told to prepare to deploy for rescue support. Less than 19 hours after SOCPAC was notified, the 353rd had rescuers inside the cave. They were joined by members of the 31st Rescue Squadron from the 18th Wing, host unit of Kadena. The approximately 40 personnel had flown into Chiang Mai airport on two of the 1st Special Operations Squadron’s MC-130J Commando II aircraft after receiving special permission to overfly the country of Vietnam. It was now early morning of June 28 and, aside from

the team's footprints leading into the cave, no one had found anything yet. The Wild Boars had been in the cave, unheard from, for nearly five days.

It was not from any lack of effort that nothing was found early on. The Thai authorities knew of a local man that could be of help. The first official diver to enter the cave was 67-year-old British expert Vernon Unsworth. As divine providence would have it Unsworth was an experienced cave diver, lived about an hour south of the cave entrance and had been planning to dive the Tham Luang Nang Nong system, with which he was already familiar, that very day. Unsworth advised the Thai government to contact the British Cave Rescue Council (BCRC). Hearing of the dilemma, the BCRC rushed three experienced cave divers to the cave, arriving one day before the flood. Thai Navy SEAL divers had been in the cave since June but even using bright lighting the water was so murky it was impossible to operate. Sniffer

“When we arrived it was worse than had been painted. I thought it was highly probable we would never find these kids.”

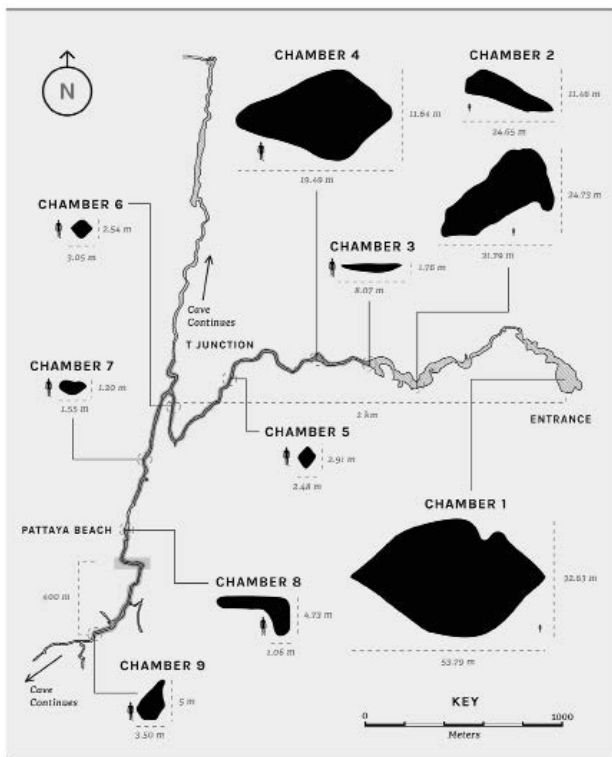
Special Tactics is not formally trained in cave diving rescues, but they are outstanding at planning difficult missions. Members of the 10th Battalion working with the unit in charge, the Thai SEALs, to come up with an extraction plan if or when the Wild Boars were found; a plan that would have a chance of success without killing kids or rescuers. MSgt Derek Anderson of the 10th Battalion came a lead planner for the extraction. It was an all-international team effort but Anderson is generally given credit for drafting the plan that ended up successfully saving the kids. It involved a complicated scheme of dropping hundreds of necessary air tanks at various points to supply the Wild Boars and the extracting divers. That, and the guide rope system, was complicated, but it could work. The Air Force team of the 10th and the 3rd had already examined the possibility of pumping water out and drilling down from above. Hodges contacted Chevron Oil in Bangkok and quickly found it unworkable, too complicated, and too lengthy.

Battling rising water and swift currents, two of the BCRC cave divers, Richard Staunton and John Volanthen, a Belgian cave diver and a French diver, Maksym Polejaka, began searching the cave and setting up guidelines for other divers. The rain continued to fall and the water rose. Operations had to be suspended until the weather improved. On July 2 Volanthen was setting guidelines and ran out of rope. He surfaced in a cave chamber and in the darkness smelled something... human. The Wild Boars had been found. They were weakened and confused, but passably healthy. Coach Ek had kept the kids calm, told them to drink the clearest water possible and had given the kids all of his food. Word was passed down the line. Thanks to those hundreds of media on site, the good news rocketed around the world. Hours later, seven Thai military personnel, including a doctor and a medic, made the extremely difficult trip to the Wild Boars, bringing medical supplies, high calorie food, and clean water. Four of the seven volunteered to stay with the Wild Boars for the duration. They would be the last to leave the cave. Now the real challenge began.

How were they going to get kids and a coach, most

THAM LUANG CAVE COMPLEX

Tham Luang Forest Park, Fong Pha, Mae Sai, Chiang Rai, Thailand | 47°09'019 2253978 Alt.: 648 m | Length: 10,318 m VR: 45 m
ALL CHAMBERS



MAP INFOGRAPHIC CREATED BY: CHIANG MAI ROCK CLIMBING ADVENTURES, LTD., 2018
Surveyed by: Association Pyrenéenne de Spéléologie (1986-1987) Grade UI/Sv2 3-2-A/2-2-A
Map drawn by Martin Killis (June 2018) www.thailandclimbing.com

dogs were used above the cave to try to find a crevasse where engineers could look at drilling down from above. Drones and robots would soon join them. It continued to rain.

The members of the flood arrived and went to work. However, they had to look at things realistically. The Wild Boars had not even been found yet. When they arrived at about 2 a.m. on the 8th, there was a trickle of water in one part of the cave. In one hour it had risen to two feet. Major Charles Hodges, a Citadel graduate from the 10th Special Tactics Squadron and the mission commander later said,

of whom could not swim, and none with diving experience, out of a flooded cave two and a half miles back, with twist, turns, changes in elevation and some openings as small as 15 X 28 inches? It would take some of the best cave divers in the world five hours with the current, and six hours against it, just to get back and forth to the Wild Boar's ledge. As the world rejoiced at the news the rescue experts took a real, deep sigh. This was going to be very, very dangerous.

"It's zero visibility, it's cold, and it's far, far back into a cave. There were never any guarantees and I remember Major Hodges saying specifically there's maybe a 60 percent chance of survivability. We were completely honest when briefing the Thai leadership that we were expecting casualties. Even though we did as much mission planning and rehearsals as possible, no one had ever done anything like this before." said Anderson.

Alternatives were examined. A shaft was found that sank to 900 meters, but it was not enough. During the rescue operation over 100 shafts were drilled, but none were sufficient. There was serious consideration by the Thai government to constantly resupply the Wild Boars, wait months for the monsoon season to end and have them walk out. This would have meant an almost constant train of divers shuttling supplies back two and a half miles through a mostly flooded cave. You could almost guarantee casualties. Then there was the oxygen, or, more accurately, the lack thereof. On July 6, the oxygen level had dropped. By July 8, the oxygen level was less than normal and becoming dangerous. Engineers looked at the possibility of running an oxygen line back to the Wild Boar's chamber but quickly deemed it next to impossible in the timeframe. The Thai government naturally wanted the safest possible extraction, just wait it out, but time was quickly evaporating.

"We were explaining it was time to fish or cut bait," said Hodges." If you don't do something now the cave will make the decision for you. Five or six months from now, when the water recedes, we will be lucky to find remains."

The experienced divers and Thai SEALs examined and contributed to MSgt Anderson's plan. Cave divers would have to lead the Wild Boars out one at a time. Slowly, deliberately and carefully. Practice missions were already being run in a nearby pool and a rope system to get the divers accustomed to the size of the twist and turns had been put into place. Normally a mission this intricate would call for months of practice. There was no time.

As if to emphasize the danger, on July 6, a volunteer and former Thai Navy diver, Saman Kunan, died while helping deliver the almost endless need for fresh diving air tanks. It is often thought that Kunan was the only casualty in the rescue operation, but there were several injuries and another Thai SEAL diver, Beruit Pakbara, contracted blood poisoning while in the cave and died that December. On the same day Kunan died, oxygen levels on Wild Boar ledge dropped to 15 percent, down from the normal 21 percent and more rain was forecast. The plan had to be initiated and the rescue extraction had to be moved up.

