

# The First Behind the Curtain Story

## A View From Behind the Curtain

A personal memoir

© 28 Dec 97

AUTHOR: John Townsend

Revised/edited: 28 July 2010

### **A View from Behind the Curtain by John Townsend**

28 December 1997

April 26, 1980

Because of my desire that Congress be informed on this matter and consistent with the reporting provisions of the War Powers Resolution of 1973 (Public Law 73-148), I submit this report.

On April 24, 1980, elements of the United States Armed Forces under my direction commenced the positioning stage of a rescue operation which was designed, if the subsequent stages had been executed, to effect the rescue of the American hostages who have been held captive in Iran since November 4, 1979, in clear violation of international law and the norms of civilized conduct among nations. The subsequent phases of the operations were not executed. Instead, for the reasons described below, all these elements were withdrawn from Iran and no hostilities occurred.

The sole objective of the operation that actually occurred was to position the rescue team for the subsequent effort to withdraw the American hostages. The rescue team was under my overall command and control and required my approval before executing the subsequent phases of the operation designed to effect the rescue itself. No such approval was requested or given because, as described below, the mission was aborted.

Beginning approximately 10:30 AM EST on April 24, six U.S. C-130 transport aircraft and eight RH-53 helicopters entered Iran airspace. Their crews were not equipped for combat. Some of the C-130 aircraft carried a force of approximately 90 members of the rescue team equipped for combat, plus various support personnel.

From approximately 2 to 4 PM EST the six transports and six of the eight helicopters landed at a remote desert site in Iran approximately 200 miles from Tehran where they disembarked the rescue team, commenced refueling operations and began to prepare for the subsequent phases.

During the flight to the remote desert site, two of the eight helicopters developed operating difficulties. One was forced to return to the carrier Nimitz; the second was

forced to land in the desert, but its crew was taken aboard another of the helicopters and proceeded on to the landing site. Of the six helicopters which landed at the remote desert site, one developed a serious hydraulic problem and was unable to continue with the mission. The operational plans called for a minimum of six helicopters in good operational condition able to proceed from the desert site. Eight of the helicopters had been included in the force to provide sufficient redundancy without imposing excessive strains on the refueling and exit requirements of the operation. When the number of helicopters available to continue dropped to five, it was determined that the operation could not proceed as planned. Therefore, on the recommendation of the force commander and my military advisers; I decided to cancel the mission and ordered the United States Armed Forces involved to return from Iran.

During the process of withdrawal, one of the helicopters accidentally collided with one of the C-130 aircraft, which was preparing to take off, resulting in the death of eight personnel and the injury of several others. At this point, the decision was made to load all surviving personnel aboard the remaining C-130 aircraft and to abandon the remaining helicopters at the landing site. Altogether, the United States Armed Forces remained on the ground for a total of approximately three hours. The five remaining aircraft took off about 5:45 PM EST and departed from Iran airspace without further incident at about 8:00 PM EST on April 24. No United States Armed Forces remain in Iran.

The remote desert area was selected to conceal this phase of the mission from discovery. At no time during the temporary presence of the United States Armed Forces in Iran did they encounter Iranian forces of any type. We believe, in fact, that no Iranian military forces were in the desert area, and that the Iranian forces were unaware of the presence of the United States Armed Forces until after their departure from Iran. As planned, no hostilities occurred during this phase of the mission -- the only phase that was executed.

At one point during the period in which United States Armed Forces elements were on the ground at the desert landing site a bus containing forty-four Iranian civilians happened to pass along a nearby road. The bus was stopped and then disabled. Its occupants were detained by United States Armed Forces until their departure, and then released unharmed. One truck closely followed by a second vehicle also passed by while United States Armed Forces elements were on the ground. These elements stopped the truck by a shot into its headlights. The driver ran to the second vehicle, which then escaped across the desert. Neither of these incidents affected the subsequent decision to terminate the mission.

Our rescue team knew, and I knew, that the operation was certain to be dangerous. We were all convinced that if and when the rescue phase of the operation had been

commenced, it had an excellent chance of success. They were all volunteers; they were all highly trained. I met with their leaders before they went on this operation. They knew then what hopes of mine and all Americans they carried with them. I share with the nation the highest respect and appreciation for the ability and bravery of all who participated in the mission.

To the families of those who died and were injured, I have expressed the admiration I feel for the courage of their loved ones and the sorrow that I feel personally for their sacrifice.

The mission on which they were embarked was a humanitarian mission. It was not directed against Iran. It was not directed against the people of Iran. It caused no Iranian casualties.

This operation was ordered and conducted pursuant to the President's powers under the Constitution as Chief Executive and as Commander-in-Chief of the United States Armed Forces, expressly recognized in Section 8(d)(1) of the War Powers Resolution. In carrying out this operation, the United States was acting wholly within its right, in accordance with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, to protect and rescue its citizens where the government of the Territory in which they are located is unable or unwilling to protect them.

Sincerely,

Jimmy Carter  
\*\*\*\*\*

(President Jimmy Carter's Letter to the Honorable Thomas P. O'Neill, Jr., Speaker of the House of Representatives, and the Honorable Warren G. Magnuson, President pro tempore of the Senate)

With this letter President Carter summarized an operation known by many names. To the planners who conceived it, "The Attempt to Rescue American Hostages," to the military who rehearsed and executed it, "Operation Eagle Claw," but to most -- it is simply "Desert One." Many, with cases to make or political agendas to fulfill, have written much about that night. The ramifications of this disaster would have a huge influence on the shaping of the Department of Defense and U.S. Special Operations in the 80's. This is my view, from inside the cockpit, as one of the men who were called upon to execute a small portion of National Strategy.

For me, Desert One began in my squadron briefing room, during the Thanksgiving holidays of 1979. As the only Special Operations Squadron in the Pacific, we always thought we would be among the first to participate in any military operation. When Bill

“Oz” Osborne knocked on my door and said to get to the squadron for a briefing my heart started to race. Was this another exercise, or was something up? All my life, at least as long as I can remember, I had wanted to fly and be part of a great adventure. I grew up watching WW II war films like “Twelve O’clock High,” “The Flying Tigers.” and “Destination Tokyo.” I read every book on the Air Corp. and Air Force I could find. Now maybe I too would get to do something for real!

The Vietnam conflict had ended before I entered the active duty Air Force, but the military was still reeling from its after-shocks. We had drawn down our force, and military spending was continuously being reduced. Jimmy Carter was President, and in an effort to control inflation, he had decided that the military should set the example. He did this because he could control the budget of the executive branch, and the Department of Defense was the largest part of the branch. Inflation was in double digits, but our annual pay raise was capped at less than three percent. He implemented a “zero based budget” concept. Each year the Services would submit three budgets, one for what it would take to be fully funded, one for a zero growth, and one for a 10 percent reduction in capability. It seemed we were funded at somewhere less than the zero growth amounts. From the lowest level this meant we couldn’t always get the equipment we needed without a lengthy wait, but we could fly, and that is all that really mattered.

As we slowly assembled, I was surprised to see it wasn’t the entire squadron. Just a select group of the most experienced pilots and navigators were there, along with the unit’s planning staff. For security reasons, the commander had used our “Comm-out” recall procedures. This meant he had taken about three individuals and sent them to the homes of those officers he wanted, rather than use a phone to call. He did not want anyone who may be listening to know something unusual was up. It took some time for everyone to arrive, and while we waited we all began to speculate about why we were here. Guesses ranged from problems on the Korean Peninsula, to a major exercise in Australia (this clearly turned out to be wishful thinking). No one, that I recall, tied this meeting to the trouble in Iran. That was another squadron’s area of responsibility.

Lieutenant Colonel Ray Turczynski had taken over the squadron just a few months earlier, when Lieutenant Colonel Darrel Grapes suffered a heart attack. We were still feeling him out. What kind of commander was he going to be? Would he second-guess our every move, like Colonel Grape’s predecessor or would he give us the freedom to fully use the weapon system we flew? We were about to learn the answer to that question, in spades! Colonel T stood in front of the audience and called the room to silence. He had been attending a PACAF (Pacific Air Forces) Commanders Conference, but while there had been called away to answer questions for the senior leadership. Namely, could his unit land their aircraft at night, without lights, and seize an airfield like the Israeli’s had done at Entebbe? Could they do that if the airfield was

unlit and there was no moon? Had we ever trained using the newly developed Night Vision Goggles? Colonel T explained that we needed to be able to say yes to each of those questions, by Christmas!

We knew the answer to the first question, could we land and seize an airfield at night? We had done precisely that in an exercise just two months earlier. However, that airfield, like Entebbe, had been lit up with runway lights and was easy to find visually. We knew that even if the airfield wasn't lit we could find it. The real question was could we find it in a way that would let the pilot take over and land a 75-ton aircraft? That was a big question, and where the use of night vision goggles would come into play. Our stateside counterparts had been using the goggles for a month now and found it helped the pilots see better at night, but there was a trade-off. The pilot's depth perception was greatly reduced and they would have no peripheral vision. Colonel T had brought back several pair with him from Hawaii. Our job was to train ourselves and to be prepared for whatever task we would be asked to perform.

After the briefing we divided into working groups. The planners went off to find an airfield we could practice on and the pilot's and Nav's sat down to decide how we could do something none of us had ever done before. As an Instructor Navigator, my job would be to help adapt the existing procedures we had for radar approaches down to a new minimum altitude of 200 ft. where the pilot would have to take over and land the aircraft. These procedures were developed in the tightest of secrecy. Initially, only the four aircrews were to know what we were doing. None of us really knew why, and with the demands of doing something so new I never worried about the why.

As we prepared for the first training mission, I thought back on how I came to this point in my life. I had wanted to fly all my life. For me, flying was freedom, an escape from the earth and all that was associated with it. Ever since I was very young all I had wanted to be was a pilot and fly jet fighters. When I was 14, I finally convinced my mother that I was having trouble seeing the blackboards at school. She took me to an optometrist. He examined my eyes and told me I would never be an Air Force pilot. I was devastated. What was I going to do now? That was when I learned the Air Force also had flyers that weren't pilots, and didn't need 20/20 vision. I made up my mind that I would become one of those flyers.

Anyone who knew me in High School would never describe me as an over achiever, but I was a good problem solver. I think this came from the necessity to be self-sufficient since I was about ten. My father was an alcoholic, and abusive when he was drunk, which seemed to be most of the time. My mother was a Psychiatric nurse, striving to be successful in her profession, totally committed to my father, but trying desperately to hold the family together. In today's vocabulary this is known as co-dependency, back when I was growing up it was just confusing. I had two younger sisters and a brother,

each with their own set of needs. I escaped from the stress of this dysfunctional family by becoming addicted to the television. I never studied in High School, but seemed to just get by. I can remember only one teacher who saw any potential in me and encouraged me in English and Drama. But by the time I met her, I had already decided grammar and I would never develop a strong relationship, and I never saw myself as a leading man type. My mother had always said I would go to college. This seemed to be the one “given” in my life.

I had tried Boy Scouts, but without a father's involvement I just seemed to drift along, and my absence never seemed to matter to the troop. Then I discovered Civil Air Patrol or CAP. CAP is an auxiliary of the United States Air Force, and it was the perfect place for someone whose sole goal in life was to fly military aircraft. I loved my time in CAP. We took part in searches for lost aircraft, and studied military organization, and we flew. My unit took us to a small airfield in Wurtsburo, NY. There, we flew gliders and it was the greatest thrill of my life to that point. I can vividly remember one of my first flights. It was a spring day, clear, cool and beautiful. The sky was an azure blue with small white puffs of clouds. My instructor was a former German Luffwaffe pilot, who had flown a ME-109 in WW II. We took off and flew behind the tow plane to three thousand feet. We released from the tow to start our glide back to earth. My instructor turned the plane over to me and it was the greatest sense of freedom I had ever experienced. We turned into a thermal, a rising column of air, and I looked off my wing and there was a Red Tail Hawk. He and I flew in formation for what could only be a few seconds but it was perfect. Without fear, without control, he and I were equals, in his element, and enjoying the freedom of the cool fresh morning. Soon he became bored with us and climbed up to the clouds.

When it came time for college I applied to schools that offered the Air Force Reserve Officer Training Course (ROTC), and weren't too close to home. I defined this as 500 miles, or a day's drive. For me college was an escape. Because of my grades, I can't say colleges were lining up to recruit me, but I was surprised with the number of schools that did accept me. I ended up going to a small independent Liberal Arts College in West Virginia. For me this was a true blessing as it gave me independence and a sense of community.

My first year there was a complete disaster. I approached college with the same “I don't care” attitude I had in High School. At the end of my second semester, I had to sit down to a reality check. Did I really want to fly in the Air Force? If so, I had to make some serious changes in how I approached life, and my studies.

As I began my sophomore year I put those problem solving skills to work and tried to figure out how to go from a 1.6 (on a 4.0 scale) GPA to 2.0 so I could get into ROTC. For me the choices seemed clear as day, change from Chemistry as a major, to

something which I could get a descent grade in, and take some electives which would be easy A's. This is how I ended up as a Psychology major with 12 hours in Drama. I was so successful in raising my GPA that I actually ended up with a full ROTC scholarship my last year and a half.

After college, I worked several odd jobs waiting for the Air Force to send my orders to active duty. In the ten months between school and the Air Force I managed to get a job with a small airline. I was the freight manager, deliveryman, and line help. I worked 12 hours days and loved every minute. I had almost complete freedom while I was on the road, and working around the airplanes was always fun.

Finally, it was time to start with the Air Force. At Navigator School I again started out slow, but managed to end up almost exactly in the middle of my class. Everyone wanted to fly either F-4 fighters, or C-141 and C-5 cargo aircraft. With my class standing, I ended up in C-130 Hercules squadron. Not glamorous, but in hindsight the best possible place for me. I fell in love with the "Herk," as it is known to its crews. I came into my own flying low altitude and airdropping cargo and personnel. But Dyess AFB and Abilene Texas did not seem like a place that would be likely to be asked to send crews into combat if something were to come up. I worked hard to develop my navigation skills and called the personnel center every month bugging them for a chance to get into special operations. Actually, I wanted to get to Europe and Special Operations seemed the best way to do it. As is the case with most things, the Air Force actually knew what was best for me. They sent me to Special Operations all right, but to the Pacific, not to Europe.



MC-130E

The 1st Special Operations Squadron flew the MC-130E, Combat Talon. The Combat Talon is an extensively modified cargo airplane originally built in the mid-60s. The MC-130E differed from its plain-Jane C-130E cousin in some significant ways. It was designed to operate at night, at low altitude, into hostile places like North Viet Nam. To do this it was equipped with a terrain following radar (like the F-111), precision navigation systems managed by two navigators and updated with a great ground

mapping radar. Its crew also had an electronic warfare officer with radar detection and jamming equipment. In the late 70's, the ability to take on fuel while in-flight was added. To allow the aircraft to do this its engines were upgraded to the newer ones installed on the C-130H. The 1st SOS was the first unit to be fully equipped with this modification, and by now all its crews were qualified in this tactic. This ability to refuel in-flight would be instrumental to the 1<sup>st</sup> SOS involvement.



MC-130 InFlight Refueling

Now back to training. The squadron planners found an isolated airfield in the center of South Korea and about five days after that initial briefing we sent two airplanes up to practice our new concepts. I can remember flying those first approaches as we lined the airplane up on a black hole, and the pilots following my partners and my guidance on faith. Captain Greg Peppers was the finest Navigator I ever flew with. We were natural compliments to each other and flew together as often as possible. Little did I imagine that 13 months later he would be dead from a careless mistake on the “easy” portion of just such a training mission.

As Greg and I lined the aircraft up with the runway we could clearly see on the radar 10 miles ahead of us, we settled into a routine which was almost second nature for us. We were at a thousand feet above the ground and gave the pilots the warning we were starting our first “blacked out” approach. The lights of the airfield were dark, and there were mountains all around. Since I was the more experienced I chose to be the one responsible for keeping the systems updated with accurate radar information. Greg would make sure we were clear of terrain and give the pilots’ verbal cues about where we were on the approach. He would be the equivalent of a ground based radar controller, telling the pilot he was right or left of the extended centerline and above or below the planned glide path. In addition to his words the pilots would have the course and glide path represented on the instruments. If Greg’s words and the instruments ever



disagreed we would stop the approach, execute a missed approach to a safe altitude, and sort out the reasons.

The flight deck of the airplane was especially hot and crowded. The pilots had decided to add a third pilot to the standard crew. His job was to act as a fourth set of eyes to help find the airfield and make sure we were as safe as possible for the landing. They had also determined the light from the navigator's instruments would cause a reflective glare on the wind screen and reduce the ability of those early night vision goggles to see past the window. Therefore, we used a heavy black curtain to separate the pilots and flight engineer from the navigators; this cut down the cooling airflow we would normally have. The navigators were isolated, Our only view of the outside world came from the sensors we controlled, the radar or the forward-looking infrared (FLIR) and the headsets we wore. This could sometimes become quite disorienting. For example, one night we were flying low level to our approach and I was moving the FLIR from left to right when the pilot entered a hard left turn. My eyes were telling me one thing and my inner ear was saying something completely different. This caused a severe case of vertigo and I had to close my eyes for almost a minute to clear it up.

I placed the radar cursor on the end of the runway and updated the navigation computer to give the pilots good course information and Greg checked the information and backed me up. The pilot called for the "before landing" checklist and we configured the aircraft for landing. Gear down, flaps to fifty percent slow to approach speed. By seven miles we were set. At 6.4 miles we began our descent down to the 200-foot decision height. We planned to treat this like a precision approach. The aircraft commander would be looking outside to find the runway visually. If he could see the runway at 200 feet he would take control of the airplane and land. My job was to keep the navigation system as accurate as possible, Greg was to provide verbal course information to the pilots and altitude information once we began our descent. The co-pilot flew the approach using the flight instruments. This was a standard procedure for us, but accuracy would be much more critical than ever before. When the pilot took over to land the aircraft the co-pilot would begin to provide verbal airspeed cues until we reached taxi speed.

"Five miles, speed 120 knots, altitude 700 feet -- on speed on altitude." "Four miles, speed 120 altitude 550 -- on speed, on altitude." "Three miles, speed 115, altitude 300 - - on speed, 50 low." "Two miles, speed 115, 200 feet -- Decision height!" *Will we see the runway?* "Runway not in sight!" I feel the power come in as we start our go-around. We increase power and start to climb to a safe altitude. Too late, the pilot sees the airfield. We talk about what went wrong. The night vision goggles show everything in a green tint, which takes some getting used to. The pilots are learning how to translate this new information into cues that they can use. There is also a glare on the windows we hadn't expected -- the instrument lights on the pilots panel. Even at the

lowest setting, they are still too bright. We break out a roll of duct tape and start covering light bulbs to make the cockpit darker. Duct tape seems to be the universal cure-all for aviation problems. I wonder how airplanes flew before it was invented.

We are now heading back to the initial point. We will try it a second time. The pilots configure the aircraft, “landing gear down and locked,” “flaps to 50 percent,” “airspeeds checked.” Greg and I are busy with reprogramming the navigation system. Ten miles and we start a second approach. Greg, as the left navigator, calls out the start descent point. His voice is calm as he gives course and altitude corrections to the pilots. We begin down again. This time at Decision Height the pilot sees the runway; we are going to land. I tighten my seat belt and hold on. 105 knots, 50 feet, we cross the end of the runway, 100 knots -- 25 feet, 100 knots -- 25 feet, 97 knots -- 15 feet, 97 knots -- 10 feet. Greg is calling altitude without in a calm and clear voice. Ten feet, five feet, five feet, BANG! We are down. Not the prettiest landing in the history of flight, but it worked. *BY GOD IT WORKED!* There is a problem with depth perception. The NVGs provide the outside world in a two-dimension view, and it will take a lot of adjustment to learn to translate this into the cues we use for determining depth.



What the Flight Deck Looked like with NVGs

We must have flown a dozen more approaches before it was time to head home. On the two and a half-hours it took to get home we talked about what had and hadn't worked. We would pass those lessons on to the next crews who would fly tomorrow. When we got home we told maintenance what problems we had with the aircraft and headed in to meet with the other crew that had flown that night. Together we build a lessons learned report to help the rest of the squadron.

Somewhere early on, the squadron decided this challenge was too daunting and the need for the best pilots and navs was too much just to limit it to the initial few. Colonel T decided all the crews should be trained and he would have a bigger pool of talent to

choose from. We started a training and evaluation program, where each approach and landing was graded. The spirit of competition was keen and served as a strong motivation tool. Although no one knew why we were training everyone wanted to be part of the dance.

By Christmas we were trained and confident we could fly to any runway, at night, without lights, and land on the first pass. Colonel T said we could take Christmas off, but cautioned not to go very far away. On a seventy mile by seven-mile wide Island, I thought he had a great sense of humor.

About that time, although none of us realized it, we were forming what would be fixed crews for the next six months. My crew was made up of Captain Steve “Flem” Fleming, aircraft commander, Captain Bill Osborne, co-pilot, and Captain Art Schwall as safety observer. Lieutenant Dennis Novy was the electronic warfare officer. The enlisted aircrew members were Technical Sergeant Jack Felton, flight engineer, Staff Sergeant Jim “Andy” Devine, radio operator, Staff Sergeants Ron Hickman and Andy Huff as the loadmasters.

Captain Steve Fleming came to the 1st SOS from flying Drone carrying DC-130s at Davis-Monthan AFB, Arizona. He was a senior Captain, approaching time for promotion to Major. He must have had over two thousand hours in C-130s and although new to this airplane he had a great sense of both his and the aircraft’s limits and capabilities. Flying is moving the airplane through time and space. To do this safely you have to be ahead of the airplane. You have to know what it will be doing next. When you make a control change it will take time for the aircraft to respond, you have to understand that relationship and anticipate the results of your changes. Steve was always ahead of the airplane. He had a great sense of where he was and where he would be thirty seconds later. . He had about the best hands of anyone I ever flew with, and an in-depth knowledge of C-130 systems. As a bachelor, Flem partied hard, but was always ready to fly, and was an outstanding aircraft commander. There was very little that seemed to disturb him, and his confidence rubbed off on the rest of the crew. If Flem said we could do something you knew we could do it.

Bill Osborne arrived at the 1<sup>st</sup> SOS about six months after me. He had been at Hurlburt Field while I was at Dyess. He and I were peers, as far as rank went, and had become good friends and neighbors. When I arrived at the 1st, I was a newlywed. My first task had been to find a place for my bride and I to live. The base housing office had a one-year waiting list so I had to find something off base. There was an abundance of cinder block homes that had once been US Navy housing, but when the island had reverted to Japanese control it was given to local landowners. I was able to find a little (940 square foot), house tucked away on the side of a hill, next to a sugar cane field. Next to my house was an identical unit. When Oz arrived and was looking for a house I told him

about the unit next to me and he was able to work out a lease and move in. It was a great arrangement for both of us. His wife, Pat, and mine, Mary Lou, became good friends. Since Oz and I were “on the road” doing so much training in the Philippines or Korea it was good to have someone who your wife could turn to for help if something went wrong while you were gone. During typhoons, if we weren’t part of the evacuation, we would get together and have “Typhoon Parties” where we would stay up all night playing games, drinking cocktails, and watch the storm pass by. Oz was one of the first pilots to come into the MC-130 directly out of pilot training. He knew the airplane, and was a good aircraft commander in his own right, but the seniority within the squadron meant that he flew as a copilot, on the big missions, most of the time. Although I didn’t realize it at the time the six months between my arrival and Oz’s arrival would make a big difference for us. When I got to Okinawa, the wait for base housing was a year. Just six months later it had climbed to 18 months. Oz would never let me live down the fact Mary Lou and I only had to live in that little house for a year. As the saying goes “timing is everything.”

Just after the New Year our #1 crew was selected to go back to the states for additional training. I wasn’t on it. What a disappointment! In fact, my rival was chosen as the one of the nav’s. The crew had the chief of standardization-evaluation (stand-eval) as aircraft commander, a stand-eval pilot as copilot and Col.T as the safety pilot (rank has its privileges). Neither of the two nav’s was me! I was totally depressed. Greg and I went into talk with “Mr. Wilson.” Lt. Col. Wilson was the acting Operations Officer or DO, having taken over when Colonel T moved up to commander. Colonel Wilson was understanding and promised if a second crew was needed, we were the first choice. About two weeks later good ol’ Mr. Wilson was true to his word. We were told to plan for a flight to Hickam AFB, Hawaii, and then to Hurlburt Field, Florida. Hickam was at about the maximum range for our airplane, but the plans shop already had the KC-135 lined up. We would hit the tanker about six hours after take off and take on 30,000 pounds of gas. We would then have more than enough gas to make Hickam.

Shortly before take-off, we were told we would be taking some passengers back with us. We had to wait, while they were cleared through the passenger terminal. We started engines and taxied out for takeoff. I was looking forward to a night in Hawaii, the warm tropical breeze and a city where almost everyone spoke English. At 155,000 pounds we were heavy. In fact, we were at our maximum peacetime weight, so it took some time to climb to our cruising altitude of 19,000 feet or Flight Level 190. Once at altitude, we settled into the boring routine of keeping track of our position using the sun and by measuring the difference between our absolute altitude and our pressure altitude. About every forty minutes we would check our position and update the navigation systems. On the hour we would record the fuel to confirm we were getting the expected mileage. About five and a half-hours into the flight we began to set up the

airplane for the in-flight refueling. Using the radar I checked ahead of us, the sky was filled with thunderstorms. It was going to be a bitch to find that tanker, and find a clear piece of sky to refuel in. Right on time I see the tanker's identification beacon on the radar. We are running about 20 miles South of course to avoid thunderstorms. I call the tanker to confirm our refueling information and we start a long distance tango to find each other, avoid the weather, and mate in the middle of the ocean. The rendezvous goes smoothly and Flem brings the plane to pre-contact, a position about fifty feet behind the tanker. Once in position, Flem has to smoothly bring our plane into a position where the boom operator on the KC-135 can stick the refueling probe into our receptacle, and keep it in that position until we can take on our 30,000 pounds or 4,615 gallons of gas. This is a demanding job in good weather, while avoiding the thunderstorms and bouncing in the turbulence it is like parallel parking an 18-wheeler between two Hondas. After ten minutes, Flem is drenched in sweat and really struggling. Finally, the tanker tells us we have our planned off load of fuel and Jack Felton, the flight engineer, confirms it. We pull back and watch the tanker climb away back toward Guam. Now it's our turn and we climb back to FL 190 and continue to Hawaii.