At the same time, one member of the 353rd had an



Air Commandos meet with Royal Thai military officials and a Thai engineering company to advise and assist in the rescue operation. (Photo by Capt Jessica Tait)

unexpected role. Capt Jessica Tait, the 353rd Public Affairs Officer, deployed to on-site as rescue support, unexpectedly found herself the face and voice of the rescue for the English-speaking public of the world. This was a little more complicated than at first glance. Tait had been sent with the 320th/31st initial package because the Thai Cave Rescue was already a world-wide story when they received orders. On the ground she became the focal point for the English speaking media, and was expected to arrange interviews and give updates for everyone. The possible sensitive issue of US heavy messaging and "taking credit" with an American military member speaking for a Thai-led operation was always discussed between the State Department, OSD/PA, and AFSOC/PA. Tait consistently emphasized this was a Thai operation and the United States, along with all the other nations, were in support. Apparently, she got that point across. The King of Thailand, Maha Vajiralongkorn, later



Thai rescue authorities work together to support the staging of equipment for pumping operations. (Photo by Capt Jessica Tait)

asked to meet Tait and expressed his gratitude.

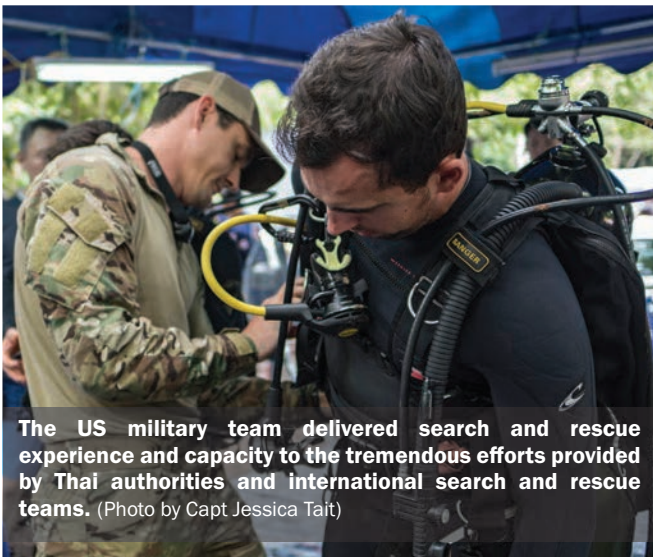
On July 8, the cave entrance was cleared and over 90 international divers, including those from the 320th Special Tactics Squadron, the 31st Rescue Squadron and US medical personnel were stationed along the staging areas deep inside the cave. The water was still so muddy that the support divers' air regulators would often malfunction due to the mud buildup. All aspects of the plan had to be precise; there was no room for error. A team of 13 international cave divers and five Thai SEALs began their hours long journey back to the



Airmen work with Royal Thai Navy Seals and international search and rescue teams on the plan for dive operations July 2, 2018. (Photo by Capt Jessica Tait)

Wild Boars. The team included an Australian doctor, Richard Harris, who would administer the anesthetic Ketamine to render the boys going out of the cave unconscious. It had been decided that it was safer to guide them through the maze of muddy water, rocks, twists and small openings if they were unconscious and therefore would be no chance of them panicking and endangering both themselves and their rescuers. They were also given the anti-anxiety drugs Xanax and Atropine to steady their heart rates. The Ketamine was effective for 45 minutes to an hour, meaning the escorting divers, trained by Dr. Harris, had to re-administer a dose of Ketamine. The Thai government gave Dr. Harris and two of his assistants diplomatic immunity in case something went wrong. At various cave chambers they were quickly examined by medical personnel before being sent on.

The boys were dressed in wet suits, with positive pressure full face masks and a harness. Handles were attached to their backs to allow them to be “carried” in the water. They were also tethered to their escort. Divers at



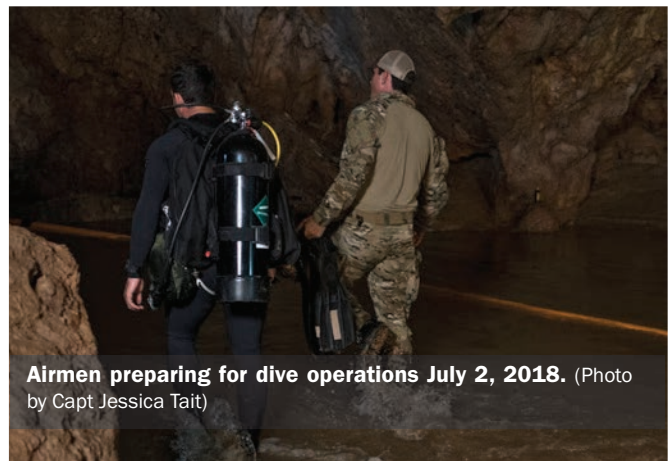
The US military team delivered search and rescue experience and capacity to the tremendous efforts provided by Thai authorities and international search and rescue teams. (Photo by Capt Jessica Tait)

various points carefully pushed, pulled and lifted the boys, always careful not to bump their heads or masks on the ever-present jagged rocks. The escorting divers ensured their heads were always above the unconscious boys so if there was an unseen rock in the muddy water the divers would hit

their head instead of the boys’.

“It wasn’t going to be an issue of visibility,” said Hodge. “Visibility was always going to be bad. They were kicking up so much silt that the concern was mud getting into the regulators. The guy in front would start and the guy behind him would have mud in his regulator.”

The trip was arduous on the divers. When the boys made it to a dry spot in the cave, they were met by three other divers, taken out of their dive gear and at one stop they had to be dragged on a stretcher approximately 600 feet across slippery rocks and wet sand hills to the next demarcation point. There they were medically examined, put back into their dive gear and sent on the next part of their journey. In Chamber 3 they were alternately carried and transported by zip line, installed by rock climbers, to the cave entrance. The route remained partially flooded and rescuers later recalled how tough that part of the journey proved. The first day that



Airmen preparing for dive operations July 2, 2018. (Photo by Capt Jessica Tait)

Chamber 3 section took five hours alone, though at the end, practice and improvements had reduced it to a little over one hour. At the cave entrance an ambulance awaited to take them to Changrai Prachanukfroh Hospital where doctors found the Wild Boars had lost, on average, approximately four and a half pounds apiece, but were generally in good shape. The boys wore sunglasses while their eyes readjusted to light and were checked for any infections.

How was it decided who would go first? They considered youngest to oldest or the weakest to strongest. Actually, Coach Ek said the boys were all “still strong,” mentally and physically. Then they left it to the Wild Boars themselves to decide who went first. After talking they reasoned the boys living farthest away from the cave should go first. They could ride their bikes and tell everyone where the others were and would be coming out shortly. They had a hard time wrapping their heads around the fact the world was watching and nobody was going to let them bike ride off into the sunset. A decision was reached by the on-site Thai divers and the first four were quickly prepared.

That first day four boys were taken from the cave. The rescuers knew that they would need 10-20 hours to resupply the cave route with air tanks, medical equipment and other supplies. For once the weather had cooperated—it had

PHOTO HAS BEEN REMOVED

stopped raining. That, and efficiencies cut down the amount of time it took to transport the kids the required two and a half miles. However, it remained a tough go.

On July 9, four more Wild Boars were rescued. The weather, and the luck held. Again, the difficult and still dangerous procedure of resupply had to be accomplished. The cave had proven several times it was unforgiving of mistakes. On July 10, the remaining four Wild Boars left the cave, along with Coach Ek. Mission accomplished? Well, the Wild Boars had been saved but approximately 100 divers, volunteers, and medical personnel remained in the flooded cave, most almost a mile back, with a few even farther from the entrance. The cave rescue was not done.

Almost immediately after the last ambulance left, water began rapidly rising in Chamber 3. It is thought the main water line, pumping water out of the cave, had broken. Pumps had been installed early on to help bring down the water in the cave. With all the rain the pumps were never expected to be the final solution. However, the pumps had removed the equivalent of 400 Olympic-sized pools of water and with the short dry spell had actually made a little progress in the water levels. As soon as the kids and Coach EK left the cave, the pumps stopped and water rose rapidly. The codeword for “drop everything and get out” was issued. Air tanks, equipment, all of it had to be abandoned. Workers and divers moved in an orderly way, but quickly, for the entrance. They began to work against the advancing water. By the time the Thai divers, deepest in the cave when the pumps broke, made their way to the entrance, only about an 18 inch air pocket remained. Everyone was out.