About an hour after the refueling, the number four engine overheat and fire warning light comes on. We run the emergency checklist and shut down the engine. The fire warning light doesn't go out. Flem tells Oz to discharge the fire extinguisher. Greg and I can do nothing but cross our fingers. The light goes out. A visual inspection confirms the fire is out. I provide heading information to the nearest island alternate should something else go wrong. Jim Devine, our radio operator, calls the air traffic controllers and tells them of our problems and declares an emergency. Our speed slows, and we begin to drift down to a lower altitude, it is going to be a long flight to Hawaii.

All the sudden a full bird Colonel comes up on the Flight Deck, and identifies himself as Colonel Dunwoody, the commander of the 1st Special Operations Wing. Boy, am I surprised! What is the commander of the 1st SOW doing in the Pacific? The look of concern is evident in his eyes and his actions. I wonder: *what is he so concerned about?* He asks what is wrong and Greg tells him we've had to shut down an engine for a fire indication. This is not a big deal to us, anyone who has flown a C-130 has done it at least once, and it is a part of our training. C-130's fly very well on three engines. Col. Dunwoody is a product of the Tactical Air Command. Since the 1st SOW is in TAC they pick the commanders. Wing Commanders are chosen from those individuals who are most likely to become a General. His background is in fighters and civil engineering. Before becoming the wing commander, he had been head of the civil engineering unit on base. I don't think he had more than a rudimentary understanding of the C-130. We tell the Colonel we have everything under control, but will be late arriving at Hickam AFB because of headwinds and the loss of the engine.

The Colonel turns and goes to the back, but returns a minute later with his chief pilot. He asks again if we need help. I can see the apologetic look on the face of the chief pilot. The wing commander is a fighter pilot and fears the loss of an engine. When you only have one or two and you are over Open Ocean I can understand where he would be concerned, but we have three good engines running. The chief pilot knows this is a standard emergency for us. Flem tells the Colonel to go back and sit down, if we need his help we will ask for it. About every twenty minutes he pops up to check on us. It is going to be a really - really long flight to Hawaii.

About two hours out of Hickam AFB “The Colonel” is back on the flight deck. This time he has on a polyester shirt, with a wild flower print, the kind that was so popular in the late 70’s. The shirt was open to the waist, with about five pounds of gold jewelry around his neck, and his large economy gut hanging out. I had a hard time not laughing. John Travolta he’s not! Since we were going to be broke in Hawaii, and he was much too important to wait he wants us to coordinate transportation to the civilian airport so he could catch a commercial flight back to Hurlburt Field. This was one radio call Jim Devine was more than happy to make. Oh well, a couple of days in Honolulu, without “The Colonel!” It’s a dirty job but someone has to do it.

Jim Devine is a Staff Sergeant and has been in the squadron for about as long as I had. He is a fun loving individual, who brings a easygoing competence to the job or radio operator. The mission of the aircraft is long range infiltration. It is designed to operate deep behind enemy lines, alone and at night. To keep a link with home we carry a radio operator to manage all but the air traffic control radios. Jim will provide the link with the command center to let them know our mission status. He will do this on the high frequency or HF radio. HF is an older radio, but it has the ability to transmit over a long distance. To minimize the amount of time on the radio, Jim keeps a codebook with single words that will be used to identify important events.

Once on the ground at Hickam it will take maintenance a couple of days to get the airplane fixed. As much as Hawaii is a tropical paradise, it is killing us to be there. Someone is doing something, and we aren’t part of it. It’s time to hit the road, and get to the party. Finally, the plane is fixed and we check with the squadron. They tell us to plan on a late morning arrival at Hurlburt, but want us to make a stop in Ontario, California on our way. We tell them we will be into Ontario at 2 a.m. Pacific Time, are they sure they want us to stop? “Yes, the Lockheed “Skunk Works” have some modifications they need to make to the airplane.” The flight to Ontario goes according to plan. This is a night flight and I get to use the stars to back up the inertial navigation systems. I am lousy at night celestial, and need all the practice I can get. Fortunately, the navigation systems are just purring along, and we find California in spite of my best efforts at getting us lost. Greg is enjoying watching me screw up the

celestial computations and delighting in pointing out each error. We check in with Los Angeles Center, and request “INS direct to Ontario.” It is a quiet night and they approve. INS stands for inertial navigation system, and its development marked the beginning of the end of a pilots need for navigators like me. It provides automatic guidance from one set of coordinates to another. From a navigator stand point when its working it makes our job a lot easier, but it had a nasty habit of breaking when you needed it most.

Arriving at Ontario, we taxi into the Lockheed - Ontario parking ramp and I wonder who is going to be here at this time of night, and what they are going to add to the airplane. As soon as we shut down engines and open the door the officer in charge of the local military detachment bounds up to the flight deck to welcome us, and tell us what is going to happen. They are going to make some changes to the terrain following radar, which will allow us to fly at heavier weights than we had ever done before. We are invited into the detachment for some coffee while they modify the aircraft. From the office we can call the FAA and file the flight plan for the next leg of our journey. By the time I exit the airplane the technicians have the nose open and are already pulling the electronic boxes out of the airplane. Their whole approach makes you believe this fix is the most important thing in the world. I really love the “can-do” approach and confidence these guys show. The radar is modified to allow terrain following flight up to 155,000 pounds, or 20,000 pounds higher then we had been told was possible just two months earlier. Some other changes to the electronic warfare suite were also performed. True to their word, the changes took about two hours, and by 4 a.m., we are back on our way to Hurlburt Field, Florida.

We arrive at Hurlburt about six hours after takeoff. It has been a long day, but it isn't over yet. Col.T meets us and takes us into the 8th Special Operations Squadron (our sister unit) for a formal indoctrination on what we are here for. As we walk into the squadron, I see Captains Hal Lewis, and Rick Bakke. Hal was an aircraft commander at Kadena and we had flown together many times. Rick was one of my instructors when I came through the formal Combat Talon School two and a half years earlier. We exchange pleasantries, and they join us in the briefing room. We are asked to sign non-disclosure statements promising to keep what we learn to ourselves. For the next two hours, they fill us in on what they have been doing and what will be going on while we're here. Hal Lewis has been in Combat Talon for at least six years and is one of the most experienced aircraft commanders in the unit. Rick Bakke has almost an equal amount of experience as a Talon navigator. These two represent the best of what the SOF community has.

In the late 1970's Hurlburt Field is a sleepy little base. It is home to the only Special Operations Wing in the Air Force. The newest airplane on the base is the AC-130H, built in the late 60's. It is a quiet place, that has become almost a backwater in the

AF. In fact, the majority of its buildings are left over from World War II. All of us are intimately familiar with the base, we all went through our qualification school here and some of the guys, like Oz, were assigned there several years. We are cautioned not to draw attention to ourselves and avoid generating questions we might not be able to answer. After the briefing we are taken to billeting to check-in and get a good night's sleep. The next couple of days will be busy as we prepare our charts and get ready for the rehearsal mission we are here to fly.

Mission planning is a tedious process. Greg and I draw the charts and develop a flight plan that we will use to ensure we arrive at our destination on time. The charts have to be updated for new towers and obstructions along our flight. Since some of the charts are five to ten years old, there can be a lot of stuff to add. Even though we have a terrain following radar, we want to be sure we know where the new towers are so we can avoid them. Some of the new towers in the west can be 1,000 ft high, and reach above our planned altitude. Running into a tower, in the middle of the night would not leave a good impression with anyone. Greg plots them all and I cross check his work.

Greg Peppers had arrived in the squadron just a year earlier. He came into the Air Force with the promise of becoming a pilot, but between the time he had signed the papers and graduated from Officer Training School, the Air Force had decided it had too many pilots. It gave Gregg the option of going to Undergraduate Navigator Training (UNT) first and when things improved it would send him back to pilot training. Gregg had graduated from UNT about six to nine months behind me, and had been assigned to Little Rock AFB, Arkansas. After a couple of years there they notified him he could go to pilot training at Williams AFB, Arizona. Once he arrived at "Willie" he flew T-37's. Somewhere along the way he decided he just didn't like the harassment the Air Training Command instructor pilots put the student pilots through, and asked to be sent back to C-130's as a navigator. He was just checking into the squadron when I was returning from my stateside leave and we became great friends. Greg had almost as much C-130 experience as I had, but I had more Combat Talon time, and it was a squadron policy to fly a theater experienced nav with the new ones until they became comfortable in the Pacific. It also gave us a chance to see what kind of skills the new guys had. Gregg had the kind of personality that made him everyone's friend. He was articulate, professional and easygoing, a perfect combination for a leader. His wife, Geri, was vivacious and outgoing. They fit into the squadron like a hand in a glove. Since Greg and I got along so well, once he had completed his orientation we tried to team up as often as possible.

For us, a normal training mission lasts about five hours and as a general rule of thumb we spend about two to three hours of planning for every hour of flight. This rehearsal would include two missions, each about 12 hours in length. We are looking at 24 to 36 hours of flight planning in the next four days. Fuel plans have to be completed, so we



knew how much gas we need and arrangements for in-flight refueling had to be coordinated. 1 Lt. Dennis Novy, is our electronic warfare officer, and he gets together with the intelligence folks to review the threats we will face and have to defeat, if we are to survive. The enlisted members begin building an aircrew escape and evasion plan. We would use this should the aircraft crash and we have to evade capture. I am hoping this is a huge waste of time.

With the navigators and enlisted crewmembers taking a micro approach to planning, the pilots take the macro approach. They are looking at the “big picture” to ensure we cover all the possibilities. Mission planning is interrupted with blacked-out landing practice and local orientation flights. This serves two purposes, it keeps the crew coordination sharp, and it exercises the airplane. Believe it or not, airplanes don’t like sitting around any better than the people who fly them. The more you fly them the better the basic systems seem to work. Gears stay lubricated, hydraulic lines don’t leak, and the engines don’t stop.

Along the way, we are also shown this new configuration for the cargo compartment of our airplane. Rather than the nylon troop seats we normally carry, we put wall-to-wall mattresses down and use tie-down straps to hold both them and the passengers down. This is called the “Sealy Configuration” because of all the mattresses. I think this is a great concept for long flights, so much more comfortable to sleep on. I wonder if we will ever see a commercial on this? “Sealy Posturepedic, the Air Force’s choice for rescue missions, shouldn’t it be your choice too?” or “America, sleep well tonight. Your Air Force is flying the biggest, softest, padded cell built.”

The plan called for six C-130 aircraft. Three would be MC-130’s and three would be EC-130s “borrowed” from the command and control wing at Kessler AFB, Mississippi. These aircraft were chosen because they were also refuelable in flight, but were a lot lighter. This was important because they would be used to carry gas for helicopters we would be meeting up with somewhere in Iran. A normal C-130 weighs around 80,000 pounds empty. Our MC-130’s have about 12,000 pounds of modifications added. The helicopters would need as much gas as we could carry. I wondered why we weren’t using helicopters that could be refueled in flight, but had enough concerns about our job that I didn’t need to worry about what helicopter was chosen or why.

From the start, Operation Eagle claw required two nights. On the first night, one of the MC-130’s would land and secure the airfield with a security team made up of US Army Rangers, and Air Force Combat Controllers. The other two MC-130’s would carry a secret Army rescue force that later came to be known as “Delta Force.” Finally, the three EC-130’s would carry large fuel bladders filled with an aviation fuel known as JP-4 which all military turbine aircraft used. This fuel would be used to refuel the

helicopters, who would arrive at the rendezvous site almost empty after flying to their maximum range. We would refuel them, and they would load up the rescue force and travel to a site where they could hide during the day to wait for the next night. On the second night, Delta would sneak into the Embassy and rescue the hostages. The helicopters would then evacuate the rescued hostages and the rescuers to another airfield where we C-130s and/or some C-141's would rendezvous and evacuate them back to a friendly country.

The rehearsal plan called for us to duplicate the distances we would be flying in the actual operation. The first Combat Talon would carry the Rangers from Hurlburt. But the second two Combat Talons had to fly to Pope AFB, North Carolina, the day before, to be in place to pick up Delta and carry them to the first night rendezvous. My crew was the number three Combat Talon. The other 1st SOS aircrew was the number two Combat Talon.

Night 1 rehearsal is set for January 30, 1980. The morning of the 29th we depart Hurlburt for Pope AFB, North Carolina. We arrive in the early afternoon and park on a remote ramp away from other base aircraft. The sky is gray and threatening, it is cold, and it feels like a storm is coming in. We are to have as little to do with the Air Force units on base as possible. In fact, we are put into billets on Fort Bragg, the Army base that Pope AFB sits adjacent to. Compared to Air Force quarters, Eisenhower Hall's rooms are Spartan. It must be that warrior thing! I don't know what the Army spends its money on, it sure as hell isn't for mattresses, the ratty old mattresses we are using in the cargo compartment are more comfortable than the ones we find in the Army quarters. I sleep fitfully at best. The room is hot, and the dorm is noisy. I am more and more convinced I made a smart career choice in the Air Force.

The Army comes to life at 5:30 am. For someone who is planning to work all night this is a royal pain in the ass. About an hour or so later the floor quiets and I roll over and go back to sleep. I am disliking Army life more and more each minute. We have a noon wake up so we can eat, and do some last minute planning. Col.T wants us in the aircraft with the engines running when Delta shows. We have about a 5 pm take off planned, so maintenance will be out there by 1 p.m. and we would normally arrive about 90 minutes before take-off. Today we are planning to be there an hour earlier than normal so there are no mistakes that cause a late take-off. As the new kids in town, we don't want the brass to think we can't hack the mission. Walking out of the dorm, Fort Bragg is fresh with a blanket of new snow. There must be six inches of the stuff on the ground and it is still gray -- and threatening to put some more down. I don't give it much thought, maintenance is at the plane, and will get the de-icing trucks from the Airlift Wing on the other side. There is plenty of time available to meet our 5 pm go.

After lunch, and a stop at base operations for weather briefs and filing our flight plan,

we arrive at the aircraft and the maintainers barrage Col.T with the problems they are having getting the Airlift Wing to support us. “They” don’t want to send over the de-icing trucks to spray us down, and it seems all the fuel trucks are busy too. Someone at Pope believes their training missions are more important than ours. Things like this happen when you are trying not to call attention to yourself. My crew goes about its preflight routine. Col.T heads off to try and get the refueling and de-icing support the wing is dragging their feet on. We check the forms for write-ups. This is a formality since the only things in them are things we put in there. Yesterday had been a good flight, there were only a couple of minor things and the crew chief had them cleaned up.

Greg and I preflight our equipment. He is flying in the left seat and I will be in the right. His job will be to ensure the pilot is clear of terrain and back me up with the navigation systems. I take the right seat, because I am senior and probably a little better at reading the radar and updating the computer. Both of us are fully qualified in either seat and we switch around regularly. After checking the equipment, we settle into the tedious task of loading the coordinates for the route into the INS and Doppler computers. He does one and I do the other. We then cross check each other’s work. With the preflight done there isn’t much to do except relax until crew brief. I wonder where Col.T is with those de-icing and fuel trucks. If they don’t show soon we could have a late take off. I’m thinking: *Boy I bet the guy in charge of this will be pissed!* About an hour before our planned take-off, Delta shows up in two non-descript rental trucks. The trucks back into the rear ramp and the people inside scramble aboard. I look at them coming aboard and think. *Are these guys for real? This looks like something out of James Bond!*” We are used to Army Special Forces and Navy Seals, but these guys are different. Dressed in black jeans, black shirts and jackets, and wearing a black watch cap, their faces are even darkened. Each carries at least one rifle, a side arm weapon, small pack and little else. These guys are traveling light. It is obvious they are not planning on being anywhere for a long time. They find a place to plop down and make themselves comfortable. We don’t make any attempt to talk with them, and they don’t offer any. These are the guys who invented the phrase “If I told you I’d have to kill you.”

Ten minutes later Col.T shows up. Boy is he pissed! It seems he went all the way up to the Wing Commander and couldn’t get support. Finally, in frustration, he asks to use a secure phone, one whose signal is scrambled, and calls the Air Mission Commander to let him know we are having a problem. By this time there isn’t much anyone can do. Timing on this mission is absolutely critical. Even if they started right now, by the time they refuel and de-ice us, we would be an hour late for takeoff. No way can we make up that much lost time. The rehearsal is scrubbed for the night. We get to spend another luxurious evening as guests of the US Army. As we button up the airplane a light snow is falling. I wonder if tomorrow will be different.

The next day the routine is much the same, except when we arrive at the airplane it seems like every full Colonel on Pope is somewhere on the ramp around our aircraft. We have fuel trucks, de-icing trucks, fuel trucks for the de-icing trucks, and a caravan of support. Talk about feast and famine! Later, I am told several telephone calls were made after Col.T went to see the Wing Commander. Col.T called our Air Component Commander, an O-6, named Jim Kyle. Col. Kyle called the Task Force Commander, Major General James Vaught, US Army, who called the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General David Jones, US Air Force. The essence of the conversation, I was told, was that the Wing Commander at Pope did not believe two lonely airplanes on his base should take priority over the routine training of the Airlift Wing. Even when told it was vitally important by the mission commander. Clearly, Col.T couldn't tell him what we were doing, or why we were here.

I was told the Chairman called the Commander-in-Chief of Military Airlift Command (CINCMAC). CINCMAC was the General ultimately responsible for Pope. I assume CINCMAC was told we had to cancel this mission because one of his commanders failed to support us. I believe CINCMAC probably called the Colonel and asked if he wanted to remain Wing Commander beyond the 31st of January? If so, those two airplanes on his ramp had better take off on-time tomorrow. If it didn't happen this way it still made a good story for a new Captain. All I know for sure is, we had people tripping over themselves to make sure we got airborne. We repeat our preflight routine and Delta shows right on time. We start engines and taxi out. Our call signs tonight are Sealy 02 and Sealy 03. Marty Jubelt, the Aircraft Commander for Sealy 02 takes the runway and is gone. We wait 15 minutes and follow. I am really pumped up, but the first half of the mission we will be on high level airways flight and is it is pretty boring stuff. Greg and I take turns monitoring the steering and time control. We each catnap while the other is working.

As each check point passes we note the time on our logs and have the pilots adjust speed to make the next one on time. Our standard for an on-time arrival is plus or minus two minutes. For this mission, the crew standard is on time, plus or minus 15 seconds, anything else will be unacceptable. If we miss that margin, the nav's will have to buy the beer when we complete the post-mission requirements. If we don't land on the first attempt the pilots will buy. We are, by nature, competitors; each of us has competed and won to be here. We all feel we are part of an elite breed, and this game we play is just a carryover of that competitive spirit.

As we approach Oklahoma and North Texas we configure the aircraft for an in-flight refueling. Unlike the refueling in the Pacific, this will be a "no-comm" refueling. Neither, the tanker KC-135 or us will speak on the radio, unless there is an emergency. We will arrive at a specific point, known as the Air Refueling Initial Point (ARIP), at a pre-coordinated time and altitude. We then turn down the refueling

track. The KC-135 arrives right after us, and a thousand feet higher. He will pass over our aircraft and slow to refueling speed. We will climb and close to pre-contact position, and the boom operator will signal ready to refuel by flashing the refueling lights. We call Center and advise them we will be descending to the Air Refueling track and request MARSA, or “Military Assumes Responsibility for SAfety.” Center acknowledges and gives us a contact frequency to call back on when we are complete.

We hit the ARIP within five seconds of our planned arrival and turn to the correct heading and airspeed. About a minute later, the stars disappear as a black shape passes silently overhead. We have the tanker in sight and accelerate to catch him. About ten minutes later we are in the pre-contact position and the tanker signals they are ready. We slide smoothly into position and feel the refueling probe latch into our receptacle. We take on the planned fuel transfer and slide back to pre-contact. The lights on the tanker flash twice, his acknowledgment of refueling complete and goodnight. He turns toward the North and we continue straight ahead. We call Center and resume our flight to the entry point for low level.

We spend the time between the end of refueling and arrival at the Low Level entry point preparing the aircraft. Unnecessary equipment is stowed, the navigation systems are updated, and new way points are programmed. As we enter New Mexico we begin our descent to the low level route, located just North of Clovis, New Mexico. Cannon AFB is located in Clovis. It is the home of an F-111 wing. We will use their low level routes to take us up to Nevada for the landing. *I wonder if there will be any 111's on the route tonight.* The route is supposed to be closed, but it is not unheard of to have some crew not get the word or just jump on for a few legs of training. Having a 111 come up our ass would not be good!. Dennis Novy has the radar warning receivers on and ready. He should see the 111's TFR before they see us, and we will step out of their way.

We run the “Before Low Level” checklist. Radar is checked, altimeters are set, all crew positions prepare for the next four hours. We cancel our clearance with Air Traffic Control. Below 3,000 foot above the ground (AGL), you don't need clearance and can fly under Visual Flight Rules or VFR. At no time for the next four hours will we be above 1,000 ft AGL. We start at the thousand foot. detent to verify the equipment is working and then step down to 250 ft. There are very few things as thrilling as being flying 250 ft above the ground, at night, in the buttes and mesas of the Western US. My radar looks out to about 15 miles and I can see the road intersection I had chosen as my update point. I place the cursor over the near side of the intersection and update the computer. The INS is doing great tonight. The INS we used was either really good, or it would wander out to East Jesus. On the nights it didn't want to work Greg and I would be asses and elbows in trying to keep us on course, and on time. Tonight I can sit back and enjoy the ride. We cruise through the night sky. Climbing only when the pilots need to trade jobs. It is a fairly bright night and occasionally we can see cattle, or

horses start running as we surprise them. The legs are long, sometimes 30 minutes, and I have a chance to talk with Greg about what we will be doing once we reach the terminal area. I also think about the challenges of this mission.

The practice site mirrors, as closely as possible, the remote Iranian airfield we are planning to land at. The runway is a North - South orientation and our low-level route will take us all the way into the touchdown. Since this is our first attempt, and there are no radar threats, we will climb to 1,000 feet before we start the approach. This lets me find the airfield on radar sooner, and get set up earlier for the approach. After about four hours of wandering around New Mexico, Arizona, and Nevada we approach the landing site. Buried deep in the training ranges of Nellis AFB it is well away from any other traffic, or civilization. It is a small airfield, and there is barely enough room for three C-130's on the ground at a time. The first aircraft, "Sealy 01" had landed and dropped off his Army Rangers to capture and secure the landing zone. "Sealy 02" was fifteen minutes ahead of us and would be holding in a parking area for our arrival. Once we were down, he would take off while we off-load our passengers. We would then leave and the tanker aircraft, with the clever call signs "Exxon 04, 05, and 06" would land to refuel the helicopters. In the military, there is an axiom "keep it simple, stupid" or KISS for short. I think our choice of call signs mirrors this principle. You don't get much simpler than "Sealy" for airplanes with mattresses, and "Exxon" for airplanes with gas. It is the only thing in the operation that is simple.

I wonder what the Army thinks about dropping off not more than 65 Rangers to hold an airfield against the Iranian Army. I know it can't be more than 65 Rangers because that is that the C-130 is designed to carry. If it is more, it's not much more, certainly it couldn't be any more than 80 to 90 tops. If you add their equipment, guns, food and water the number would probably be less. These guys are going to be dropped off and their ride home will leave. I am glad it is them and not me. They must be either really brave or really stupid. I know they are not stupid, at least at the Captain and below ranks. This Ranger Force will leave with the last Exxon aircraft, once Delta and the helicopters have departed. For this plan to work all the C-130's must arrive. We have no room for error. Since I know all the C-130 aircrews, and we have trained together for years, I know we will uphold our part of the bargain. I wonder about who the helicopter guys are, but they must be the same and I dismiss the thought.

We pick up the airfield at about 15 miles and feed the updated information to the pilots. The "Before Landing" checklist is complete and the airplane configured. The airfield moves down the scope as I call range to touch down. This is going to be a piece of cake. In the middle of nowhere, it easy to be positive of the radar picture and of the airfield. In addition, Sealy 01 had placed some infrared lights down to mark the landing zone, and we had added infrared filters to our landing lights. This was a 100 percent

improvement over what we had back in Korea, and helped the pilot pick out the airfield and see what he was doing. Since the lights were infrared the only time you would see them was if you were wearing NVGs. We land right on time, to the second! I am not buying beer tonight. We taxi to the ramp area and off-load our passengers, who seem happy to get out of the airplane and stretch. Within ten minutes of landing we are ready to go. The winds are light so we line up to the South and take off. We will low level out, just as we came in, and climb to another aerial refueling over Oklahoma/North Texas. We concentrate on the low-level escape. It would be bad form to screw this up and crash after the hard part was over.

The sun is just coming up as we rendezvous with our KC-135, this time heading east into it. We take our gas and pick up an Instrument Flight Rules or IFR clearance back to Hurlburt. It will be good to get back to the Air Force quarters we had left three nights earlier after the long night we have had. We use the high level portion of the mission to critique our performance and nitpick each other's errors. Long before all the Total Quality stuff, which seems so popular now, we were into making each flight better than the last. After the tanker, timing is no longer critical so we set the optimum cruise airspeed and let the autopilot take us home. Once we land we head straight to bed, we have to be ready to fly again in less than eight hours.