Looking back, it probably should not have worked as well as it did. Everyone on the inside expected casualties, but that did not happen. They were justifiably proud, but it took a little while.

“The actual core of rescuers, were all kind of exhausted, but kind of in awe that we had pulled this off over a three-day period. Everyone was pretty quiet, just rinsing off our gear. The very next day the hotel had a dinner for us and we were able to relax a little bit and take in what had just happened,” said Anderson.

What had happened had some interesting side notes. The oldest of the Wild Boars, Phiraphat Samphianghai, turned 17 years old while in the cave. In fact, while the world literally

came together to rescue them, four of the Wild Boars and Coach Ek had no country to call their own. Belonging to tribes that extended across the borders of Thailand, Laos, China and Myanmar, they were considered technically “stateless,” and could not be issued a passport or technically be allowed to leave the Chiang Rai province. The team had run into past difficulties when playing outside of Chiang Rai. After the rescue the four “stateless” Wild Boars and Coach Ek were officially made Thai citizens.

Was Coach Ek held responsible by the parents and an army of lawyers for leading the Wild Boar youths into the cave? Not at all. The parents forgave Coach Ek and actually showed appreciation for all he did while spending two weeks with their boys, in a dark and flooded cave. The Thai cultural outlook is both forgiving and graceful.

Many people like hearing or reading about the rescue. It was a time when the world literally came together to help the helpless. China had sent two teams, with robots and a 3D imager, to work alongside Americans. The Czech government had tried to deploy four large water pumps, but the ground was found to be too unstable. Space-X CEO Elon Musk had his engineers design a “kid-sized submarine”,



The mission commander for US Indo-Pacific Command's search and rescue team shakes hands with a Royal Thai military official June 29, 2018. (Photo by Capt Jessica Tait)

but it was deemed too impractical. Musk then got into a somewhat bizarre feud with one of the Australian divers, but at least he tried to contribute. In all, best-selling books were written, documentaries were produced and at the time of this writing a large-scale movie, directed by Ron Howard and starring Viggo Mortenson, Colin Farrell, and Joel Eggerton is currently shooting. It is to be entitled *13* lives.

The “Quiet Professionals” from the 353rd? They gathered what equipment they could, made their way back to the airport and boarded their MC-130Js, tired and relieved. The flight back to Kadena would take a bit longer because the country of Vietnam had denied their overflight. Vietnam’s rationale was “The crisis is now over.”



About the Author: Matt Durham served on the AFSOC headquarters Public Affairs staff for over 19 years, under eight different commanders as both officer and civilian. He has deployed to Haiti, the Bosnian AOR, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

Adaptive Precision Strike

Combat Aviation Advisors Put the

FINISH

in Partner Nation Air Forces

By Major Daniel Jackson, USAF



FIND, FIX, FINISH—those three menacing words succinctly dictate the targeting cycle used by US Special Operations Forces to hunt down America’s enemies in the Global War on Terrorism. Over the course of a decade and a half of continuous combat, ever since Gen Stanley McCrystal began disassembling al Qaeda in Iraq in 2004, the words have become a sort of mantra—a laconic shorthand for the relentless, never-ending cycle of target development and prosecution that defined a new era of warfare. Airpower played a pivotal role in this innovative mode of operations from the very beginning and as the United States began exporting its new way of war to its allies and partners to help cover down on a sprawling, global conflict, it found it had to export the capability to Find, Fix, and Finish to allied and partner air forces as well. This is the story of how a handful of Combat Aviation Advisors (CAAs) from the 6th and 711th Special Operations Squadrons built an in-house adaptive precision strike program from scratch

to put the Finish in partner nation air forces and make a meaningful impact in ongoing counter violent extremist organization (C-VEO) operations and strategic competition.

Lt Gen Thomas Trask, former vice commander of USSOCOM, lists three principal functions of airpower in irregular warfare: mobility, intelligence-surveillance-reconnaissance (ISR), and strike. CAAs in the 6th SOS entered the Global War on Terrorism primarily organized, trained, and equipped to advise partner aviation forces on fixed-and rotary-wing mobility operations. The fleet of “odd-duck” airplanes on the Hurlburt ramp bore witness to that fact: a re-engined DC-3, an An-26, a Twin Otter, a pair of Hueys, and a pair of Mi-17s. The squadron had a smattering of individuals versed in ISR or strike, but with no organic capability to train or maintain currency and proficiency in those mission sets, the unit depended on those few individuals’ prior experience and just-in-time training to tackle one-off deployments. In other words, the CAA enterprise had very little capacity for two of the three key functions of airpower in irregular warfare. The re-missioning of the 6th SOS from advising to non-standard aviation (NSAv) light airlift in 2012 only exacerbated this problem.

By February 2014, less than two years after its re-missioning, the squadron found itself not only performing light airlift in overseas contingency operations, but also returning to advising: tasked to develop and integrate a tactical ISR capability in the Afghan Special Mission Wing (SMW). Having divested of much of its advising talent—with

very little of that having been in ISR to begin with—the unit faced not just a one-off deployment, but a two-year, persistent engagement for which it was not organized, trained, and equipped. The subsequent tactical success of the SMW owed itself to individual CAAs rising to the occasion, often leaning heavily on their advisor skills to bridge yawning chasms in mission expertise. Lt Col Bryan Raridon, one of the few CAAs at the time with a background in tactical ISR, kept his qualification in the U-28A Draco to maintain currency and proficiency between deployments to Afghanistan. That was not an option available to aircrew who came from different backgrounds; to maintain currency and proficiency in the U-28 would require qualifying in it, which would take away training slots desperately needed by an already highly deployed community. Currency and proficiency requirements of CAAs would have distracted from the U-28 community’s own operational imperatives. Despite progress with the SMW, GEN Joseph L. Votel, commander of USSOCOM, told Congress in March 2015 that fixed-wing aviation foreign internal defense (AvFID) efforts suffered from a “capability gap in ISR and light strike mission areas.”

In early 2016, Colonel Raridon took command of the 6th SOS. While the squadron would continue executing NSAv missions for more than a year, it had a new mandate from Brig Gen John P. Stokes, acting AFSOC director of operations: to assess, train, advise, assist, accompany, and integrate foreign aviation forces in the functional areas of special operations air mobility, ISR, fixed-wing armed recce/



A Hellfire missile streaks from the rail on a CAA-flown Cessna 208 at White Sands Missile Range, February 2020. (Photo courtesy of MAG Aero)



Majors Paul Tandberg (left) and Daniel Jackson (right) conduct precision strike training with a Lebanese AC-208 crew in 2020. (Photo courtesy of author)

precision strike, and agile combat support. A change request followed from USSOCOM later in the year, signed by then vice commander, Lt Gen James Slife. The high-stakes engagement with the SMW in Afghanistan had taught the command that expertise mattered; without an established baseline in the mission set, it was impossible to set standards or articulate risk. In the near term, Headquarters directed Col Nathan Green, commander of the Air Force Special Operations Air Warfare Center (AFSOAWC), the 6th's wing-equivalent parent organization, to send CAAs to the Oklahoma Air National Guard's 137th Special Operations Wing to conduct ISR mission training in the MC-12W. This training had to be strictly "on a non-interference basis" with the Guard's operations. AFSOC planned to lease its own CAA ISR aircraft beginning in the summer of 2019, purchase them in 2022, and finally equip them for armed recce/precision strike in 2023.

Colonel Raridon selected five pilots and three sensor operators as ISR initial cadre. A few of the cadre members had a background in tactical ISR, while others made up for their lack of mission knowledge with advisory experience. They traveled to Oklahoma City and began flying the MC-12, but non-interference proved difficult; the Guard supported as best it could, but just as with the U-28s, it had its own requirements and priorities. Difficulties arose between Title 10 and Title 32 funding and authorities, and initial cadre members found themselves on the road TDY half the year—though they did manage to nail down a master training task list and write a syllabus that could work with just about any tactical ISR platform. Raridon took his case to Colonel Green, showing him the cost (in both time and money) of sending aircrew TDY to Oklahoma City. He discussed the problems associated with burdening another community with CAA training, currency, and proficiency requirements. He laid out the \$26 million price tag of pursuing commercial training. Alternatively, the squadron could lease aircraft to run its own program for only \$4

million per aircraft per year. Green agreed with the latter course of action and used AFSOAWC's own budget to lease a single Cessna 208B Grand Caravan from North American Surveillance Systems (NASS). It arrived at Destin Executive Airport in February 2017.