The second night is much like the first. It will be a High - Low - High mission. That means a "High" altitude cruise portion, a "low" altitude portion while we are in hostile territory, and a "High" level cruise back to our departure base. Total flying time for tonight mission is about 18 hours. About half will be low level. We keep the "Sealy" configuration because our mission tonight will be to carry the "hostages" out of the country. We expect we will need to pack as many people into the cargo hold as we can. All unnecessary equipment is removed to lighten the aircraft.

Preflight goes as planned, and we are airborne right on time. The beginning of the mission is the same as the night before. High level to the Air Refueling track, Comm-out refueling, low level into a landing at another air field on the Nellis AFB range. Tonight's air field is called Indian Springs, it has a 10,000 foot long runway and should be a piece of cake compared to the little airfield we landed at last night. Ten miles out we set up for the approach. Like all our other approaches we begin descent at six miles. Almost immediately, I notice a problem. There is something wrong with the Radar. I have the cursor on the end of the runway, but all the sudden the picture has disappeared! My mind races over the possible causes for this. *Have we lost the Ka Band radar? No there are returns elsewhere. Is there a blind spot on the antenna? No it would affect something else. What could be causing the end of the runway to disappear? SHADOWS! The field is hidden by a shadow.* "Pilot! slow descent, we have terrain twelve o'clock and two miles. Do not descend until we are past it." Oz levels the aircraft and we clear the terrain. Once clear, we resume descent and land

about 15 seconds late. So far, the operation appears to be going like clockwork. To me, it appears to be the last thing which goes according to plans. We taxied to our assigned parking spot to wait for the helicopters. We waited, and waited, and waited. What was supposed to be a 45 minute wait turned into two hours, and two hours turned into four. Greg and I talked about how to manage our systems during this long down time. We talked about what could be causing the delay. We talked about the amount of gas we would need to make it back to Hurlburt. We talked about how much money we were making in Per Diem. Finally, as the sun came up, the Helicopters started to arrive. If this had been the real thing, we would be leaving Iran in broad daylight. None of us thought this was a good idea. Once the helicopters are marshaled and we have our passengers we were released for flight home. I don't remember very many compliments aimed at the helicopter pilots about their ability to arrive on time.

After every training mission we get together to talk about what worked, and what didn't. I figured this was going to be some rough debriefing. The helicopters were late night one, and damn near a no show on night two. All us nav's knew it was because they just had pilots who couldn't find their way around. If they pulled this kind of stuff on the real mission we would be in deep shit. Because of the length of the mission, the debrief was scheduled for the next day. I figured that would give them a chance to bring the helicopter pilots in for the debrief too.

The debriefing was held in the Air Ground Operations School auditorium, the only secure room on Hurlburt large enough for the crowd. The first thing I noticed when I walked in was there were only the C-130 aircrews. *Where were the helicopter crews?* That question would be my standard question all the way up to mission night.

Colonel Kyle welcomed the group and summarized the mission requirements, noting the 24 hour slip due to weather and lack of support at Pope. He said he thought the rehearsal had gone well and was proud of the way we performed. I wonder what rehearsal he had seen! It sure as hell wasn't the one I was on! We were on the ground for at least four hours on the second night. Even I knew that wasn't a good thing! The plan called for not more than an hour down time. He asked if there were any questions. My mind cried out: *What about the fucking helicopters? Where are they? Did they get lost again and can't find Hurlburt?* But none of my peers seemed to have any questions so as one of the junior crewmembers I thought discretion was the better part of valor and kept my mouth shut. Colonel Kyle thanked us for participating, reminded us of the security requirements and said if they needed one they would schedule another rehearsal, but we were to be ready to go anytime. The Kadena crews were released to head back to Okinawa. *Don't call us, we'll call you.*

The trip home was uneventful, we stop at Mather AFB, California, to pick up some more Night Vision Goggles, and remain overnight at Hickam AFB, Hawaii. Greg and I



wander down to a bar called the Crow's Nest. This is a great bar that doesn't start up until about 11 p.m. It has peanut shells on the floor, and a band that plays off color songs. The perfect way to unwind. We pick up an air refueling on the way home and make it in a single long sortie. Checking into the squadron you can see the looks of curiosity and maybe a little envy. No one asks where we have been, because they know we can't say. It's nice to be on the inside for change. I stagger home after the TDY. My wife, Mary Lou, asks how the trip was and could I tell her where I have been. I tell her it went well, but not too much else. After two years of marriage, all here in the Special Operations Squadron, she knows I can't share the specifics.

Oz and his wife, Pat, had been planning a vacation to Taiwan for some time. The possibility of something happening while he was gone really worries Oz. Colonel T told him to go ahead, if something comes up he would get in touch. A couple of weeks after we got back, Oz was on his way to Taiwan. A couple of days later we were alerted for another stateside training mission. Art Schwall moved up to copilot, and Captain Paul Rumble was added as safety pilot. The important lesson here is --NEVER, NEVER go on leave during a World Crisis.

About a month later, Marty Jubelt again headed off before us, but this time it was only a couple of hours earlier. Again, we were on our way back to the States. The trip must have been a smooth one, because I don't remember any specifics until we got to Hurlburt. We are again briefed on the current plan. Although we had been only gone a month there were some significant changes. The first night airfield had been discarded and there was a new one. There was also talk of a landing on an unimproved strip, but the planners were still working out the details.

This time the rehearsal calls for us to fly from Pope AFB to Twenty-Nine Palms Marine Corps Air Station. Once again weather was to play a factor. This time it was at Twenty-Nine Palms. As we approach the field, we enter some fairly heavy rain. The visibility sucked, and the runway was wet. Steve did a great job of first finding the airfield, and then "greasing" the landing. We went into full reverse on the engines and I kept my fingers crossed we didn't have one hang up. At our gross weight and with a wet runway we would have been in the mud in a second. We taxied into the parking area, over pierced steel planking (PSP), used to build temporary airfields. In the rain it felt just like taxiing on ice. Gingerly we came to a stop and I watched as the Delta commandos jumped off to head to their assembly point. The first three commandos off the airplane evidently found out how slick PSP can be because the first thing they did was fall on their asses.

I see no sign of the Helos and wonder how late they would be this time. Again, it was not my job to worry about that and I concentrate on getting us back to Hurlburt. The flight was uneventful. One nice thing about these 18 hour days everyone gets a chance

to sit in the pilot seats while we rotate for rest periods. Back into billeting and then up for the night two rehearsal. This was getting to be a regular routine. In the last four months I had flown more hours of quality training than in the twelve months prior. I was loving the training and could have kept this up for another six months.

On Night two we went into Yuma Marine Corp Air Station. I assume we did this to improve operational security. Not too many practices at the same place! Once again, we arrived “on-time” and the helicopters never showed. It was a long night sitting on the ramp, waiting. Finally, we were released to head home. My thoughts about the Helicopter pilots ability to pull off their portion of the mission could be summed up with a simple “this ain’t never going to work.” Although we were the “new guys” we had just flown two unsuccessful practices (from my view point) and I figured the debrief would be ugly. This time there was not even the hint of post mission debrief. I thought it must be the “high rollers” were out figuring how to tell the President this ain’t working.

Before we were released to head home, the planners had us fly some training missions into a dirt field on the Eglin range. We were told this was a “just in case” training sortie, to fill the training square and to say we had done it. A couple of local 8th SOS pilots came along as instructors. Greg and I switched seats and I found out something else about me. When I get nervous my voice goes up. The closer we got to the ground the squeakier my voice got. After a couple of approaches Steve Fleming “suggested” Greg fly the left seat and do the talking. Humph! I was better at the Radar anyway.

On the trip home we had to drop into Norton AFB, in San Bernardino, California to wait on some equipment. We were at Norton for about four or five days before we were released to head home. For someone who can barely spell poker, it was a wonderfully profitable stay. By the time we left, Art Schwall, Steve Fleming, and Greg Peppers were hardly talking to me. Something about holding promissory notes for their first born! On the trip to Hickam, Los Angeles Center had us head north up the San Fernando Valley. Since fuel is always an issue on a trip that far overwater, I was concerned about why we weren’t being allowed to head out. As we came abeam Vandenberg AFB, Los Angeles Center told us to look out the left window, and cleared us present position direct to the Jet route that we would take to Hawaii. There, rising from the earth, climbing in the cool morning air, was a Titan missile, headed for its target site on Kwajalein Atoll deep in the Pacific. Since we weren’t able to get tanker support we would be following the missile to Kwajalein, if at a much reduced speed. Once again an evening in Honolulu. This was getting to be a regular routine, and starting to wear ever so thin.

After we arrive home, we have about three days off, to take care of personal business and get reacquainted with our families. The last five months have been demanding and has put a tremendous amount of stress on the wives. Thankfully, the squadron has a

great support group, and we have friends who help fill in the voids left by our absence. My 18 month daughter seems to change each day, and with some remorse I regret the time I have to spend away. While I am taking care of these personal matters, the squadron is alerted to begin preparations for our deployment to what will be the staging base for the mission.

Col.T is alerted by Colonel Kyle to have the aircraft at Diego Garcia on the 17th. Diego Garcia is a small atoll in the middle of the Indian Ocean. It is part of the British Indian Ocean Territory or BIOT. The US gained the right to build a naval base and airfield on this atoll as a payback for Lend Lease in WW II. Personally, I think the Brits got the better deal. I had been to Diego Garcia just a year earlier as part of a squadron training program to orient our aircrews to the entire Pacific Theater of operations. There isn't a great deal of spare quarters on the island and I wonder where we will be staying.

Col.T cranks up the mobility shop to scrounge up all the equipment we will need to be self-sufficient at a remote location. We plan on tents, C-rations, a water trailer, and our spare equipment, all carried in our own aircraft. The plans shop schedules KC-135 tanker support. We will fly non-stop from Kadena to Diego Garcia, a distance of about 4,700 miles. For a C-130 this is about a nineteen hour flight. It will be the longest single flight any of us have ever made. While the plans shop is busy with support details, the nav's sit down and begin the detailed planning to ensure we have sufficient fuel, and know where and when we will be along the flight. The pertinent information is passed to the plans shop to relay to the KC-135's. This is going to be a low profile departure. No one is suppose to know where we are going.

As I begin to pack, I start putting things in my bag that leads Mary Lou to think I am not going to the same places I have in the past. Whoops, talk about operational security problems! The addition of rolls of toilet paper, bug spray, and sun tan lotion suggested to her I must be headed somewhere off the beaten path. Somewhere with bright sun, lots of bugs, and poor toilet facilities, and not just on another training mission. Her guesses were remarkably accurate.

We plan on a mid-morning arrival at Diego Garcia, and backing up the nineteen hours of flight, and change in time zones, that gives us a late afternoon departure from Kadena. We will be flying through the night. Greg and I talk about how we will work this. Nineteen hours is a really long day and to be sharp the whole time will be tough. The flight is challenging but not something that requires two navigators at the same time. It is the same with the pilots. We have three, and only need two. With all the mattresses, one nav, and one pilot can sleep while the others work. We add a flight engineer and radio operator for the sortie so they can spell each other too. Greg and I plan about four hour shifts. This will allow the one working to get into a flow, and a four-hour nap is about perfect to refresh you. It also ties in pretty good with the two in

flight refueling's we have scheduled.

The flight goes smoothly. We land at Diego Garcia in mid-morning. The heat is oppressive. We have to wait at the airplane while the customs agent checks our aircraft. One of the questions I remember was "Do you have any weapon's?" What kind of question is that? This is a Navy Base, there are weapons all over the place! We have a weapons locker with the side-arms we will wear in our survival vest. Over the past six months most of us have bought boot knives, bowie knives, and all kinds of survival stuff. The escape and evasion plan for this mission is really simple. If you crash, and survive, walk to Pakistan and call the embassy, 'cause no-one is going to be around to come get you. Well anyway, one of the enlisted guys actually said yes to the customs guy. He has to turn over his official Air Force combination emergency knife and parachute shroud cutter. This knife, and I use the term loosely, is issued to all aircrew. In fact, there is actually a pocket sewn into the flight suit for it. It has an orange handle, and two blades made of some very soft metal like aluminum. I have seen butter knives made with better steel. The only cool thing about it is the switch blade feature. Why do we need a knife with a spring open blade? Someone once told me the knife was a switchblade so that when you are floating down under the parachute canopy and you have a shroud line you need to cut, you can reach down with one hand and grab the knife and push the button and it will spring open. The only problem with this explanation is the knife blade opens, and not the shroud cutter. Knowing how the Department of Defense buys things, I can understand how this would happened. Some contracting expert looked at the specifications and asked him/herself, "Whoever heard of a switch blade where the knife blade doesn't spring out. This must be wrong! they must mean the knife, not this stupid hook blade. I'll just make this simple change and order 10 million."

Once the British Custom's agent has made the island safe, by confiscating that knife, we are released to go find quarters for the evening. The Navy hosts us with their usual "can do" attitude. There are only a couple of visiting officer quarters on the island. Who would want to visit? Col.T and the senior guys get them, and we get the hallway and lobby of the officers' billets. We have a light lunch and Greg and I find a quiet place to plan our next flight. It will be a simple five-hour flight to an island off the coast of Oman. Flight planning only takes a couple of hours and we are set. Now what to do with the rest of the day?

The next morning we head out for Masirah. On the Northern tip of the island is an isolated airfield with a 10,000-ft runway. We land and park on an isolated ramp on the north East Side of the base. Our instructions are to have no contact with the regular inhabitants -- Contract Royal Air Force pilots flying Jaguar fighters. We find two big wooden creates waiting for us when we shut down. One is full of tents, and the other is full of cots and tables and a variety of "camping type" stuff. We begin setting up the

camp. This is made difficult by a number of environmental problems.

First of all, we are in the Air Force for Pete's sake. If we had wanted to learn how to camp we would have joined the Army. Second, the tents we are sent are designed for the moist climate of Central Europe. They are dark heavy canvas, and are anchored with wooden stakes. Driving wooden stakes into the arid, rock hard, ground of Masarah was a real challenge. After spending the better part of the afternoon we get three tents in place. We set up the cots and inflate our air mattresses. These mattresses must have been built in WW2 and had never been used. They didn't hold air worth a damn. Well it's the thought that counts.

The heat is oppressive in the day. We move slowly and spend as much time as possible in the shade, working on mission planning, and basic life functions like building the camp, and cooking our meals. The enlisted guys took the two big wooden crates and turned them into outhouses. I marvel at the ingenuity of the people I associate with. Slowly, each day, the camp becomes more habitable.

To build our cover story, we launch a single mission every day. Our cover was that we were here to observe shipping in the Persian Gulf. Since this is a chance to get out of the heat and into the air-conditioning of the airplane this mission does not solicit any of the bitching a boring mission would normally garner. To give this some credence we flew out over the ocean for three hours, just kind of aimlessly wandering around. On the return we were decided to liven up the otherwise boring day. We had all brought toilet paper with us, each assuming we would have to be "self supporting." Since we are airdrop crews by nature we want to throw something out of the airplane on every flight. With so much toilet paper available we decided to "TP" the camp. We flew low over the tents and at the right instant we had the loadmasters toss out a couple of rolls. Bulls eye! We dropped it right on the tent Col. T was staying in. After a couple of days one of the other Electronic Warfare Officers, Jeff Bloom, made the mistake of leaving his flight suit on the airplane. This was a tragic mistake. One of the other crews found it and stuffed it with papers and as they flew over the camp threw it out the back of the airplane. For the next week every crew completed their mission by dropping the dummy or toilet paper. We thought this was a quiet unobserved ritual. Evidently we were wrong! On April 23rd an RAF Jaguar came over and "beat up the camp." I had never seen an airplane fly so low, so fast in all my life. When he passed over the camp and pulled the nose toward the heavens, vortices off the wing tips created dust devils in the sand. During his last pass smoke started coming from one of the engines. *Oh well, you have to expect losses in a big operation!* Later we find out in his effort to impress us the pilot had blown up one of his engines.

We spend the next two days going over the plans for this mission. I find out we will be taking off at 185,000 pounds. This presents some challenges for us in mission

planning. The maximum weight any of the performance charts for the C-130 go to is 175,000 pounds. The weight is known as emergency war order weight, and we are not supposed to exceed it. What we had been taught up to then was our normal maximum weight was 155,000 lb. maximum landing weight was 145,000 lb., and emergency war order 175,000 lb. At 185,000 lb. we would be 40,000 pounds above our maximum landing weight. If we lost an engine on take off we would not get airborne. If we lost it right after takeoff, we wouldn't stay airborne. As Greg and I work on our fuel planning the pilots discuss the formation options and what we will do on night one and night two.

We also find out where the planners had settled on for the first night landing site. It was supposed to be chosen as a remote, out of the way site. The first thing I notice is the road running through the middle of the two parallel runways. *With thousands of miles of unoccupied desert what idiot chose to put the runways next to a road?* I can't believe we couldn't find any better place. When Greg and I ask about this we are told that it is a desolate road with very little traffic. I sure hope so! I would hate to cancel the rescue cause some motorist sees us landing. It will make the hostage rescue a real blood bath if they know we are coming. Greg and I spend close to a whole day going over the last 30 miles of the route. We memorize every contour and terrain feature we think we will see with the Radar.

During this planning I notice that we have a minor problem with coordinates. We will align the INS in one Geo. reference system but the landing site coordinates are defined on another system. There is no way to make a one for one conversion. We will need to update the Nav systems to the new coordinate reference with we get close to the airfield. What this means is even if the INS is perfect there will be about a four mile update as we update off the new coordinates. Hopefully this won't cause the Nav system to crash when we update.

The day before the mission we are still making changes, and fine tuning who will do what, and how will they do it. When we find out the latest plan calls for C-141 Starlifters to carry the hostages out of the country, and we won't be needed -- we come up with a plan to add a fuel tank and serve as a stand-by refueler for the helicopters. Someone coins the cliché, "In SOF you never finalize the plan, you just run out of time to make changes." This is certainly true of this operation. The day before we expected to go, we were still fine tuning the night two operation. The latest version of the plan did not have a role for our aircraft. The evacuation of hostages and rescue personnel had been given to some C-141 aircrews. This really made a lot of sense, they could carry more, fly farther and faster, and would be more comfortable. I couldn't understand why we hadn't planned this all along, but was upset we were going to be left out of the second night. We put our heads together and figured out a way to add the fuel bladder to the aircraft and convinced the

planners to send us in as a backup tanker for the helicopters. We were back in!

The day of the operation we are all pumped up. We have gone over the route of flight, and checked our fuel loads and timing. Then we take a meal break and do the same thing over again. Looking for any possible mistakes we could have overlooked the last half dozen times through. The plan calls for one MC-130 to serve as a pathfinder, and bring a ranger security team and combat controllers in to secure the landing site. About a half-hour later a second Combat Talon would carry half of the Delta rescue force and lead the first of the EC-130 tanker aircraft. Our mission was to carry the rest of Delta, and lead the other two EC-130s. We were also loaded with a fuel Blivet, to serve as a backup if more gas was needed. The fuel blivet carried about 500 gallons of gas, or 3,300 pounds.

We still don't know if we will get a GO decision or not, and everyone is kind of milling around the communication tent, waiting. Finally about five in the afternoon a message comes in and the radio operator beats feet over to the Command Tent to talk with Col. Kyle. A minute later Col. Kyle heads over to the Comm Tent and is inside for a fair amount of time. He comes out and word spreads to assemble all the aircrew.

We gather up our professional gear, and head to the command tent for a briefing. For us Nav's that means the charts, and flight plans, and fuel plans. We go into a mill around mode for about a half an hour while the planners put their heads together, making last minute changes. As always, probably since the very first flight, this briefing starts with a time hack. It occurs to me how much we have changed since those romantic war movies I watched as a kid. In the movies, when they did a time hack, where everyone synchronize their watches. Here, at the beginning of the digital age, everyone thinks their "Accutron" or "Pulsar" or "Seiko" is more accurate and as the lead Navigator says "on my mark the time will be 13:15, Ready – Ready – Mark!" Someone yells out, "your off by 2 seconds" and several watches beep, as if to reinforce the point. Mild laughter breaks the tension, as Col. Kyle calls the room to quiet.

We begin our formal crew briefings. The Talons will be call signs Dragon 1, 2 and 3. The EC-130s will be Republic 4, 5, and 6. It is a short, perfunctory briefing; everyone had been through this so many times we all knew our roles by heart. We were as ready as we could be. Colonel Kyle had taken the pilots out on a tour of the taxi route earlier; everything was as ready as it could be. The crew of Dragon 1 headed out to their aircraft, they had about 40 minutes until they would take off. The aircraft had been "cocked" in preparation, so all the crew had to do was align the Inertial Navigation System and warm up the Radar and they would be ready to go.

Greg and I headed out to begin our preflight, and start warming up the navigation system. Since we were the second formation lead we had plenty of time, but both of us wanted the quiet of the airplane to consider what we were about to do. I don't know

about the others, but I my only fear was of making a significant mistake. As I sat in the right Nav seat I said a prayer asking the Lord to “help me not screw this up.” I was sure that if I did my part then everything else would work out.

After about forty minutes, the rest to the crew shows up and we have our aircrew brief. About this time the passengers start coming over from their isolation tent. We have very little interaction with them. They have a real challenge ahead, and I can see they are all locked into their own worlds. Most of them are Viet Nam veterans and this is the first chance to prove the US is not a second rate military force. We complete the power on checklists and move onto “before starting engines.” Art Schwall, the copilot, says Dragon 1 is starting his take-off roll. I stick my head out the forward escape hatch to watch him lumber into the air. He seems to take forever to get airborne, but does manage to lumber off to the south. I can hear Dragon 2 and Republic 4’s engines running and watch as they start to taxi out.

Our engine start goes smoothly, and Greg and I begin powering up the radar, as Steve begins to taxi out. We have the “black-out” curtain up and I can’t see out. I know the taxi route and the only thing which is a bit unusual is the fact we need to “back taxi” down the runway to the hammer head area at the end of the runway. All of this is to be done without radio control. We don’t want to take any chance that someone monitoring the radio frequencies will be able to alert the Iranians. All the sudden the pilots get excited! Dragon 2 had started his take-off roll while Republic 4 was still back taxiing on the runway. The runway is built on the baked desert. Both aircraft head off the runway and into the countryside. I think, *“This is fucking great! We haven’t even gotten into the air and the mission is already screwed up!”*

The pilots start to sort themselves out, and all the sudden someone says Dragon 2 is on his take-off roll again. I hope he doesn’t go “cross country” again. Steve says he is airborne. By this time we are concentrating on completing the Radar preflight and I lose track of who is around us. We complete our preflight and all the sudden we are lined up on the runway, ready for takeoff. As we started our take off, I hack my watch to time the roll. It was an old habit I had picked up from my days in an airlift squadron. Normally, the C-130 takes about 20 to 40 seconds to take off, depending on how heavy we were. This was the time it took to accelerate to our rotation speed and begin climbing out. We seem to accelerate very slowly. Finally, the flight engineer says we have passed  $V_1$ , or rejection speed. We are now committed to taking off. We can no longer stop before we reach the end of the runway. *Come on, accelerate! What is taking so long?* We finally reach rotation speed and the airplane begins to ease into the air. I stop the watch. I am amazed! It took us over 60 seconds to get to flying speed. We must have used almost all of the 12,000 feet available on the runway.

We accelerate slowly and I give the pilots a heading to the north to get us pointed to



Iran. When they roll out I will update the computers and steering. I check airspeed and see we are only doing 150 knots. We are 15 minutes late and not making up anytime. I ask Steve why he is so slow. He says he is waiting for his wingmen. Of course! It is so long since we have flown formation I had forgotten about the wingmen. I drop the forward-looking infrared (FLIR) turret and start scanning for Republic 5 and 6. Five is tucked in on the left wing and six is on the right. Steve says he thinks there should be a third one back there, Hal Lewis and Republic 4 didn't take off with Dragon 2. We will wait just a couple of more minutes to see if he makes it. There would be nothing more lonely than having him try and get to Desert 1 without a Talon to lead and give threat warning information. I continue to scan behind us looking for the third EC. It seems like forever, we will be hard pressed to make up all this time! Finally, Republic 4 tucks into our six O'clock position. We are a diamond formation so they can take full advantage of whatever protection we may offer. I tell Steve all three of our "chicks" are tucked in and he begins to slowly accelerate. We will be late, but we will be there!

We climb to about 10,000 feet to become as small as possible, without highlighting ourselves on radar. The sun had set below us but at this altitude it was still twilight, but getting dark quickly. At 100 miles south of the Iranian coast we begin to descend down to our enroute altitude of 1,000 feet above ground level. This "drift down" is slow and deliberate. Dennis Novy, the EWO, calls an "all clear." His sensitive receivers are not indicating that anyone is paying any attention to us. The Iranians appear to be oblivious to us. No early warning radar's are up and it looks like we will have clear sailing into the heartland. We had chosen a point where there was a gap in their coverage, and were relieved that there was no change in their coverage. Intelligence had suggested that the fundamentalists had killed most of the senior military leadership. We hoped this meant that all the command and control systems would be down. These same experts had told us we could discount the F-14's and F-4's the Iranians had, after six months of parts shortages it was unlikely they could get any into the air. I guess they had some mud on their faces when the Iran-Iraq war started.

After about 40 minutes of flight the Iranian coast would be the first place to update the navigation system. I selected the first radar coordinates on the navigation system and the radar dropped a cursor blip on where it thought the target should be. From this I would move the cursor to the actual target. If I was sure of the target I could then update the navigation system. From this first "real" enroute fix I would be able to tell how well the INS was working. As I studied the cursor and looked for my target I could tell the system was working really good. I only had to move the cursor about half a mile to the north to put it on the actual target. After almost an hour of flight this was a good sign. The system should be tight the rest of the night.