That first Caravan allowed CAAs to begin ramping up in-house production of ISR aircrew throughout 2017, helped by reservists from the 5th SOS as well as the 711th SOS—newly re-missioned as a CAA squadron. But it quickly became clear that strike could not wait until 2023; the 6th learned it would shortly begin an enduring commitment while the 711th began episodic engagements with partner nations flying strike aircraft. The CAA community suddenly found itself facing down the prospect of engaging with partners who had more institutional experience with strike than they did.

Even from the earliest days of their engagement with the SMW, CAAs had begun to realize that American ideas of a progressive approach from ISR to precision strike did not seem to apply with partner air forces. The US military operated on an assumption that it could slowly walk a program into the objective—spending weeks, months, or even years on tedious target development until requisite technical skills and tactical acumen existed to support either joint or unilateral action against a target. When CAAs first set foot in Afghanistan in 2014, they thought it would be months before their partner would graduate from target development to operating overhead an objective. However, just seventy-two hours after their arrival, they found themselves accompanying SMW aviators over a direct-action raid. For the Afghans, the value of the new airplanes was not in finding and fixing—especially since other methodologies existed to do those tasks. The only way to build advocacy within the partner nation and secure the US investment was to figure out what happened after finding and fixing the target. "Precision strike arrived the moment the partner nation could see an enemy on the battlefield from an airplane," recalled Colonel Raridon. "If I can find and fix it, you know what's coming next: its finish."

Several of Raridon's aggressive young ISR aircrew rapidly came around to that way of thinking. Majors Brian Schaf and Paul Tandberg both arrived at the 6th SOS in the spring of 2017, just in time to participate in the small



Left to right, Lt Col Will Slotter, Capt Ryan Mayer, Maj Brian Schaf, and Lt Col Steve Vestel preflight their missile-toting Caravan prior to the first live-fire flight on the White Sands Missile Range, February 2020. (Photo courtesy of Brian Schaf)

group tryout for the ISR syllabus. Both had come of age in the Global War on Terrorism and both thought of weighing down their leased Caravan with weapons even before they became precision strike initial cadre that fall. In October 2017, NASS released photos of an armed version of its own. Work on updating the performance working statement (PWS) transitioned from AFSAOWC to A5RV at AFSOC Headquarters for leasing two additional aircraft. Mr. Derry McKinney crafted requirements based on what CAAs needed to do with the aircraft and it quickly became clear the NASS armed Caravan would provide the most capability for the least cost. The command still intended to hold off on live munitions until it procured the aircraft; while the lease continued, strike training would utilize a decommissioned Hellfire missile—called a captive air training missile (CATM)—missing its warhead and propulsion, but with the seeker intact.

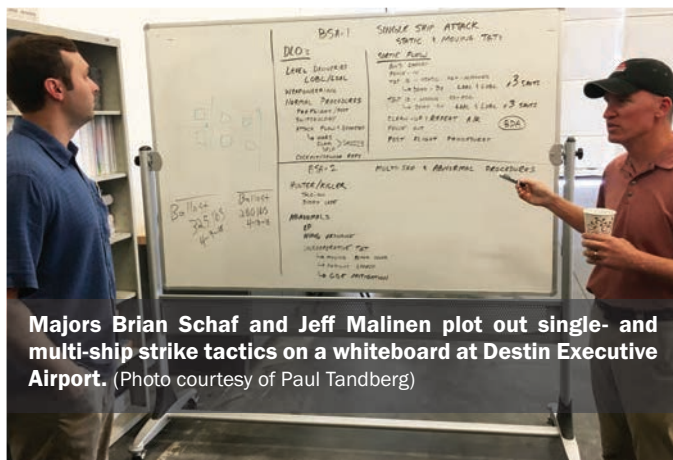
That fall, the 6th SOS brought Maj Jeff Malinen, a reservist, on orders for a year to spearhead the squadron’s “adaptive precision strike” (APS) program. The term had evolved over the previous two years; USSOCOM originally referenced “light strike” which implied a light attack platform like the A-29 or AT-6. However, SOCOM’s change request specified “armed recce/precision strike,” which the command later defined as an armed ISR platform performing level weapons deliveries. There is some overlap between light attack (its own requirement) and armed ISR, however, ultimately they are different (but complementary) mission sets. The term “precision strike” is doctrinally defined in Air Force Annex 3-05, Special Operations:

Precision strike provides the joint force commander and the SOF operator with specialized capabilities to find, fix, track, target, engage, and assess (F2T2EA) targets. F2T2EA can use a single weapon system or a combination of systems to complete the kill chain. Precision strike missions include close air support, air interdiction, and armed reconnaissance. Attributes associated with precision strike include persistence, robust communications, high situational awareness, precise target identification, lethality, and survivability, as required.

Including “adaptive” was Colonel Raridon’s idea. It came from the need to train to a baseline for the mission set from which CAAs could adapt to the partner, the specific platform, the environment, and differing methodologies. It put the emphasis on the person rather than the platform. The gap between the baseline the person trained to, and the mission they went downrange to execute, equaled risk, which the squadron could now articulate to leadership.

In November 2017, Malinen, Schaf, and Tandberg traveled to Avon Park, Florida, for a shakedown flight on NASS’s new hardpoint-equipped C-208 Caravan. NASS delivered the very same aircraft to Destin Executive Airport shortly thereafter and the squadron took delivery of its own CATM on December 1. Derry McKinney had worked out a deal to get one from an MQ-9 squadron at Cannon Air Force Base. On the night of the first, Lt Col Steve Vestel drove his

pickup truck to the flight line at Duke Field. He and Brian Schaf stood in the darkness, waiting until a C-146 landed with their cargo. They put the CATM in Steve’s truck and drove it to the squadron, snapping a “proof of life” photo before locking it up for the night. It was a surreal moment, but one that preceded a big slowdown in progress: first, it proved difficult getting the CATM released from munitions storage at Duke and transported down to Destin Executive on a regular basis. Maj Jason Greer eventually found a way to store the inert training aid at Destin. Second, the aircrew struggled to work around poorly integrated weapons systems on infrequent trips down to Avon Park—a long flight in a 208. Jeff Malinen had a friend at Camp Shelby, Mississippi, and eventually arranged for use of the much closer laser



Majors Brian Schaf and Jeff Malinen plot out single- and multi-ship strike tactics on a whiteboard at Destin Executive Airport. (Photo courtesy of Paul Tandberg)

range there. Finally, production of CAA ISR aircrew remained the priority in the squadron. This greatly frustrated Malinen, who felt unsupported in what, at times, seemed to be an impossible task.

The first step forward came from Secretary of the Air Force Heather Wilson’s visit to Hurlburt Field in May 2018. Major Tandberg attended the planning meetings and learned the secretary was supposed to get a thirty-minute ride as a passenger on a C-145 Skytruck. Quiet to that point, he decided to speak up: “No, we’re not going to do that,” he declared. “We’re going to fly her in the 208 and we’ll show her a strike line and we’ll show her ISR and we’ll do the operation in a foreign language.” Suddenly, what had started as a quick flight around the flagpole, evolved into a full mission profile supporting Special Forces soldiers in a direct action raid on Santa Rosa Island with both the aircrew and ground party speaking in Spanish. Majors Phil Vaughn, Brian Schaf, and Paul Tandberg flew with Secretary Wilson, Lieutenant General Webb, and the secretary’s security detail in the aircraft. Tandberg put her in the sensor operator seat as they did simulated missile runs with the CATM and then she got into the copilot’s seat for the rest of the scenario and the return trip to Hurlburt Field. After landing, she coined each of the crewmembers and thanked them before quickly jumping aboard a waiting CV-22. “Two of my best days in this job have been here, with all of you,” she later said of her Hurlburt trip. “I saw competence at a level few Americans can even understand.”