About an hour into the low-level route the radar picture deteriorates and I can't seem to make out any distinct images. The pilots say that outside visibility has deteriorated and

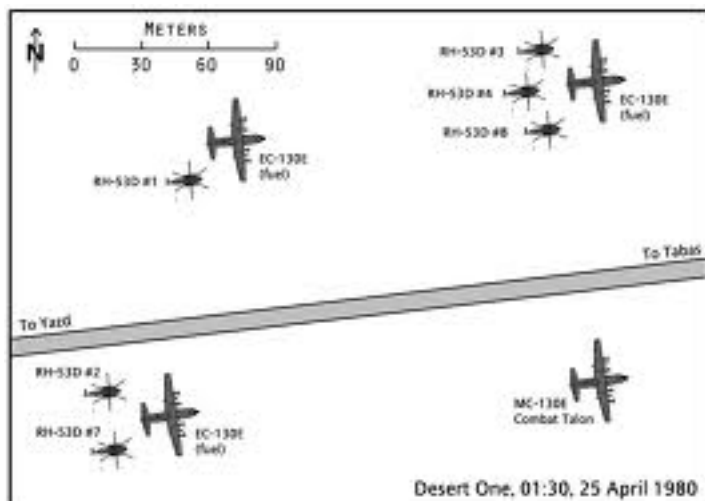
we start to buffet from the turbulence. We climb to try and get out of the storm. I turns out there is a huge sandstorm that no one had thought to mention to us. We keep the TFR on and fly above the cues. In spite of being behind schedule we slow our enroute speed so our wingman can hang in there with us. Formation flying is demanding in good weather, in this storm is doubly so. With no radar targets I am really worried about what the navigation systems are doing. One of our waypoints is a VOR, supposedly located 10 miles east of an Iranian Airfield. As we approach the checkpoint we turn on the VOR. It points slightly to the left. I have the pilots fly to the VOR; we may be able to update the systems over it. With about a mile to go I am shocked by why I see on the Radar. Directly in front of us is the airfield. I can see the runways, taxiways and buildings. It is too late to alter course we are going to fly directly over it. I sure hope everyone is inside asleep as we pass overhead.

Shortly after the airfield we break out of the sandstorm and settle back into the low-level flight. I check our wingman, they are all still tucked in and everything seems to be going okay. The route of flight takes us up the center of Iran. Iran is a vast desolate country and we see few signs of life as we move north. About an hour prior to landing we enter a second dust storm, fortunately this one is nowhere near as bad as the first one. We have one more mountain range to cross and we will be into the vast desert where our landing site is located.

Thirty minutes out we alert the passengers. The begin preparing for the trans-load to helicopters. Since we have the extra fuel blivit we will be hanging around for the trans-load. Twenty minutes out we begin configuring the aircraft for landing. The three EC-130s begin to take some spacing. They fall in trail behind us and we will land about three to five minutes apart. Ten minutes out and I am beginning to break out the area where the landing site is. I have studied the charts of the area for three days and know each contour and hill within 10 miles. Everything looks good and we begin our descent to landing. We are flying from the southwest towards the landing site. We had anticipated some problems with the pilots locating the landing site but that problem seems to have taken care of itself. The pilots have little difficulty finding the area...There is a huge fire to the northwest. I don't remember that in any of our rehearsals. I think this is the first time the mission had seemed like anything different than our training.

Six miles, we begin descent. *Hopefully the fire burning to the north won't shut down then NVGs.* We are on-speed, on heading, on-altitude. Five miles... speed slowing to 110 knots, on glide path, on-course. Four and a half miles... on speed, on-course, on glide path. Four miles... on speed, slightly right of course, slightly above glide path. In the last six months we have flown over a hundred practice approaches, all leading to this moment. Three and a half miles... on-speed, on-course, on-altitude. Three miles... on-speed, on-glide path, on-course. Art Schwall is flying a text book approach, will Flem

pick up the zone? Two and half miles...on-speed, "I have the aircraft." With those words Steve takes over the approach... He has the runway insight and we will land. There will be no go around on this one. We will be about 10 minutes late, but we have arrived.



Parking really wasn't like this shows

Steve plants it, and we bounce. This is not one of Flem's best landings, but we are down, and the engines come into reverse as we slow and clear the landing area to the south. We find our marshaller, and he clears us to a parking area. While Jack Felton, the Flight Engineer starts the after landing checklist and we start putting equipment into standby. Greg and I look at the INS; its velocities are crazy...the hard landing must have jolted it. Greg wants to update it and I want to let it settle down. We compromise; we will let it settle down for five minutes and then update. We all take turns sticking our head out the overhead hatch to look around.

One of the EC-130s lands, and then another. The third one seems to be having some kind of problem and makes about three approaches before he gets it down. Finally, he puts it down and taxis into position. About the time he is pulling into his assigned parking one of the ground security team grabs our loadmaster and advises that they have some Iranian captives and need a place to keep them. Well, time to break out all the firepower. Before we took off the life support people gave each of us a .38 caliber pistol and two boxes of ammunition. I dig my 38 out of the survival vest, the bullets out of my Nav bag and load the gun.

About five minutes later the captives arrive and are loaded on the airplane. I sneak down from the flight deck to look at what we have. In the back are about 50 scared men, women and children sitting down on the mattresses, three or four army rangers guarding them, and two confused loadmasters wanting very much to have the captives anywhere else. These captives had come off a bus that had been traveling along the highway as the first airplane landed. They had been on Dragon 2, but one of the assault forces had

lost a weapon so they were all searched and moved to avoid one of them having the gun. Thousands of miles of desolate country and the only damn place to land is next to a major east west road.

Once everyone is on the ground we see the first two MC-130s (Dragons 1 and 2) turn around and prepare for takeoff. We were the only MC-130 to carry an extra 1,500-gallon fuel tank to back up the EC-130s should they have a problem. This is just one of the many last minute changes that seemed to be continually being added to this mission. We settle down to wait for the helicopters. We expect them to be late, they hadn't made an arrival time since we started training. The first hour passes and still no helicopters. We check our fuel. Normally we don't bother with a fuel log on a tactical mission, but with the length of this one Greg and I had decided to treat this like an overwater mission. We had been logging our fuel readings since take off and we are right on the fuel line. This unplanned ground time is not doing much for our fuel margins. Into the second hour of waiting we start talk about how long we can wait, before we don't have enough fuel to get home ourselves. We get permission to use this fuel and transfer it into our system. This will give us at least another two hours of loiter time to wait.

Shortly after we finish refueling we get word that the helicopters are inbound. They arrive in what can only loosely be described as a formation. Five of the Helos head to their designated landing sites and get ready for refueling. The sixth lands directly in front of us, and shuts down its engines. This is not a good sign. Nowhere in the rehearsals had one had to shut down. I don't know how many Helos we needed but I suspect we have one less then we had a minute ago. The pilots get out and wander off to look for their flight lead. As we sit and watch there appears to be a lot of activity. The Helos are refueling and once one gets done Delta starts to load. All the sudden things seem to come to a screeching halt. Those already on-board the Helos started to get off and load onto the EC-130s. Word comes that the mission has been aborted. I am flabbergasted, the idea of aborting once we had gotten this far had never occurred to me. In SOF we always find a way to complete the mission, it may not be pretty but we get it done. What could cause us to cancel?

Once we get word we are aborting we begin to prepare for departure. The big question we have in Dragon 3 is what are we going to do with the captives? Are we going to take them with us, or release them? We get word that the captives are to be moved back to their bus. About this time Col. Charlie Beckwith, the Delta commander, climbs up on the flight deck and sits down on the instructor's seat directly behind me. He is not a happy camper, and does not have many kind words for the USMC. He tells us the helicopter directly in front of us had a hydraulic problem in the backup system and the pilot refused to press on. The helicopter task force commander backed up this decision. This was the first time I realized we didn't really have a single

commander. Col. Kyle only seemed to be in charge of the C-130s, Col. Beckwith, was the ground forces commander, and now I find out the helicopter formation had its own commander. Even with my limited experience I find it incredible that we have two different commanders for Air Operations.

Colonel Beckwith explains that his plan required six helicopters, and that the Marines had launched eight to make sure they had the required six. Because of the dust storm only six had arrived and with one aircraft aborting he did not feel he had enough helicopters to accomplish his mission. Because of this he chose to abort the rescue attempt. We are told the remaining flyable helicopters will be refueled and we will then depart and leave the non-flyable one behind. This has been a long way to come and come up short. I wonder what we will do with the hostages. Finally, word comes that we will put them back on the bus before we depart.

All the sudden there is a bright flash out the window, my first thought is they have decided to blow up the helicopters and this was the first one. I wonder why they are doing it now, and so close to the C-130s. Looking out, over Fleming's shoulder I see the horrible truth. They aren't blowing up the helicopters.... one of the EC-130s has just exploded and people are starting to evacuate out the back! As I play this scene back, and I have done it a hundred times, it is always in slow motion. It is as if my mind's recorder suddenly went into high speed. I see the people; there must have been a dozen or so, walk out the back end. A few seconds later a large fireball spews out the open ramp of the aircraft. The engines are still turning. I wonder why the flight crew didn't shut them down. Slowly I realize the reason they didn't shut them down is because they are dead. Somehow the helicopter must have hit the front of the EC, and caused this fireball. I see someone walking in front of the number three and four engines. It appears that he is dazed and confused. I pray he doesn't walk into the props. As if an answer to my prayer someone from Republic 6 went out and grabbed him and led him into crew entrance.

While the inferno, which was once an RH-53 helicopter and an EC-130E, lights the night sky; order slowly begins to emerge. Radio silence is no longer the critical concern it was just a few moments earlier. We are asked for an assessment of how much we can load in the back end, and for a count of personnel on the aircraft. The hostages have been removed and the Ranger security forces had been loading their equipment. We had about four motorcycles on-board when the explosion first occurred. As we realize we will need more space Fleming makes the determination to get rid of unnecessary equipment. The motorcycles are the first to go. After they are thrown out, the now empty fuel blivet is manhandled to the ramp, and it too is discarded. About 10 minutes after the initial request we report back in with a head count of rangers and Delta personnel on board our aircraft. This entire time Beckwith sits behind us in stony silence.

Suddenly there are a series of bright explosions coming from the stricken EC-130. I believe they are the tires exploding and as the magnesium wheels ignite. I wonder what the chances of shrapnel damage to our aircraft, or to the EC parked just to its right. Again, as if someone had read my mind. Republic 6 begins to slowly move away from the fire.

With time for our departure approaching I turn my attention from the spectacle unfurling outside the cockpit window to preparing for the task ahead -- finding our way back to Masirah AB. The flight plan had a different route planned for the first two hundred miles or so. Greg asks if we should start programming the new coordinates into the computers. He and I talk about it for a couple of minutes and decide not to use the planned escape route. We will backtrack along our original route of flight. There were two reasons we decided to do this. First, we had been sitting on the ground for almost three hours and the INS had been humming along, but it hadn't been updated with a good fix since we began our approach. I knew we had at least two good radar targets to update the system along the original route. We would go back the way we came and find those targets. Additionally, no one would be on our wing on the way out. Everyone would be responsible for their own escape. By flying a separate different route we improved our chances of not being intercepted. We told the pilots what we would be doing and why and they were in agreement.

After what seems like an eternity and at least three head-counts of personnel on-board the aircraft we are told to prepare for take-off and are released for departure. As Fleming turns the aircraft around and lines up for take off I remember checking compass headings. The heading check is usually a perfunctory check for the Nav's. We are checking to make sure one of the systems (we have two separate compass systems on the aircraft), is not out of tolerances or mis-aligned. Tonight both agree, but they are five degree different than the runway heading. I don't say anything because the pilots always have the runway staring them in the face. Tonight I learn the fallacy of this belief.

As we start our take off roll it becomes apparent almost immediately we are in trouble. We are heavy, and it is hot, but we are not accelerating like we should. It is almost like we are stuck in mud. As Fleming concentrates on guiding the aircraft, Art Schwall the co-pilot calls off the airspeed. This indicated airspeed comes alive at about 50 knots, and Art calls out 50, 55, 60, 60, 65, 65, 70, 70, 70. We are not accelerating! Art calls 75 knots and then 80. *Come on baby, you can do it.* 80 knots and then all the sudden Steve yells, "Holy shit what is that?" WHAM! We hit something and bound into the air. At 80 knots we can't fly and start to settle back into the desert. Steve eases the nose up and we settle into ground affect and finally begin to accelerate. Eighty-five knots, ninety, ninety-five, one hundred and then one hundred and five. Steve pulls the nose slowly up and we finally begin to climb into the night

sky. Now the questions start...Steve what did we hit? He tells us we crossed the road and hit an earthen berm on the side.

We are in the air, and we are flying. While we wonder what we may have done to the landing gear there isn't a damn thing we can do about it so those concerns are put aside and we concentrate on getting home. Once the After Take-Off and Before Low Level checklists are complete we ask Jack for a fuel reading. Checking the fuel chart Greg tells me we are right at our minimum fuel, with no reserves. We will land with 4,000 pounds if everything goes right. Four thousand is point below which our tech orders tell us the gauges become unreliable. There is supposed to be a KC-135 tanker orbiting off the coast, in case the EC-130s needed fuel, I sure hope it is still there, but I'm not optimistic since we are a good four hours late and their staging base is back at Diego Garcia. They would be getting low on fuel themselves and needing to head home themselves.