Lt Col Steve Vestel and Maj Brian Schaf took delivery of the squadron's first CATM on December 1, 2017, and snapped this "proof of life" picture before locking it up for the night. (Photo courtesy of Brian Schaf)



The author shoots a Hellfire missile at the Utah Test and Training Range, July 2021. (Photo courtesy of author)



A Hellfire missile slams into a CONEX target at the White Sands Missile Range, February 2020. (Photo courtesy of Brian Schaf)



Conducting a rocket attack at the Fort Stewart Range, March 2021. (Photo courtesy of author)

The relationship between the 6th SOS and Special Forces groups gave the APS initial cadre a rich laboratory to continue to experiment and validate their program. In the summer of 2018, the APS initial cadre went TDY for two weeks to North Carolina to provide support for Special Forces JTAC training. In the aircraft, they spent a lot of time figuring out what worked and what did not. On the ground, they data mined publications from other armed platforms across the Air Force: MQ-9s, F-16s, B-1s, etcetera. They looked for the overlap—the fundamentals. They began to develop training and tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) that would get the most out of their C-208 training tool. This included use of rockets in addition to Hellfire missiles. For partner nations, the six-figure cost of a Hellfire could be problematic. Modern precision guided munitions are expensive, but a laser-guided rocket cost only a third as much as a Hellfire. Afghan Air Force AC-208s and A-29s had already been using them to great effect.

Finally, the pieces began falling into place for the program to reach critical mass. MAG Aerospace bought out NASS and saw the CAA's armed Caravan as an opportunity. They began working with subcontractors such as Moog, Inc., to better integrate the weapons systems. Jeff Malinen's orders expired, but Maj Roy Stone stepped up in his place. Steve Vestel moved over to the 492nd Special Operations

Training Group (SOTRG) and finally had time to focus on writing the publications and syllabi. Lt Col Erin Reynolds helped the ISR syllabus transition to the SOTRG's flying training detachment, which took the pressure off the operations squadrons to produce more CAA ISR aircrew. The new commander of the 6th SOS, Lt Col Walter "Rocky" Harvey, made Paul Tandberg the in-house "champion" for ISR requirements and Brian Schaf the "champion" for APS. Additionally, the squadron had a great resource in Lt Col David Brandt, who had been initial cadre on the AC-130W. Because he had been initial cadre before, he knew they could not wait for help from higher when things got weird. "Help is not coming," he would tell them. They received another strike-equipped C-208 in the fall of 2019 and began training in formation tactics.

With the program moving forward on a firmer footing, the 6th SOS's new parent wing, the 492nd, put in a request for live munitions. SOCOM's program executive office for fixed-wing aircraft (PEO-FW) tagged the 645th Aeronautical Systems Group, known as Big Safari, to be the program office; with their different funding and authorities, Big Safari could make things happen rapidly and responsively. They issued a new PWS to MAG Aero that drove them toward a definite deadline for live fire. The next step was to accomplish the developmental testing to validate the systems



integration and safe separation of the weapons from the aircraft. Derry McKinney made modifications to the contract to get the testing done in November 2019, though issues with the airworthiness paperwork delayed it until February 2020. Big Safari selected White Sands Missile Range (WSMR) near Alamogordo, New Mexico. “You need all that space in case it goes nuts,” McKinney explained.

Big Safari could have sourced its own test pilots or tagged MAG Aero to provide aircrew. Instead they offered for the APS initial cadre to be in the seat. Not only would it give them an opportunity to build familiarity with the weapons and help them design training, it would also allow them to fuse developmental testing with some operational testing of TTPs. Lieutenant Colonels David Brandt, Warren Halle, Will Slotter, and Steve Vestel, Majors Brian Schaf, Roy Stone, and Paul Tandberg, and Captain Ryan Mayer flew the two strike-equipped Cessnas out to New Mexico for the last two weeks of February 2020. On February 19, Derry McKinney went out on the range to watch from the operations building. Everyone seemed to hold their breath for that first shot; the Hellfire streaked off the rail... and went... where? In the operations building, everyone looked at McKinney. “Where did the weapon go?” They asked him. “I don’t know!” he countered. “I thought that was your job!”

Big Safari performed all the post-shot tasks and made all the necessary reports. They never found that missile, but it was the only hiccup. After that, the aircrew started slinging Hellfire after Hellfire into CONEX boxes with deadly accuracy. “It was awesome,” said McKinney, gratified to see something go from a list of requirements on a piece of paper to real life in such a short amount of time. The aircrew fired Hellfires, they fired laser-guided rockets, they fired unguided rockets, they shot singly and in formation—the WSMR shoot felt like a culminating event for everyone involved. They worked through some issues, like the software not accounting for the downward tilt of the weapons pylons, or the subcontractor using data from attack helicopters to design the attack profiles. But everything worked more or less as

expected.

Despite COVID, the APS initial cadre conducted seven proficiency shoots between July 2020 and June 2021, most of them led by Maj Kevin Skelton. Each shoot gave them the opportunity to refine their TTPs and adjust their checklists and pubs. They leveraged their in-house JTACs (an anomaly for flying squadrons) to provide robust, integrated fires training. MSgt Jose “Roomba” Cruz-Richardson proved particularly indispensable in building relationships with air support operations squadrons at the supporting bases. Altogether, APS initial cadre shot 57 Hellfires and 330 rockets with no mishaps or safety issues.

On May 26, 2021, the AFSOC/A3 ended initial cadre and gave the go-ahead for small group tryouts to begin with the APS syllabus. During the summer of 2021, the 6th and 711th sent APS aircrew on two strike engagements advising Hellfire-equipped AC-208s and AT-802 attack Air Tractors overseas. A third strike engagement canceled due to COVID. When CAAs had begun engaging with the Afghan Special Mission Wing in 2014, they did not have an in-house program for ISR or strike. Responding to mission requirements and the demand signal from theater special operations commands, they moved rapidly to build both, establishing programmatics, writing publications, and performing developmental and operational testing simultaneously. Around the world now, active and reserve Combat Aviation Advisors are enabling partner nation aircrew to Find, Fix, and Finish our shared enemies.



*About the Author: Major Daniel Jackson is a combat aviation advisor in the 6th Special Operations Squadron, drawing from his years of tactical ISR experience in the U-28 “Draco” to train partner nation aircrews. He has a masters degree in history and has written three books, the most recent of which, *Fallen Tigers: The Fate of America’s Missing Airmen in China during World War II*, was published by the University Press of Kentucky in May 2021.*

Afghanistan: Just Like Old Times

By Colonel Shelley Woodworth, USAF (Retired)

I'm not a historian, strategist, or political thinker. I am a retired, former special operations pilot, and former headquarters staffer who is now unemployed. A quiet professional, going about my business, living my mundane days of walking the dog and buying overpriced coffee, shelf-checking Lowes and Home Depot, and hoping one day to get to the remodeling of my retirement home. Now – and quite suddenly – I find myself fully employed, not with a company, not as a consultant, not as a business owner, but again as an Air Commando. Alongside me are a few green beanies, some water warriors, a raider or two, and a host of “others.” In the days leading up to 15 August 2021, the date of America's departure from Afghanistan, something was starting to brew. That feeling of something big, something unknown, but something important was taking over, yet none of us really knew the magnitude of the humanitarian crisis that was about to unfold. As it did, all the has-beens started doing what we've done in our previous career: making stuff happen.

First, there was a text from my former interpreter asking me if I knew how to get him and his family out of Afghanistan. Then my other interpreter. Then another, already in the United States, trying to get his family out.

PHOTO
HAS BEEN
REMOVED

Then people I didn't know began asking for help. I started receiving texts from other Americans who were receiving the same requests, and out of nowhere a small organization formed. Then another and another. Within hours, organizations to help Afghans who stood by us for 20 years

began springing up across the globe. I was hearing from my counterparts in the United Kingdom who served alongside me in NATO's RESOLUTE SUPPORT mission. I heard from my former Australian deputy. I heard from one of my former AFPAK (Afghanistan-Pakistan) hands. All of us wondering if the United States would really leave Afghanistan without any presence, any support, or any guidance of how to proceed with an evolving Western-minded military and corrupt government. On 15 August 2021, the United States did exactly that. In fact, it did one better (or worse) by endorsing the Taliban as an organization with whom the world could negotiate to help continue a path forward to independence for Afghanistan. I will stop there. I will not entertain or profess political commentary as it serves only to destroy every side of this endeavor. This story is about the best of humanity, the best of special operations, and the best of Afghanistan.