We decide that since we are alone, in the middle of Iran, we are going to backtrack along the way we came in. The escape route had been planned to have a 200-mile loop that was different then the infiltration part. It then joined the ingress route. Greg and I talked about it and since we knew we had a couple of good radar update points we decided to retrace our path in. The flight out went smoothly, with only one minor scare. About half way out we saw lights off the right wing and thought perhaps it was an interceptor. Dennis Novy said he had a signal, but it did not appear to be tracking up so we went down to 250 ft. and waited to see what the lights did. They soon disappeared.

We are alone, isolated, and running home after a failure. Our training takes over. We do our jobs and maintain radio silence. I concentrate on making sure the navigation systems are working, and update the inertial navigation systems, but it is mechanical. My mind is racing with a hundred thoughts about this mission, this failure. *What could I do? What could I have done to change the outcome? Where will we go from here?*

Colonel Beckwith sits behind me, lost in his thoughts and straining to do something, anything, to get us back to Masirah right now. The back of the plane is filled with men, his men, but I don't see him go back to check on them. It is as if he is lost in his own world. I wonder if all of your careers will be reflections of this fiasco? Are all military operations this political, this convoluted? I turn back to the task at hand. We are still inside a hostile country, and I don't want to add one more tragedy to the otherwise worthless night.

About half an hour from the coast, we hear the KC-135s leaving their orbits. They had been on station most of the night, and needed to go back to Diego Garcia before they

ran out of gas. I wanted to yell out: Don't *leave, we need gas!* As we checked the fuel reading they were consistent. We still showed we would be landing with close to that 4,000 pound limit where the gages become unreliable. We maintain radio silence, and press on along our course, putting Desert One behind us.

The timing is perfect; the sun comes over the eastern horizon just as we cross the coastline headed south. The sun is glorious and Masirah is only an hour away. Fuel is down to 8,500 pounds as we start a climb to altitude. I think about the procedures for ditching should be run out of fuel, but this is not a serious concern now. We know we will make it. We have come so far since last night. Surely if we were suppose to die, we would be on the desert in the middle of Iran right now. We clean up our after low level checklists, and prepare the aircraft for landing.

I listen as the Jim Devine calls the base with an aircraft status: number of personnel on-board, number of injured types of injuries and estimated time of arrival at Masarh. They will have medical personnel ready to take our injured to treatment. Evidently the C-141's which were going to help on night two have been diverted to serve as ambulances to take the burn victims to hospitals in Europe or the US.

I say a small prayer that all the remaining aircraft made it out of the desert, but really wonder who we lost. We try and put aside our emotions and concentrate on making sure all we needed to do was done. I think it was at this time that I came to understand what the term "professional" really means. A professional is someone who can separate himself from the emotions of the moment to remain calm, analytical and focused. Fifteen minutes from landing we call Masirah approach and request a straight in approach to a full stop landing. Approach control approves a visual approach and tells us to call the tower when we are five miles out. A short time later I hear a couple of the Republic aircraft (EC-130s) call in for approach clearance. At least two others made it. The approach proceeds without incident, and five minutes out we call tower for clearance to land. The fuel gauges read a little less than 4,000 pounds, but the engines continue to purr along. We are two minutes from landing; we are not going to have a problem now.

Landing is uneventful. We touchdown in the normal zone. Flem pulls the engines into reverse and we stop by the first turnoff and move into parking. As we pull up, medical personnel are waiting to treat the injured. We clean up the After Landing, Taxi, and Engine Shutdown checklists and turn the aircraft off. Art opens the door and Beckwith is gone. I am not in a rush to leave the flight deck, so as everyone files off I pack my gear. My helmet goes into its bag, my charts and equipment goes into my Nav bag, Flem is picking up his stuff, Paul is out of his seat and on his way out. Jack Felton is talking with maintenance about the write-ups from the flight, but it is a perfunctory conversation. The crew is going through the paces. We know there won't be a night



two to get ready for. Greg is ready to leave, and asks if I need any help. I don't know if I answer or not. The world goes on around me but I don't feel like playing the game today.

As I leave the plane, someone comes up and tells me Republic 4 was the aircraft in the accident. The flight deck was destroyed when the helicopter crushed it and the crew on the flight deck is dead. On the flight deck were Hal Lewis, TSgt Joel Mayo (flight engineer), Capt. Lyn McIntosh (copilot), Rick Bakke (navigator), and Captain Charles McMillian (navigator). Two crewmembers, Lt. Jeff Harrison and SSgt. Joe Beyers did manage to make it out, but were burned. It turns out that the helicopter that had been behind the C-130 had lost visibility when it had lifted up and kicked up the desert sands. This condition is known as a "brown out." When the pilot lost sight of the ground and the C-130 he allowed his helicopter to move forward. When the main rotor contacted the C-130's tail the helicopter was catapulted over the top and actually hit the airplane cockpit to cockpit.

I sit down, in the shade of the wing and consider what this all means. Is my life a reflection of this mission? Could I have done anything different that would have changed the outcome? What if I had said they were crazy at that first debriefing back in January? My first real operation and it was a phenomenal failure where do I go from here? I have a group of questions, but I have no answers.

My belief in God, forged in the life of abuse from my father, is that God does not seem to control the individual events of man, or if he does it is not within our understanding. I say a prayer that he receive the souls of my friends and colleagues and provide them with the rest and comfort they have earned. I then ask that God prepare the families for the news, which is sure to be delivered.

The other aircraft come into parking, and I watch as people are assisted off and loaded onto a waiting C-141. It is an abstract event. I am an outsider in this world. People move around me and I watch as it all happens. Greg comes up and tells me it is time to head off to intelligence for our post mission debriefing. I grab my stuff and off we go. The first stop is the armory to turn in our weapons. I hand over my .38 cal pistol and the three boxes of ammo they gave me. At Intel we describe the mission, what we saw and what we did. The thing I tell them about is the VOR station actually located at the airfield. This seems to be only important to me, so I pass the info and let it go.

In the debriefing tent we find a case of warm beer. It is a gift from the British contract officers on the other side of the base, it has a hand written note on the top. "To you all from us all for having the guts to try." This would become the motto of the 8<sup>th</sup> SOS from that point forward. This beer is quiet a treat, even if its warm. There had been nothing to drink besides water and coffee for the last week. I think we all had a warm

beer and individuals break off to talk with friends.

The Flight Surgeon asks if I would like a sleeping pill. It looks like everyone else is gathering to talk about the mission. I have never been a joiner of these groups. I have been up over 24 hours, I want to finish my debriefings and put this fiasco behind me. I take the pill, and wander off to my cot. I strip off my sweat soaked flight suit, take a big drink of water and swallow the sleeping pill. The next thing I know it is late afternoon and I wake up. The group is still up, talking about what everyone did.

I rejoin the group, and listen in to what has been going on. I find out it will be a couple of days before we can leave this island and head home. In fact, our crew has to go out and fly another sea surveillance mission before we can depart. We had to keep up appearances that we were just a reconnaissance force. The next day we load up and head out over the Persian Gulf. We are cruising at about FL 180. Just wandering around on a random route of flight. Then all the sudden there is an F-14 on our right wing. It is a beautiful plane. Its wings are extended so it can slow to our speed. It carries the markings of a pirate. It has a black tail with a Jolly Roger, a skull and crossed bones painted on the side. Our plane has had all its marking removed, for the mission we just returned from. I wonder what the Tomcat crew thinks as it flies alongside. The Radar Intercept Officer in the backseat seems to be waving at us and Art Schwall waves back. Suddenly, it dawns on us he is passing a frequency. Two – Three – Two – Four. Two – Three – Two – Four. He wants us to come up on the UHF radio on 232.4. We tune up the frequency and are greeted with a friendly voice asking if we happen to know the right setting for Mode II on the IFF/SIF? Son-of-a-Bitch! We had be lazy about keeping the mundane stuff up to speed and evidently had wandered too close to the Carrier Battle Group surrounding the USS Nimitz. We scramble to the equipment and put in the right setting. The Tomcat sweeps his wings back and pulls out in front and goes straight up. A moment or two later a second F-14 sweeps overhead and also goes vertical. That would have been a hell of a note! Shot down by our own Navy after watching a fiasco in the desert! Now that we know the Carrier is somewhere around here, and they know who we are, we crank up the radar and go looking for them. Greg makes out the various returns on the Radar and picks out the largest return and steers us towards it. In about 15 minutes we are over the battle group. It is a beautiful sight seeing the big carrier, its cruisers and further out the destroyer screen. Well, that broke up an otherwise boring mission and now it is time to go home. Back to our tents, and C-Rations. Unlike previous missions, this one ends in a straight-in approach and landing. We don't have the same bravado we had just two days before.

A couple of days later we complete tearing down the camp. The 8<sup>th</sup> SOS had left earlier and just as we were the first in, we are the last out. We depart as we had arrived, quietly, as a simple two ship formation. We return to Diego Garcia. I wonder what kind of

reception we will have? By now word of our failure must have spread even to this far corner of the world.

Arriving at Diego Garcia I notice a subtle change. The British Customs officer greets the plane, but there is no check for contraband, just a simple welcome and he is off. The base ops staff takes our secrets without fanfare and we are off to billeting. The bus driver is quiet and nothing is said. It's as if they all know we had been to a funeral and they don't know what to say to console us. We eat dinner at the Officer's Mess and exchange some small talk. Someone invites us to the movies. Movies in Diego Garcia are a trip. It is kind of a cross between watching home movies, and a drive in. They show 16-mm films on a small screen, in a screened in porch. The chairs are all overstuffed old lounge chairs. It reminds me of my old frat house. We watch the movie "Alien." I don't remember too much else except all the sudden it is time to leave and go home to bed. The next day we plan the flight and schedule two tankers. The first will be over Malaysia, and the second to the west of the Philippines. The trip home is routine and we land at Kadena AB without fanfare.

I return home and my wife and my daughter are the sweetest things I can imagine. Her relief is obvious. Later, I find out the details of what it is like to be left behind. It seems that the day after the mission, when the news is released, my mother calls to see if I am home. She tells my wife about the accident, and since I am not home I must be involved. Could I be one of the eight dead flyers? My wife doesn't know what to do so she goes to our best friends house. Her girl friend is gone, and the husband is asleep. She wakes him up to tell him I am dead and she doesn't know what to do. Fortunately, he calms her down and soon word comes that the dead are from units based in the United States. This is a relief, but it is still a terribly long wait to find out what has become of us.

Back in February I had been notified that I had been selected to go to Navigator School as an Instructor. I had talked to Col. T about becoming the Standardization Navigator for the squadron, and getting out of the assignment. Col. T had wanted me to extend my assignment for a year and he would give me the job, but I had wanted to stay only an extra six months. Since we couldn't reach an agreement I had taken the assignment to Nav School. I had to leave in early June, so the month after the mission was filled with pre-move activities. This must have been a relief for my wife. I would be going to an assignment without secrets and a stable schedule.

On June 6<sup>th</sup> I left the 1<sup>st</sup> SOS, and Special Operations. This had been a great assignment and I departed with bitter-sweet feelings. It was what I had always wanted to do, and now I was leaving. I doubt anyone would understand the emotions I felt and the sense I was abandoning my friends.



## **Post Script**

January 1981

During the Pacific Command's Special Operations exercise SPECWAREX a single MC-130E, while returning to Cubi Point Naval Air Station flew into the ocean. Only one individual survived. Capt. Jeff Blohm, the EWO, is found floating in a partially inflated life raft. Among the crewmembers lost are Greg Peppers and Jack Felton. Greg had taken the Stand-Eval job I had turned down. He was flying with a brand new Navigator and giving him his initial orientations.

Summer 1981

President Carter refused to award any decorations to the participants of this failed attempt since in his words this was a “humanitarian operation.” It would not be until President Ronald Regan assumed office that any awards were presented. As a result of this mission our crew received Defense Meritorious Service Medals. The guidance that was given, as I understood it, was that these medals should be given out without fanfare. When I found out that no one was making any effort to do anything other than mail the medals to Jack Felton and Greg Peppers widows. I spoke with the Wing Commander at the 352 Flying Training Wing, and we were able to coordinate a ceremony for Mrs. Gerri Peppers and Mrs. Marie Felton. They were able to receive the honor and recognition their husbands deserved.

After 4 years of Air Training Command I was able to return to Special Operations where I would remain for the next 11 years doing various jobs. During that time I watched Air Force SOF grow from the 12 Combat Talons, 10 AC-130H Specter Gunships and a handful of helicopters to a fleet of close to 150 fixed and rotary wing aircraft. Today Air Force Special Operations Command has a manpower authorization on over 10,000 personnel and is a separate Command lead by a Lieutenant General. Along with its sister components, Army and Navy Special Operations Commands, and the recently added Marine Corp Special Operations Command, it helps form the backbone of a Unified Special Operations Command.