I'll start with best of Afghanistan. We all know the story of 9/11, the invasion of Iraq, the occupation of Afghanistan, and the 20-year presence that followed. Many of us deployed countless times to Afghanistan, to forward operating bases, to Bagram, and a few to the embassy. Yet, most of us don't know the Afghan people. We know the intelligence reports of the Haqqani Network, the factions of the Islamic State (IS-you-name-it), the branches of Al Qaeda, and the Taliban, all groups of people we spent the majority of our careers seeking to destroy. We know there was a profitable opium crop, hosted by the Taliban, backed by Iran, providing massive funding to nefarious groups to harm Western societies. We know Afghanistan, not by its true population of Afghans, but instead by its population of occupiers. We have bumper stickers, t-shirts, and koozies professing our proud role as infidels or a picture of Osama Bin Laden with a targeting overlay and a bullet in his head. For most of us, when someone speaks of Afghanistan, negative conversation or thought prevails. We do not know how to divorce enemy actors from the actual people of Afghanistan because we think of them the same. Admittedly, I was guilty of this as my time in Afghanistan was mainly on Bagram Air Base, with C-RAMs (counter rocket, artillery, and mortar system), security patrols, and satellites overhead protecting me. I only knew Afghanistan by intelligence reports. I, like practically everyone, equated Afghans with Taliban, IS, and Al Qaeda. I



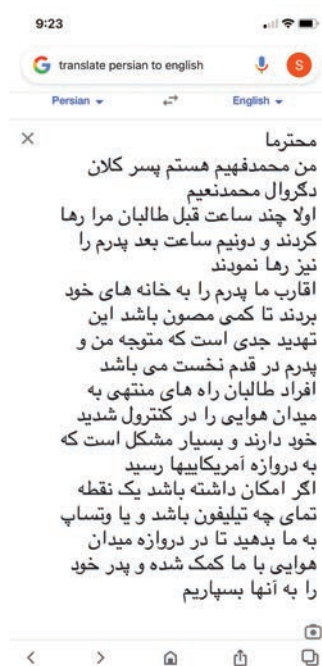
All Afghan C-130 crew (Photo courtesy of Steven Hreczkosij)

was/am your typical American.

In 2018, I volunteered for yet another deployment to Afghanistan. This time it was with NATO's Operation RESOLUTE SUPPORT, an international compendium taking a whole-of-government approach to Afghanistan under the guidance of General Austin "Scott" Miller, US Army. I was the "Senior Aviation Advisor to the Afghan Ministry of Defense" or at least that's what the orders said. I quickly found myself in charge of a host of aviation/air advisors at the headquarters level from the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States, all of us wondering what

we were supposed to be doing. To help clarify I started attending meetings and I had my team attend meetings. Within a week, we had our mission: mentoring Afghans in establishing, maintaining, and expanding the aviation branch of the Ministry of Defense. However, understanding the NATO mission would be complicated given the mission in Afghanistan had changed over its 20 years more frequently than a teenager's attitude during the high school years.

It took one chance meeting with General Miller and I finally got it. It was refreshing, it was similar to something in the past, but better, and best of all, it was working. General Miller chose a combination of several strategies, coalescing them into three main efforts: efficient counterinsurgency, reinforcement and support of Afghan defense and government (particularly the Afghan National Police), and driving the Taliban to the negotiation table. He knew from previous deployments that he as an American would never fully understand the tribal aspect of Afghanistan, so he chose to reinforce and support all parts of the government, military and civilian, leveraging tribalism, Taliban influence, and a new generation of Afghans wanting security and nationalism. Gen Miller focused on a commonality amongst the Islamic people: the desire for relationship building over contractual agreements. He worked with Afghans to remove older, Soviet-minded leaders and replace them with younger, Western-educated leaders. America may scoff at the idea of a 35 year-old three-star general, but with Afghanistan's life expectancy of 44 years, that equates to our own past-mid-life-crisis general officers. It was a new landscape. Western militaries had been in



Afghanistan for nearly 20 years and the cultural shift from our presence was palpable. One might consider this to be a luxury in the art of war; to have a population of Western-educated military officers from which to develop a new chain of command that understands, relates to, and works with NATO's mentality and culture.

Considering a whopping 70 percent of Afghanistan is under 25 years of age, it's safe to say most of Kabul is now Western-minded. Obviously, the outlying areas remain more traditional, but they're also not Soviet. They're tribal, as they have been for thousands of years. The United States and NATO finally had the decades needed to alter a population's influence from Soviet to Western. We finally had enough people educated (through military and civilian programs) in countries like the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia to direct the course of a society towards openness, democratic-influenced policies, and diversity of thought. In fact, for many of us, it was somewhat of a mini-reunion. Everywhere we went as we reconnected with Afghans who were our classmates at National Defense University, Air Command and Staff College, and Sandhurst in the United Kingdom. We worked together as if it was another joint operation: far from perfect, but functional, cohesive, and singularly-focused with a Western mentality. The decades needed to influence culture were behind us and we (US and NATO) were reaping the benefits of a vastly improved military and government. (At this point the reader may ask



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themselves "If the military and government was so vastly improved why did they both collapse in a matter of days?" This is arguably the best of Afghanistan.

Unfortunately, General Miller's mission was barely one year old when the United States started advertising departure from Afghanistan. The mission was barely three years old when we finally made good on this promise. Nearly six months prior to our departure, the US Embassy was already at minimum staffing. Of the over thirty partner nations in NATO's Resolute Support mission, almost one third had pulled out or reduced operations to staff assistance jobs. The anorexic backbone of the Resolution Support mission was essentially all that remained. When Kabul fell, the Resolute Support mission was overwhelmed. The embassy was crushed to the point of paralysis. Western leaders were shell shocked and immobile. Communications were at a bare minimum, and command and control was virtually non-existent. Then a Quiet Professional started to text.

Then another. And another. Retired, separated, and medically-disqualified special operators and agents from around the globe, in less than eight hours, became a unified and formidable force, organizing out of thin air over cell towers and satellite frequencies to make s--- happen. It was as if none of us had left the profession... a virtual homecoming for the mission we crave. Network after network was connected. Cell phone companies surely stood by in awe of the amount of communication and action occurring over their networks. First there were those that wanted to help relieve the overworked C-17 mission. They had aircraft and aviators ready to help our Afghan partners. However, then they had to be connected with those that had fund raising skills or individuals with deep pockets. Then those with the money had to be connected with those in the policy world or in Congress to get the approval for civilian aircraft to fly into Afghanistan. Then those with the approval had to be connected with those that knew how to get in and out of Afghanistan. Organizations were formed out of thin air, some banded and disbanded with each mission over 24, 48, or 72 hours. They blew in and out of town faster than our fingers were texting on keyboards. With decades of special operations behind most of us, we oozed competence. The pace of it all was stunning. The results shocking. The effort to leave no one behind was colossal. It was unemotional, exquisitely-focused controlled chaos as Kabul continued to collapse. Every last one of us innately possessed a singular mindset: humans are more important than hardware. It was the best of special operations.

What followed was astounding. As the consortium of special operations and agency has-beens progressed in their unofficial mission to save Afghans, we reached out for support. At first, was simply to our own networks. Then, it expanded to networks of other networks. The proverbial web grew so quickly, I had, at one point, 27 different text conversations running concurrently. It was something like a 1950s switchboard operator connecting #2, Mr. Jones to #57, Mr. Smith and #14, Mrs. Williams to #11, Mrs. Martinez, over and over again, almost 24 hours a day for days at a

time. It brought back memories, no sleep for the mission-focused. It's just this time the lack of sleep had a whole new effect when you're retired and on the downside of 50. Keys go missing for days, the dog begs for the food she should have received hours ago, and singular shoes of different pairs worn together as new pairs become the fashion norm. Folks who had no idea how to help, wanted to help. People with no military background, no experience in humanitarian crisis operations or anything crisis or anything operations wanted to help. It was former special operators like Kyle from Coastal Defense, Incorporated. It was Peter from Ark Salus. It was Robert from Team Argo. And it was no one associated with special operations like Kathryn from the library wanting to research non-governmental assistance. It was Tony from a private law firm offering pro-bono legal assistance to help alleviate the impending immigration crisis that would surely befall the United States. It was Sarah, a retired English teacher wanting to teach Afghans English, so they could survive in a somewhat-intolerant-of-other-languages society. It was #27 being connected to #13, #5 being connected to #19, and #2 being connected to #7. It was people with full time jobs working overnight to try to help Afghans to safety. It was egos, prejudice, and distrust our society has worn like a straight-jacket in recent years cast aside in the interest of saving human lives. But not just human lives, Afghan lives. Lives that undoubtedly protected American lives, lives that definitely saved American lives. Lives that honor and believe in the life of America. It was empathy on display, compassion

in action, and uncompromising faith in mankind. It was the best of humanity.

Months have passed since the fall of Kabul and many have gone back to work, many had to prioritize their disrupted family lives over current events, and many lost faith in finding any success as they face failed attempt after failed attempt to bring an Afghan family to safety. Yet many have stayed the course. Organizations created out of thin air in the early hours like Ark Salus, Team Argo, Task Force Pineapple, and S3i (Save, Settle, and Support Initiative), created and operated by former special operators and/or agency personnel are still working to get Afghans out. There are others, of course, but too many to name. The number saved and publicly advertised was surprising for sure. The portion of actual numbers saved by the band of has-been special operators and their non-special operations networks is astounding, not fully known, and like most missions, unrecorded. But it was a majority of that publicized number. Quiet, professional, history making, just like old times.



About the Author: Colonel Woodworth retired in 2021 as the Chief, Programming, Force Structure, and Basing for Headquarters Air Force Special Operations Command. During her career she held several command positions in operations and training. She served as Senior Air Advisor to the Afghan Ministry of Defense in 2018-2019 for NATO's RESOLUTE SUPPORT mission.



Afghan Special Mission Wing aircrews and their families are in hiding, unable to sustain themselves for fear of violent retribution. Rule 20 works with established US food distribution organizations to deliver food discretely and directly to these families. Your contribution will help US trained Afghan Air Commandos survive.

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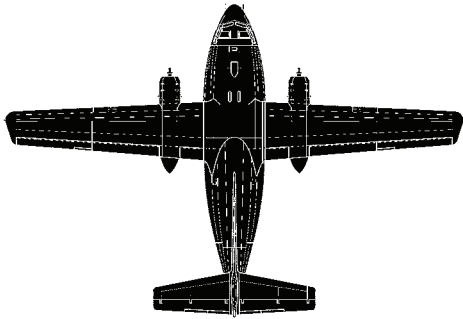
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C-123 Provider



The rugged C-123 Provider, one of USAF's most-used tactical transports, was a workhorse of the long US war in Southeast Asia. The Fairchild airlifter many times proved its worth in Vietnam, where it carried troops and supplies into combat zones as hot as the encircled US Marine base at Khe Sanh in 1968 and provided the capability for Operation Ranch Hand, the US program of defoliant-spraying to eliminate jungle cover and thus unmask enemy troop movements.

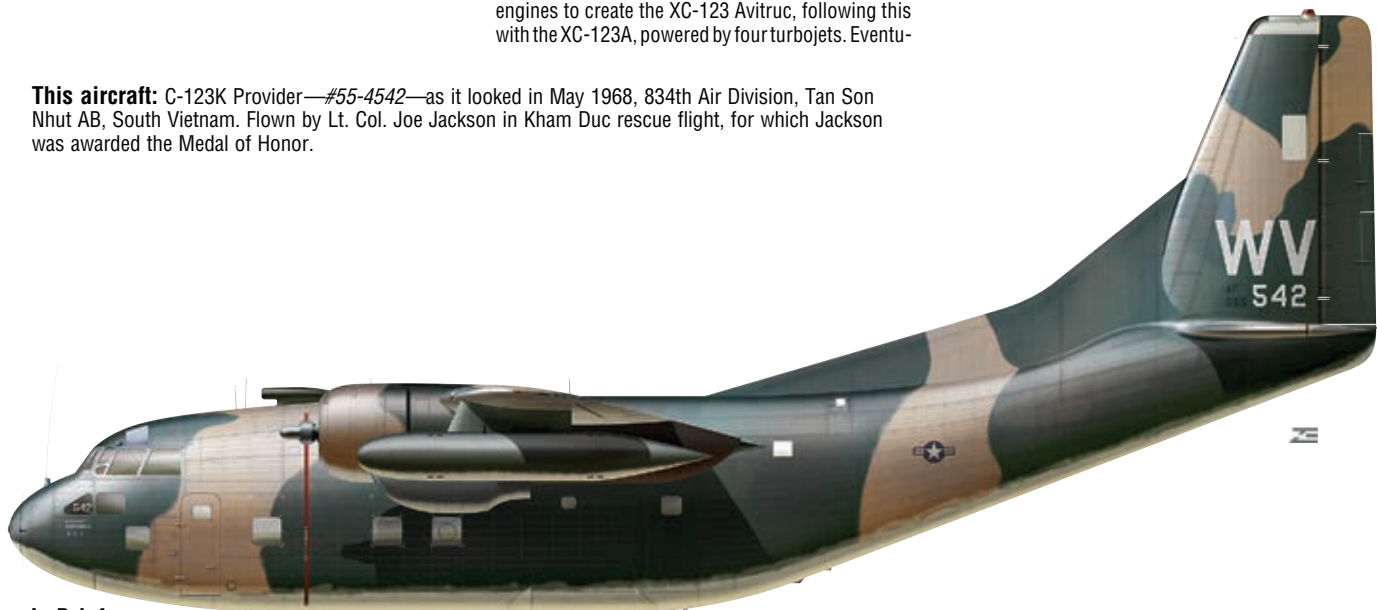
Strangely enough, the C-123 began life as a glider, although designers drew it up with every expectation that, eventually, it would be powered. Russian expatriate engineer Michael Stroukoff, who had built a series of wooden gliders, shifted to metal in 1946, ultimately building the XG-20A. He added two radial engines to create the XC-123 Avitric, following this with the XC-123A, powered by four turbojets. Eventu-

ally, Fairchild wound up with a contract to build 300 production aircraft. A small number were delivered to Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, Venezuela, the Philippines, and, of course, South Vietnam.

These C-123s went on to fight harder, longer, and better than anyone could have imagined in the early 1950s. C-123s contributed a great deal of in-country airlift in Vietnam and Cambodia. They carried out combat airdrops of troops, supplies, and ammunition, search and rescue teams, and special forces. Even now, one can find old C-123s hauling freight in South America.

—Walter J. Boyne

This aircraft: C-123K Provider—#55-4542—as it looked in May 1968, 834th Air Division, Tan Son Nhut AB, South Vietnam. Flown by Lt. Col. Joe Jackson in Kham Duc rescue flight, for which Jackson was awarded the Medal of Honor.



In Brief

Designed by Stroukoff, built by Fairchild ★ first flight Sept. 1, 1954 ★ number built 304 ★ crew of four (two pilots, flight engineer, navigator) ★ no armament ★ capacity 61 troops or 50 stretchers, six seated patients, six medics. **Specific to C-123B:** two Pratt & Whitney R-2800 engines ★ max speed 245 mph ★ cruise speed 205 mph ★ max range 1,450 mi ★ weight (loaded) 60,000 lb ★ span 110 ft ★ length 75 ft 9 in ★ height 34 ft 9 in.

Famous Fliers

Medal of Honor: Joe Jackson. **Air Force Cross:** Jesse Campbell, Richard Nagel Jr. **Other notables:** Rollen "Buck" Anthis, Claudius Watts III, Vernon Kondra, Anthony Burshnick, Bruce Fister.

Interesting Facts

Nicknamed "Bookie Bird" ★ operated from land, water, ice, snow, sand ★ flown by Air America, CIA proprietary airline ★ used for night bombing of Ho Chi Minh Trail ★ sometimes capsized when taxiing in strong crosswinds ★ used as personal transport by Gen. William Westmoreland, MACV commander ★ featured in films "Air America" (1990), "Operation Dumbo Drop" (1995), and "Con Air" (1997) ★ displayed motto, "Only we can prevent forests" (defoliation aircraft).



A Provider on the ramp in Southeast Asia.

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BOOK REVIEW

The U.S. Invasion of Grenada: Legacy of a Flawed Victory

By Philip Kukielski

(McFarland & Company, 2019, 256 pp.)

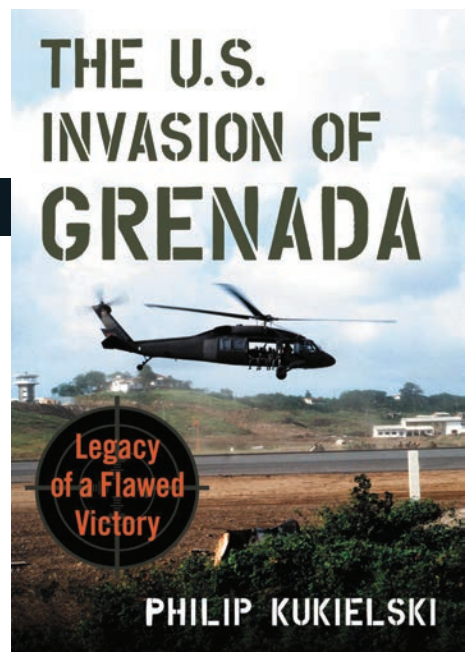
Reviewed by Dr. Ronald Dains

Mr. Kukielski presents his argument in his preface—and he has done the due diligence of not only describing exposed “shortcomings” in “battles that were won against a mismatched adversary;” he also relates the Grenada operation’s contribution, alongside Desert One and the Beirut Marine barracks bombing, to driving necessary reform within the Department of Defense. “Urgent Fury’s snafus,” he offers, “were not sufficiently egregious to have been solely the cause of reform, but they were uniquely suited to serve as an accelerating agent for organizational change.”

An experienced reporter at The Providence Journal, the author describes this book as the capstone of his career—a product of his decades in writing, editing, and research, as well as an interest in the event dating back to a cover story he wrote for the paper about a local Rhode Island Marine killed in the invasion.

The narrative is solid, and Kukielski provides 24 pages of detailed notes at the end to support his assertions, revelations that may surprise readers well-versed in military history and national security issues. His sources include robust employment of the Freedom of Information Act, archives (for example the Ronald Reagan Library and Reading Rooms at CIA and Department of State), and first-person accounts from both participants and Urgent Fury Gold Star families. He further cites his many contacts at Marine Corps University and the U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center at the Carlisle Barracks.

Kukielski’s research identifies some disturbing disconnects in the operation’s planning and execution. The first issue he delves into is a lack of good intelligence on adversarial order of battle and readiness. American forces, he asserts, also carried ashore “1:50,000-scale, British-made tourism maps that contained limited information on terrain, road markings, and longitude and latitude. Their key objective, the airport under construction at Port Salines, was drawn in by hand.” Indeed, the author describes a troops-in-contact situation in which a Combat Controller talked Marine Cobras onto a target using a signal mirror, as U.S.



forces were using five different maps to orient themselves to the Grenada battlespace; subsequent confusion in navigation and fire direction for land- and sea-based guns was certain to occur.

Coordination and scheduling proved equally sporty, beginning with a time-zone mix-up (not every planning cell was using ZULU/Greenwich Mean Time) that the author explicitly links to a night-time poor-weather drop from C-130s over the Caribbean, in which four members of SEAL Team Six drowned. This issue also bled into multiple mission amendments; and rushed planning, absence of rehearsals, restrictive secrecy, and the tyranny of distance (both between U.S. units in CONUS, and the thousands of miles separating their debarkation sites from Grenada) all contributed to confusion in executing the operation, according to Kukielski’s research.

As this fatal SEAL mission occurred, the Commander in Chief Atlantic (CINCLANT), Admiral Wesley L. McDonald, called a meeting at Norfolk to gather the pertinent flag officers—to include H. Norman Schwarzkopf and 21st Air Force Vice Commander Brigadier General Robert B. Patterson, who was responsible for coordinating Military Airlift Command’s support aboard the USS Guam flagship. While Admiral McDonald did take time to warn Schwarzkopf that “We’ve got a tough job to do and we don’t need the Army giving us a hard time,” General Patterson reported to Air Force historian Dean Kallander that “I have never seen a piece of paper from CINCLANT or anyone saying how the command relationships were going to be”. To his credit, Kukielski presents such an organizational chart on page 91, “the author’s composite version of two slightly varying charts developed by two Army historians,” but warns that the de facto authorities emerged “fluid” and “fuzzy” as units were chopped back and forth throughout the operation to various commanders.

The book goes on to describe further challenges with communications (incompatible equipment, juxtaposed with “several credible Urgent Fury accounts of uniformed

combatants using civilian phone lines to get around military communications limitations”); joint warfighting; coalition warfighting (a 300-person multinational Caribbean peacekeeping force arrived at late morning on D-Day, and surprised U.S. ground commanders struggled to find them missions within the battlespace); rules of engagement (ROE); logistics (both fuel and drinking water shortages); post-hostility planning; fratricide; and handling the press (an issue to which the author provides some valued insight and expertise).

Again, Kukielski offers a compelling account of the process in which lessons learned and identified were compiled and used to offer remedies to all these challenges. He cites, for example, the 1984 Lind Report (by William S. Lind, national security staffer for Senator Gary Hart, D-CO), which specifically asked why an adversary without surface-to-air missiles was able to shoot down nine percent of the U.S. military helicopters employed in the invasion. The Pentagon’s rebuttal, according to Kukielski, stressed restrictive ROE and therefore inadequate fire support for helicopter operations over Grenada. The author implies (and General Schwarzkopf’s memoirs appear to agree with him) that the Center for Army Lessons Learned at Fort Leavenworth offered a better aggregate analysis based on unit after action reports. He further presupposes that the 1984 Weinberger Doctrine (delivered by Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger at the National Press Club), with its

six tests for committing U.S. combat forces, comprised a logical reaction to Urgent Fury. A reader can ponder how the Lind Report and Weinberger Doctrine might apply also to Vietnam, the aforementioned Marine Barracks bombing in Lebanon, or even Mogadishu.

To be fair, The U.S. Invasion of Grenada holds some deficiencies—each of which can be tackled in a second edition. First, Chapter 11—The Route to Intervention, which serves to set the stage for the instability on the island and subsequent U.S. mission to cope with it, would be better placed near the front of the book. Interrupting a good analysis of the operation to suddenly break for a “Hold on, let me tell you how we got here” chapter disrupts the flow of an otherwise engaging outline. There are also several multiple typographical or editing errors within the text (e.g., “The Black Hawk flown by Bramel circled the Guam and ignored frantic attempts by the crew to wave off him off their flight deck.”, p.64) that also disrupt the smooth narrative. On the whole, though, the book provides some outstanding graphs and photos to supplement the account and is well worth the read.



About the Author: Dr. Ronald Dains presently serves as the USAF Air Command and Staff College Dean of Education Support and Professor of Military and Security Studies.

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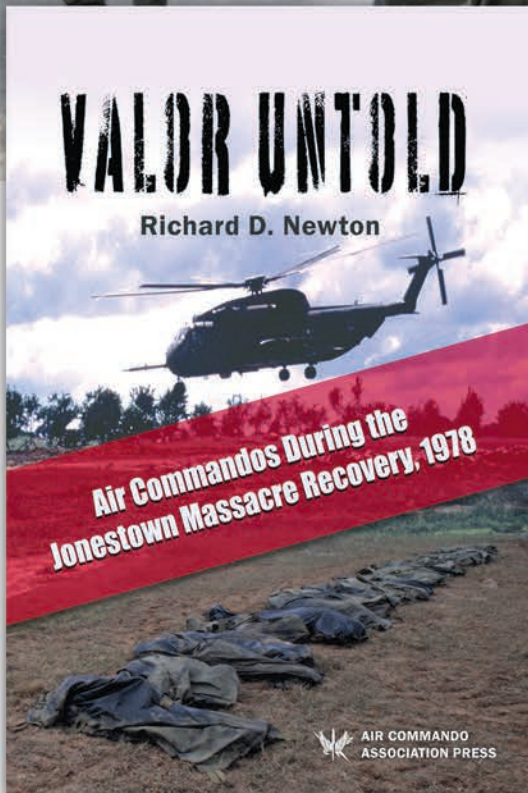
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